

2009

The Experiences of Black Students at a Predominantly White, Faith-Based Institution

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THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK STUDENTS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE,
FAITH-BASED INSTITUTION

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Graduate Studies

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Kyle M. Lantz

May 2009

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**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTERS THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Kyle Mark Lantz

entitled

The Experiences of Black Students at a Predominantly White Faith-Based Institution

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the
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ABSTRACT

Black students are attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) in greater numbers each year (Aries, 2008). Simultaneously, they are facing unique obstacles that have the potential to either impede persistence or affect success (Davis, et al. 2004; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). Understanding the perceptions of the Black student population at a given institution is extremely valuable in implementing necessary change. Focus groups were used to garner the experiences of 23 Black students, staff, and faculty at a faith-based, PWI relating to their perceived sense of belonging and perceptions of the campus racial climate. Participants reported challenges and obstacles throughout their experiences as well as a variety of responses that are important to acknowledge and understand. Findings from this study present implications necessary for the future success of students of color at PWIs, especially for those institutions of similar racial makeup.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

Ephesians 2:14-16

It is quite humbling (and extremely necessary) to sit down and “acknowledge” the many who have contributed to this project because of their commitment to me over the past two years and even over the span of my life. So much has led to the culmination of this research, and I could probably write another 50 pages about some of these people. I am so thankful for a family (Mom, Dad, Kory, Kalyn) willing to discuss and often listen to me as I process (verbally) the many things I am thinking about. You inspire me to take risks in thought and action because of the examples you all are as followers of Jesus Christ.

First of all, I am so thankful for the willingness of the 23 participants to be involved in this study. Your honesty and candor was challenging to me and made this study all the richer. I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, Dr. Scott Moeschberger, who provided a myriad of support over the past year: research intellect, moral support

(sometimes in the form of a command), endless input, and the “landing of the plane.” You encouraged me to dive deeply into research while maintaining a realistic focus of what is sound research. I could not and probably would not have done this research assignment without the belief Missy Chambless has placed in me. She is willing to talk about anything, and she has encouraged me to keep going. Plus, she keeps things light. I left Felicia Case out when I first drafted these acknowledgements and she, in her own way, reminded me that she should be in here. And, she’s absolutely right. Felicia has taken me under her wing and allowed me to learn from her and be honest with her – and I always know she’ll be honest with me. To MAHE class of 2009 I owe gratitude for allowing me to openly process matters related to race and diversity over the past two years. You all have taught me so much. I am also thankful for the readers of this study: Jenn Moeschberger, Scott Moeschberger, Emily Hunt, Alyssa Guebert, and Mark Lantz. I must also thank Kim Case who, in the early stages of this research, assisted me and provided much needed direction in beginning to understand the complexity of such a research endeavor. Notably, The Box has been a consistent source of encouragement and support to me, socially, academically, spiritually, and even physically. My friend (and Graduate Assistant Supervisor) Tim Herrmann showed me what a professional should and could look like on a daily basis. He continually urged me on in this study and in life these past two years. Lastly, I am grateful to Jesus Christ for the grace shown me in all matters and for showing me how a study like this can align with being his follower and a member of the Kingdom of God.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Colleges and universities are increasingly confronting the issue of diversity on their campuses. In response, numerous studies have discussed the impact of diversity upon the higher education environment (Bollinger, 2007; Chang, 2002; Hu & Kuh, 2003; Umbach & Kuh, 2006; Zuniga, Williams, & Berger, 2005). Research has shown that positive educational benefits are provided by ethnic diversity, specifically cross-racial interaction, in the academy (Chang, 2007; Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998; Terenzini, et al, 2001). However, there is growing concern that some universities are pursuing ethnic diversity without retaining primary focus on the development of students. Therefore, it is increasingly important to consider the challenges and triumphs facing ethnic minority students studying on a predominantly White campus.

Topic Statement

This research study aims to examine the experiences of Black students at a faith-based, Predominantly White Institution (PWI) as these experiences relate to two factors: sense of belonging and perceptions of the campus racial climate.

Explanation

All institutions possess a unique culture and climate. Sylvia Hurtado (1992) has researched extensively the issue of campus racial climate. As universities become progressively more diverse it has become important to assess perceptions of this trend. Hurtado found significant differences in perceptions of campus racial climate based on ethnicity. While studies have examined possible explanations for this, the research is limited from a qualitative standpoint. Because of the small, faith-based nature of the campus at which the research took place, this study provides more insight as to why differing perceptions of campus racial climate exist.

Similarly, college students often struggle with a sense of belonging, also called “psychological sense of community,” during the adjustment to campus and throughout their experiences on campus (Bohus, Woods, & Chan, 2003; Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; McMillan, 1996). Human beings have an inherent need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Most research conducted on sense of belonging amongst college students has utilized quantitative methodologies. Bohus, Woods, and Chan examined psychological sense of community among students at evangelical institutions but not in relation to ethnicity. Narrowing their focus, Johnson, et al. (2007) studied sense of belonging amongst first year students as it correlates to racial and ethnic groups. However, no one has yet studied how Black students experience sense of belonging at a PWI.

Research questions

This study sought to understand and discover the struggles, joys, and overall experiences of Black students at a PWI. The following research questions were used to determine such answers:

- What factors are shaping sense of belonging for Black students on their predominantly White campus?
- What are the perceptions of the campus climate (general/racial) for Black students on their predominantly White campus?

Definitions

Predominantly White Institution (PWI): This term has been widely used in research and description, but there remains some relativity in its meaning. This study assumes “predominantly white” to be a student body consisting of an overwhelming majority of White students. Technically, a student body containing more than 50% White students or more than any other race or ethnicity could be considered “predominantly White.” However, a PWI in this case is at least 75% White and often nearing 90% White.

Black students: Studies have often focused specifically on African American students as well as Black students. This study included Black students from a variety of ethnicities, and while cultural backgrounds do vary, significant findings unique to experiences of Black students, regardless of ethnicity, were discovered. However, it is important to note the diversity present within the participant population.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The United States is rapidly changing in its ethnic makeup. Falling behind in effectively managing this diversity, institutions of higher education must find ways to catch up with this trend. Meanwhile, these institutions are battling longstanding problems of racial inequity (Teranishi, Allen, & Solorzano, 2004). Recently, Harris and Bensimon (2007) found significant racial and ethnic disparities in college student outcomes. Unless higher education administrators pay special attention to these disparities, the inequity could continue to perpetuate itself.

Campus Racial Climate

Campus climates have been studied more and more in recent years. In her earliest studies on campus racial climate, Hurtado (1992) concluded there is great importance in the “consideration of the experiences of different ethnic groups and an overriding concern for a quality of life on campus that will be conducive to student development” (p. 564). Research has since moved to a focus on perceptions of campus racial climate.

In Johnson et al.’s (2007) study on sense of belonging, they discuss “the importance of understanding students’ perceptions of their college environments and experiences. Those perceptions, in turn, should guide campus stakeholders in fostering inclusive

climates that relate positively to diverse students' sense of belonging" (p. 537).

Additionally, Hurtado & Carter (1997) found similar results relating to perceptions. Perceptions actually affect behavior significantly, even if those perceptions are not entirely accurate. Antonio (2001) found that student perceptions of balkanization to interracial friendships by their peers contributed to the formation of homogeneous friendship groups. These perceptions are often more negative for students of color (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Cabrera, et al., 1999, Hurtado, 1992; Pewewardy & Frey, 2002).

More specifically, African American students report slightly higher prevalence of negative experiences on their campuses (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Cabrera et al., 1999). In their qualitative study of African American college students, Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) found that discrimination and racism still exist even in the midst of the existence of success and accomplishment. Themes such as feelings of isolation and conspicuousness have been common for students of color at PWIs (Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith, 2004). These feelings stem from racial differences being described by students, and they increase the importance of exploring the realities of race issues on campuses (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Because every campus has a unique climate, it is important to generate a body of research from a variety of different types of institutions.

Sense of Belonging

College students are leaving home at a very important stage in their development. Chickering's (1993) theory of identity development notes the importance that college students place on interpersonal relationships and approval from others. Coupled with the general challenge of adjustment to college, difficult adjustments make minority students

at PWIs less likely to persist than their nonminority counterparts (Eimers & Pike, 1997). It is important to be aware of the differences in adjustment between various ethnicities (Kalsner & Pistole, 2003). Additionally, Nora and Cabrera (1996) discuss the roles of perceptions of prejudice and discrimination taking place during this key transition. The discussion asserts that perceptions of discrimination are more common among minority students. This climate does indeed harm the cognitive and affective development in these students (Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

Key in this adjustment phase is the sense of belonging or the psychological sense of community that a student holds in regards to his or her campus community (McMillan, 1996). Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) found that early social experiences were significant factors in sense of belonging. As time progressed, success in the academic environment became more important in regards to sense of belonging. Holes exist in the literature pertaining to types of social experiences enhancing sense of belonging.

Focusing more specifically on sense of belonging for African American students at a PWI, Johnson et al. (2007) found a weaker perceived sense of belonging than for White peers. Very important in their results was the role residence halls played. It is essential to create welcoming and safe communities within places of residence, as sense of belonging plays a part in these students' intentions to persist (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007).

Consistent with prior studies on sense of belonging, Deneui (2005) found that sense of belonging generally declined throughout the year in first year students. In association with Astin's (1999) theory of involvement, Deneui also found that participation in campus activities was positively correlated with sense of belonging for

first year students. There remains a need to determine what sorts of campus activities contribute positively. Most research on sense of belonging pertains to the first year. This need for belonging may in fact lessen as identity development takes place, yet there remains a need to cultivate inclusive communities for all types of students. Moreover, there is great opportunity to discover how sense of belonging plays out in African American and other Black students at PWIs.

Racial Identity Development

Johnson et al. (2007) notes a connection between sense of belonging and campus racial climate. Because African American students usually perceive the campus racial climate more negatively at PWIs (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000), it is important to consider the specific racial identity development that is likely taking place during the college years. Also, the difference in racial and ethnic identity development for White people is important to note. Because they belong to the majority race, White individuals rarely give significant thought to their racial identity (Frankenberg, 1993; Tatum, 2003). Conversely, Black students are often much more consciously aware of their skin color.

Cross's model of Psychological Nigrescence covers five stages of development for Black individuals: Preencounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment (Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1991). This is important because African American students who attend PWIs often experience a dissonance during their college years, which can prompt their development through these stages.

Coexisting with Cross's model is Helm's White Identity Development Model (Helms, 1995). Importantly, the ethnic development that White students experience in college contributes to the campus racial climate as well (Mercer & Cunningham, 2003).

White students who have not ventured far in this process will typically struggle to see the importance of issues concerning race. Additionally, Phinney's (1990) Ethnic Identity Development model reveals four important developmental stages: Diffusion, Foreclosure, Moratorium, and Achieved. All three of these models provide a context in which to place college students during key developmental years.

Cross Racial Interaction

Why is it important for colleges to examine sense of belonging or campus racial climate? This discussion must turn to the value of cross-racial interaction on the environment. Gordon Allport (1954) reported that cross-racial interaction is crucial in developing positive race relations but only when it occurs within an environment that provides equal group status. The Contact Hypothesis assumes that Black-White interaction would lead to positive racial attitudes (Tsukashima & Montero, 1976). Sigelman and Welch (1993) found that contact between Blacks and Whites does not always affect racial attitudes meaningfully. However, they did discover that most forms of contact with members of another race lessened racial hostility.

Studies since then have shown the value of cross-racial interaction educationally (Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004; Chang et al., 2006; Hogan & Mallott, 2005; Milem, Umbach, & Liang, 2004). Chang et al. did find further support from previous empirical studies that "higher frequencies of interacting with someone of a different race during college have added educational benefits for students" (p. 448). They go on to assert that the discussion needs to move beyond the focus of *if* diversity matters to the question of *how* the benefits of diversity can be more effectively realized.

With proper consideration of institutional culture, racial climate can be improved through cross-racial interaction. Otherwise, a naiveté and artificiality can result (Chang, 2007). Chang et al. (2006) said, “racial and ethnic compositional diversity can create a rich and complex social and learning environment that can subsequently be applied as an educational tool to promote students’ learning and development” (p. 432). Astin’s student involvement theory notes that having all of the proper systems in place (i.e. a diverse student population) does not necessarily equate to student development. Proper understanding of a university’s culture can lead to the realization of the benefits of cross-racial interaction.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

A qualitative focus group research design was utilized to help the researcher determine perceptions of campus racial climate as well as sense of belonging for Black students at a PWI. This predominantly White Midwestern University enrolls approximately 1900 students and contains 8% minority students and 3% international students. As an evangelical, Christian institution focused on student development, this university prides itself on its focus on community and whole person development while maintaining commitment to the integration of faith and learning.

Participants

Table 1

Number of participants: Age, Gender and Racial Breakdown

Class Rank	<u>Gender</u>		<u>Race</u>		Tot als
	Fem ale	M ale	Black , Amer ican	Ot her	
Freshmen	6	4	7	3	10
Sophomores	3	0	3	0	3
Juniors	0	0	0	0	0
Seniors	3	2	3	2	5
Faculty/Staff/Graduate Students	3	1	4	0	4
Totals	15	7	17	5	22

Three separate focus groups conducted in late November and early December 2008 consisted of 22 participants. A pilot focus group including four African American faculty, staff, and graduate students from the university was utilized in order to allow the researcher to gain experience with this focus group protocol. This focus group lasted approximately two hours, and feedback was sought from the participants. They provided several important suggestions regarding types of questions and approaches for best conducting future focus groups. Their answers also allowed the researcher to gauge the responses to particular questions and begin to glean possible themes.

The next focus group consisted of 13 freshmen and sophomores (9 women and 4 men). A total of 22 underclassmen were solicited for participation in this study. They were emailed with a short explanation of the study as well as the date that the focus group would take place. Initially four students said they could participate. After a reminder email, four more said they could participate. Several students showed up late on the night of the interview session, and a total of 13 ended up arriving. Three of these students were Bahamian and one was Caribbean American. The Bahamian students were asked to participate by friends who were already attending. It was a diverse group of Black students representing various friend groups, backgrounds, and genders. Due to the unexpected appearances, adjusting to a larger group than expected necessitated a slower start.

The last group consisted of students who had been at the institution at least three years. There was a smaller pool of students to solicit so only 11 were emailed about participating, and they were given two possible dates. With little feedback, a date was selected and five students (3 women and 2 men) showed up. All of the students were

seniors and two of the students were African although listed as African American by the American Ethnic Student listing. While a larger sample would be desirable, more than 50% of those solicited actually attended the focus group.

Procedures

Working closely with the Director of American Ethnic Student Programs (AESP), participants were selected and solicited via email (see Appendix A). Selection was purposeful, based on perceived ability and willingness to provide an honest articulation of their experiences. The Director of AESP provided a listing of all (self identified) African American students and removed several students who, for reasons undisclosed, she felt would not be suited for participation in the study.

A semi-structured, focus group methodology was used in order to allow open-ended questions to be answered in a comfortable, safe environment (See Appendix B for focus group protocol). Focus groups allowed participants the opportunity to respond to something said by their peers. This also provided time for participants to think through answers while others were speaking (Baker, 1999). Participants were provided with proper informed consent (see Appendix C) and responses remained confidential. Focus groups lasted between 90-150 minutes.

Students were separated based on their academic classification. Freshmen and sophomores made up one group while juniors and seniors made up the other student focus group. This allowed inferences to be made about student experiences based on their current level of identity development and college experience.

The researcher provided lunch for the pilot study. Students were given \$5 gift cards to a local restaurant as an incentive for participation in the study. Due to the limited

number of Black students at the university, the two focus groups represented over 50% of the Black student population on campus.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants, and the researcher transcribed all interviews. The researcher read through each transcript generating a list of key words, phrases, and quotations. The coding process enabled the generation of categories and themes for analysis (Baker, 1999; Creswell, 2003). Two other researchers reviewed themes to check for validity. Themes were then interpreted into findings, ultimately being tied to prior related research.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The aim of this study was to gain insight into the overall experiences of Black students at a faith-based PWI related to two factors: sense of belonging and perceptions of campus racial climate. It is important to note that common themes were discovered that spoke to these two factors, but other significant themes emerged pertaining to related but important issues. Also, the pilot focus group, although not consisting of students, added some important pieces that must be acknowledged.

Participants seemed eager to discuss these issues in an environment where they were amongst peer students of color. While the tone often sounded negative, it is important to mention that participants desired change and identified things they really did appreciate about their university. However, this opportunity to give voice to their experiences seemed to uncover a profound exhaustion pertaining to their experience at the institution. The following results will summarize key themes in each focus group followed by “super themes” that seemed to encompass the entire study.

Pilot Focus Group

The pilot focus group consisted of two graduates of the university and two people who have worked and/or studied at the university. All participants spoke of their years at

the university post-college, and the two graduates also spoke of their experience at the university as undergraduate students. There was only one other Black faculty member solicited and this person was not able to attend.

All participants were eager to speak about this subject matter. Some level of relationship with each participant prior to the study and the honest comments shared communicated a deeper level of trust than was present in the student focus groups. The participants all knew each other, partly because they all worked together in various capacities, but also because they were people of color on a campus that was over 90% White. This feeling of “otherness” quickly became evident throughout the two-hour session. This session quickly took the feel of a conversation as the participants were prompted by each other’s responses. The researcher simply had to provide flow and make sure that all of the questions were covered within the allotted time.

Several themes emerged throughout this interview that are worthy of noting. Very significant was the perception that hurtful experiences in regards to race were more bothersome because this was a faith-based institution. They also noted a feeling of otherness and commonly being reminded that they were of the minority race. They discussed their feeling that there was a lot of talk about diversity but little done in the way of change. This stemmed from a feeling that diversity was compartmentalized at the university. Positively, they were adamant about a remnant of people that made their experience much more navigable.

It is also important to note that while these themes reveal challenges faced by the participants, the fact that these people choose to study and work at the university means

they are committed. They all desire to see the university be a place that is more accepting of diversity so that it will be a more complete representation of all people.

Feedback was solicited in order to more effectively mediate the following focus groups. One participant suggested more careful wording in describing certain situations as this could cause miscommunication. Others shared their appreciation of the efforts made by the researcher and that sensitive topics were handled with care.

Underclassmen Focus Group

Because the researcher had minimal prior affiliation with most of the participants in this focus group, building rapport presented a challenge. In order to make students feel at ease, it took quite a while to introduce students to the study as well as allow them to interact with each other without abruptly jumping into more intense questions. Also, because focus groups function best with 6-10 members, the larger group (13) created a challenging environment for all participants to be heard (Creswell, 2003).

Differences in racial identity development based upon background, life experience, and personality were evident. Students possessed varying backgrounds in exposure to diverse cultural settings. Whether students grew up in a predominantly white context affects their racial identity development stage. Cross's model of Black identity development speaks to these stages. Some students shared more in frustration. Others shared a naïveté about the issues being discussed. Still others seemed to be more hurt and sad about the situation. Due to the immense variety of experiences, it was often not easy to maintain flow in the conversation.

This group represented significantly diverse backgrounds. Differing racial identity developmental stages were evident. Several students came from predominantly White

backgrounds while others grew up in strong Black communities. Three of the students were Bahamian and one was Caribbean American. Some students associated mostly with other Black students while some spent significant time with their White peers. Some mentioned significant experiences with racism while others said they barely noticed such things.

This session also took the tone of a conversation in which students often agreed with each other and sometimes challenged each other's words. Several students carried more overt negative tones, which, at times, challenged a consistent flow of conversation. One student, unconvinced of the researcher's motivation for performing such a study, thought that the researcher was merely attempting to complete a project, not for any greater good.

Overall, an initial skepticism and mistrust, due both to the researcher being White and to the nature of the study, seemed to shift to a more positive tone by the end. In fact, several students expressed their thanks for being willing to listen to them and bring light to their experiences as Black students on a predominantly White campus. In fact, one student approached the researcher afterward with an inquisitive desire to uncover exactly why the researcher was taking the time to study this particular issue. While much of what the students discussed was consistent with the other sessions, some unique observations also materialized.

The Obama Effect

This research was impacted to a great extent by the recent election of Barack Obama as President of the United States. Students regularly referred to their experience of the election of a Black man as President on a predominantly White campus. One

student talked about how much she was enjoying [her institution] “until, like, we started the election.” She, along with other students, shared openly about how some people stopped talking to them, how Obama signs were torn down, and how people made exceedingly more racial-oriented comments.

There was a common sentiment of disappointment in regards to how the election was handled and discussed at their institution. One Bahamian student talked about how the election affected her saying

As soon as this issue came up about Obama becoming president, umm, I kind of found out who my real friends were...other people would just pull back...I mean I didn't vote for Obama, but you're taking this out on me...to be, you know rejected because of my color, that's a big shock to me. So, that kind of threw me back.

This major event invoked a lot of students' frustrations with their campus community.

While the Obama election was briefly mentioned in the other two focus groups, these students continued to refer to this election experience as extremely significant. Because many of these students were freshmen, this event had shaped much of their experience thus far at the university. It also seemed to affect more significantly how these students viewed matters of race in general.

Several participants from the pilot focus group who work regularly with students of color on the campus also noted that before the election many of the Black students were fairly well integrated into the campus community. They observed the “Black tables” (tables in the dining commons where only Black students typically sit) grew exponentially and quickly in the weeks immediately following the election of a Black

man to the U.S. Presidency. This election seemed to be a prominent factor affecting the students' sense of belonging and perception of the campus climate.

Programming at Us. What About the Other Kids?

These underclassmen quickly perceived that programming pertaining to racial reconciliation and issues of diversity was either focused on the ethnic students or only attended by those students. One student said, "Every time we have some kind of racial reconciliation talk it's always directed straight toward the ethnic kids and I hate that." The common sentiment was that talking about these issues with students who were living within this context everyday got tiring. These students said, "We already know what's going on."

They also mentioned how certain programming focused on students of color often adds to the paranoia surrounding the struggles they may have or have had. A couple of students said that orientation small groups and meetings that are meant to help students of color along sometimes increased the awareness of racial comments to a point of oversensitivity.

Also, one female student who appreciated the ethnic student scholarship felt that being asked what she would add to the campus as a student of color in her application seemed to emphasize the University's focus on her minority status more than her value as a student in general. She elaborated, stating, "I think the institution, in trying to make us feel more, I guess included, also kind of singles us out." One of her peers responded to this saying, "You are bringing something as an African American being here...and you're bringing something that's very important." He seemed to believe that his presence

and the presence of his peers as people of color bring a healthy diversity that is necessary for change to occur.

These responses stemmed from the view that their White peers are naïve in general pertaining to issues of race. Common themes were ignorant comments and a belief that their White peers lacked exposure to Black people in their childhoods. Those themes will be elaborated upon later in the results.

Upperclassmen Focus Group

Due to a limited number of upperclassmen Black students on campus, it was challenging to coordinate the attendance of a large enough sample population. Five of the eleven students asked were able to attend. Two of these students spent the majority of their childhood in Africa while the other three were African American. There were three females and two males. All of the students were seniors at the institution. While the researcher had minimal affiliation with these students, he was acquainted with each student to the point that they recognized and knew his name.

Most notably, there seemed to be an overall frustration with the campus community. In this, there also appeared to be a maturity gained through four years of a challenging developmental period. The students carried an air of exhaustion. They seemed to appreciate certain things about their university, but they also shared a keen reflective critique of their time at the university. They were ready to move on, yet they had plenty to share. The fact that they knew each other well created an environment similar to a group of soldiers weary from a battle fought together. In fact, most said that they appreciated some things about the institution, but they expressed a readiness to move on to a place where they were not confronted so often with issues of race.

Several themes became evident as the discussion moved along. Many of these themes were common across the research, but a couple of observations were elaborated upon as the upperclassmen shared about their experience. These more specific themes were: an expectation to be friends with all minorities, no overall connection to the student body, and a desire for more Black role models.

Friends with all Minorities

Frustrated with the small number of Black students on campus, these upperclassmen felt as though race automatically brought the Black students together. While this would emerge as a safe place for them, they felt as though they were inherently expected to be friends with not only all the Black students but also all minority students.

This idea manifested itself in a comment made by one student as he referred to one of his peers in the room, stating, “I probably didn’t have anything in common with her until [this school] made us have something in common...and so we got something in common...that we are Black, that’s the common thing.” They did notice that as more Black students have enrolled in the past few years, this sense of commonality subsided a bit. One student was happy he could now choose his friends.

Noting a reason for why this might be the case, one student mentioned that the issue of race seems to hinder early relational connecting opportunities. He said, “I feel like we do have something in common with so many people but there’s a barrier put up before we even get a chance to find out what that is.” This, he says, naturally causes us to connect to the Black community. This early connection to people of common race tends to carry through the rest of their time.

No Connection to the Student Body

When asked directly about where they felt sense of belonging and community, there was a strong sentiment that they felt little to no connection to the student body as a whole. Their expectation early on was that they would. One senior stated

Freshman year, sophomore year, and you think it's slowly...you're gonna feel like you belong to the campus...but that feeling just didn't come at least for me and a lot of other Black seniors who have graduated. So, I definitely have not felt a sense of belonging or found a place really

Another added, "Sense of community? Uh, I don't really see how...there's not one to me." This certainly became more evident to these upperclassmen as they reflected on their overall experience. Underclassmen students did not express as readily the same sentiment at this point in their experience.

Another student talked about a survival mode that emerged after this hope for feeling at home subsided. Because her father had attended the institution and had a positive experience, she said, "We expected definitely to feel more at home, like accepted for who you are, all that comes with you...it reaches a point where you just become numb just to get through and survive because it's hard." One student, often referring to her lighter skin, said she did not experience this in the same way mostly because she had a close knit athletic team that became her community. While one's alma mater often evokes feelings of pride, this seems to be less likely for these graduating students.

More Black Role Models

When the researcher asked the students at the end if they had anything to add to what had already been discussed, two students quickly spouted, "More Black professors."

This desire for Black people of influence working for the university or being available for support seemed to weave throughout the discussion. One student expressed a desire for Black male mentors, noting, “There’s not that many minorities or Black people that I can go to for a mentor to talk to me or a Black man.” There existed a sincere acknowledgement that these students had to be leaders. One male participant elaborated on the necessity of Black students stepping up as leaders on the campus and acknowledged the necessity of peer role models as well.

Overall Common Themes

The following themes emerged consistently throughout all three focus groups. These themes, due to their regularity throughout the interviews, necessitate specific responses and implications that will be covered further in the discussion that follows.

Institutional Culture Closed to Change

Pertaining specifically to participants’ perceptions of the campus climate, there was a continual assertion that the institution itself and people at the institution were opposed to change. During the interview a student asked one of her Bahamian peers if they would recommend the university to people back home. The student’s response was telling: “[This university] is a great school, but until they overcome this, this, what we’re talk[ing about]...I say no.” This opinion seemed to be echoed as students talked about an inherent institutional opposition to change in areas relating to racial diversity. Using the focus group as an illustration of the problem, one student said, “If you have to have a room full of Black kids talking about being Black on [this] campus then you know there’s a problem.”

One pervading experience seemed to evoke especially strong feelings from participants. Many thought the institution had a commitment to diversity, but it lacked wholeness in its approach. One participant perceived that “they want diversity but they want it to look like the way they have it in their minds” and this incomplete picture of diversity lacked key components. Another remarked, “If we put forth effort, we should at least get some in return...the things that we do we don’t get a lot of people to show up.” The idea that efforts toward reconciliation really do result in change was often expressed.

There was a common sentiment that the institution was inherently opposed to change, at least the type of change necessary for diversity initiatives to take hold. Feeling that institutional power holders may not see the overall necessity of change, one person said, “Nobody likes change and especially if you’re messing with something that to them in their minds is already perfect.” People might say, “we want this diversity,” as long as it does not hamper an already good thing. It was noted that administrators desire a greater emphasis on diversity but they lack full commitment “wanting to come in and change it but not be a part of it.”

Diversity Compartmentalized: Always the Black Kids’ Problem

Paralleling this perceived opposition to change is the observation that diversity is often compartmentalized at this institution. This compartmentalization manifests itself in several ways, most notably when it places a heavy burden on students of color. One person acutely noted what happens when diversity is not an important initiative pervading all corners of the institution. He said, “When diversity is not integrated within the university and the institution as a whole, the students become the manifestation of what diversity is and multiculturalism and they have to take on that burden...represent

everything that's multicultural." There is this idea that diversity becomes only associated with certain events where "[we] get compartmentalized into MLK (Martin Luther King, Jr. Day) and stuff like that."

Students felt like they were the ones having to focus on the problems of diversity, while most others were unconcerned. One female student said, "We talk about it everyday at dinner." In other words, this reality of being Black at a PWI and all that comes with that is largely unnoticed by the majority population. One student, who had not said a lot to this point commented, "It's hard for us to always have to be the ones trying to change people's minds." Her comments revealed exhaustion in carrying the burden of all matters related to diversity. This opinion was expressed on a regular basis.

Community: Safe People and Places

Students' sense of belonging was often tied to situations where they felt most comfortable being themselves or where their race did not have to play a prominent role. Speaking about being around his Black friends, one student described this time saying, "Whatever we doing, I'm comfortable and I feel at ease because I know I'm amongst friends." Another added, "I think that's why I just cling to, you know, my people, because I know that that's genuine love and I don't have to be anything else around them except me. And honestly, that's when I'm most comfortable." One senior student said

I guess my community has become, like, the Black community...the people who I share everything with have been the people who have gone through the exact same thing that I have...and I can tell them about it without having to defend my case.

This Black community often manifested itself most obviously in the cafeteria.

Providing reasoning for why he does this, a senior explained

For four years I've been sitting with the Black people...and it's not me trying to step out but I'll sit with somebody and it's like, oh here come the race thing. Here it comes. And I don't want to hear that every time I sit down and eat.

It was as if these students needed a place where race was the last thing they would have to consider. This common meeting place in the cafeteria allowed them to experience this more fully than most other campus settings.

Other students talked about spending time with people who have common interests. Athletic teams, a small residence hall community, and Gospel choir came up as safe places. The Gospel choir was repeatedly mentioned not only as a safe place for people to experience community, but also as a means by which to expose the greater community to a different musical experience than that to which they are normally accustomed.

They were careful to note that they were not complainers but that they "have to hold it all in" and "when you give us this atmosphere to be comfortable, like, it'll come out." They noted that White peers who defend them against racially insensitive comments are helpful. They said when people consistently show they care it means a lot. They also added the importance of adults who genuinely care. Commenting about one staff member who intentionally asked how students were doing, they said, "It was so encouraging...it just makes you, you know at least there's someone that...is completely sincere and genuine."

Relating to this, participants expressed an appreciation of the people they know and love at the university but hold no special affinity toward the university itself. One participant said, “I love my guys. I don’t love [the university].” Many speak of loving the university, and they could not understand this strong tie in the same way stating things like, “I’ve learned to appreciate it but I don’t necessarily fit into the story.” In fact, they said that certain significant people are what made their experience meaningful. There were several professors who were called “the select few that I felt very comfortable with” or the so-called remnant which was beneficial because “I just know they’re out there.” It is these people who seemed to be the driving force behind an overall meaningful experience at the university. Summing up these participants’ feelings about the important individuals at the university, one said, “If it wasn’t for the couple good relationships that I had, um, I would have been gone.”

Ignorant and Naïve Comments

Comments from peers were a theme that was rampant throughout the entire discussion. These comments were described as “low grade racism,” “ignorance,” and “little smart comments” that most students traced back to their White peers’ inexperience with people of color in their past and naïveté about racism in general. They also mentioned that they did not expect these from fellow Christians. One student noted the uniqueness of exposure to these comments at a PWI in that

it’s not like at home where you go to school if you went to a predominantly white school, heard the comments, went back home and you’re with your family, you’re fine. You go to school; you hear the comments. You go to lunch; you hear the comments. You go back to the dorm and you live with those people.

The continual onslaught of these comments seems to form the basis for some students retreating into peer groups consisting primarily of their racial group. Several participants mentioned becoming more acutely aware of these comments after they came to college. One person responded to their peers in the focus groups saying they received these comments “all the time, but I never thought they were racist until you just said that.” One example is her roommate telling her she was “the little black spot of [her] life...a joy.” While this was meant to be a compliment, it exemplifies the reality that race is brought to the forefront of most interactions for these students very quickly.

Students traced these ignorant comments to their peers’ lack of exposure to Black people prior to college. Referring to racial issues, one student was adamant that White students “are not going to overcome it if they don’t get faced with it.” Another student said “they’ve only been exposed to one type for so long, and so the more exposure they get, then the more used to us they will become.”

Coupled with this perceived naïveté is a defensiveness these students observe. They said that their peers could not understand what it is like for the Black students. After giving an example of how students respond defensively when he brings up his experiences as a Black man, he said, “I wish they could just understand how it is; to just see how we are treated.” Speaking of her White peers, one student said, “They just don’t get it, they don’t see why we have all this to say about it or why it’s getting so much emphasis. Sometimes, they’re even offended by it.” She went on to say, “When you start talking about racial issues they are so on the defensive that they will not listen to what you have to say...and be like, ‘No, are you sure you’re seeing it or is it you?’”

Participants acknowledged the natural development in racial identity that needed to take place in their peers, but this concession did not make comments they heard less hurtful. Expressing this frustration with her peers, one student added, “If there were not students, I could deal with that. Like, the faculty members are the ones that keep me going...they seriously care about me, care about my feelings and they want to see me succeed.”

Expected More from a Faith-based Institution

Early in the upperclassmen focus group one student said, “When I got here I thought it would be this great place. You know, I go to this Christian university.” But, when this student goes home and tells his friends and family what it’s like “they’re just in disbelief because they’re like, ‘Man, that’s a Christian university.’” The participants had higher expectations from a community that espoused such a welcoming, faith-based atmosphere. Their experience as a Black person on the campus did not line up with this expectation in a variety of ways.

One person said, “I think I just expected the people of God to act differently and they weren’t.” These feelings of surprise and disheartenment seemed to pervade the participants’ descriptions of their experiences. One mentioned that “because it is a Christian environment, we’re supposed to be like family,” and they all seemed to agree that they didn’t experience this family environment of which others seemed to speak so highly.

One of the Bahamian students could not understand how Christians could treat each other certain ways because of skin color. Reflecting on the election of Barack Obama, one student said, “I think I was kind of disappointed in [this institution] claiming

to be all this Christian community...it was totally fake.” This sentiment was echoed in statements like, “It’s a lot more hurtful coming from my brothers and sisters in Christ.” One student’s assessment was: “the Christian aspect to it I think is what has been the hardest for me to deal with...people who are non-Christians seem to get the whole diversity thing slightly better than Christians.” These students seemed to place a certain expectation on a Christian environment that was not consistently met.

Cross Cultural Experience All the Time: Being Black

As the university expresses a growing interest in global engagement and exposing students to cross-cultural experiences, participants expressed a frustration in a hypocrisy that seemed to exist in students. They noticed a willingness for students to go overseas to work with people of different races and ethnicities existing simultaneously with a struggle to engage their peers of color on their own campus. Two participants noted that “there are people that will go over and invest deeply in those communities but they won’t invest deeply in an urban community or even in a rural minority community” and “they can’t even talk to the girl next door.”

One participant expressed that they feel as though they live and work in another culture stating, “We talk about cross cultural experiences and we live it. Everyday. 24/7 I’m living a cross-cultural experience and that makes me tired because I just want to be me.” This sentiment revealed the prevailing notion that, if nothing else, being a person of color on a predominantly White campus can often be “lonely and tiring.”

At the same time, participants felt being a person of color resulted in varying responses. One student felt that he had more opportunities for leadership because he was Black. He noticed that he always got asked to be on committees, but he did not seem to

be bothered by his perception that being Black helped him gain the opportunity. Others felt the opposite. They only saw White students in certain leadership roles, which made them intimidated to try the role. Students also expressed an outlook that many activities on campus seemed specifically equipped for White students.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Originally, this research sought to understand key factors contributing, both positively and negatively, to sense of belonging and perceptions of campus racial climate for African American students at a predominantly White faith-based institution. Several initial observations about the research process are important to mention.

First, due to the culture of the ethnic minority community at this institution, several Black students that were not African Americans showed up to the focus groups. This was the first evidence of the closeness of most of the Black students at this institution; this was a tight network.

Second, there was little challenge in getting the students to share. The sheer amount of students that showed up revealed a significant interest in discussing thoughts and opinions on matters of race pertaining to their experiences in college. The challenge came in guiding the discussion toward the focused outcomes.

Third, the atmosphere of the focus groups quickly became a safe place to share frustrations and challenges in their experiences. At the same time, some expressed positive feelings regarding diversity. However, this was not the prevailing current of conversation. It was not as though they had nothing positive to share, but the opportunity

to share honestly and in a safe place seemed to evoke more frustration than anything. A longer discussion probably would have allowed the researcher to uncover more of the positive experiences. Still, through hearing the challenges, one could begin to understand what made the experience positive ones.

Lastly, the free-flowing nature of the focus group conversations allowed themes to emerge unhindered by the researcher. All of these themes may not have spoken directly to the research questions, but they revealed important factors concerning Black students' (and some faculty and staff) experiences at a PWI. These are important observations to consider in this study.

This study proved to be valuable simply in the fact that the students appreciated the concern. At the end of one focus group, a freshman Bahamian student said

You're probably like one out of ten people that...made an effort to just, ya know, find out, 'What are we thinking? What are we going through?'...to at least get our voice out there, cuz I mean some people just don't really care about what we say, so I just really appreciate it.

While some students entered with skepticism because they were being interviewed by a White male and they felt as though their talking did nothing, the opportunity to process out loud amongst peers seemed to be eagerly welcomed.

Comments about Racial Identity Development

Cross's model of racial identity development discussed earlier seems to closely align with where students find themselves in college. It was beneficial to separate the groups based on age and academic class. Several freshmen and sophomore students certainly found themselves in the second stage of Encounter, which is common in young

adults. In this stage the individual begins to grapple with the realities of experiencing racism (Tatum, 2003). One student described her first real encounter at the first all-campus event of the year where she saw a group of Black students sitting against the wall and her response was: “Am I supposed to be over there?”

Many of the underclassmen were just beginning to enter the third stage of Immersion/Emersion. Tatum (2003) characterizes this stage by “a strong desire to surround oneself with symbols of one’s racial identity” (p. 76). This informs the desire by many to be around peers of their own racial identity. This created a support system that allowed them to develop their identity. While Tatum asserts that individuals in this stage considering White people to be irrelevant, students did not seem to resonate with this in that their comments took into account their White peers’ role in their struggles. Noting the complexity of identity, it must be said that students were at varying levels within these two stages.

Several sophomores were on their way out of Immersion/Emersion and probably aligned more closely with the seniors who largely fell within the fourth stage of Internalization. Differentiating Internalization from the next stage is the fact that “by the fifth stage the individual has found ways to translate a personal sense of racial identity into ongoing action expressing a sense of commitment to the concerns of Blacks as a group” (Tatum, 2003, p. 76). They were more willing to stand up for themselves and had more security in their racial identity. At the same time, they felt like their efforts to shape the campus culture were not promoting results.

The upperclassmen were on their way to Commitment, the final stage, and this is where all of the faculty, staff, and graduate students found themselves. Because of their

increased identity development, they seemed more able to engage a predominantly White setting. Someone who has not reached Commitment would probably face an even more intense struggle and would be less capable of assisting students in their development.

Discussion of Themes

Diversity Compartmentalized: Always the Black Kids' Problem

There is increasing interest in the implications and realities of diversity in higher education. Many studies support the benefits of diversity and cross-racial interaction to achieve positive learning outcomes (Chang et al., 2006; Rose & Bylander, 2007; Terenzini et al., 2001; Umbach & Kuh, 2006; Zuniga, Williams, & Berger, 2005). However, participants in this study seemed to experience the burden of diversity efforts that were not integrated into the entirety of the institution. While events were meaningful in promoting institution-wide diversity understanding, they felt that these events were the only places where diversity mattered. They also found that fellow students of color, or people who already understand, were the only ones attending these events.

Efforts need to be made to integrate diversity at broad institutional level. Through diversity efforts relating to curriculum, policy, and culture, lifting some of the burden from students of color would spread the benefit to everyone on the campus. Zuniga, Williams, and Berger (2005) found that diversity-related efforts correlated with motivation to promote inclusion and social justice in the world around them. Cross-group interaction, diversity courses, participation in ethnic/cultural activities, and residence hall project-specific diversity awareness events were some examples. Efforts like these, made by those with more institutional power, or even White peers, would begin to spread the burden to others. Kezar (2008) also provides leadership strategies for addressing the

politics of diversity. Participants in this study spoke positively about the potential for change if it was initiated and supported from the top down. They did not see this happening very often.

Community: Safe People and Places

Many studies have investigated the experiences of students of color (Davis et al., 2003; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, 2004; Seifert, Drummond, Pascarella, 2006). Extremely common is the finding that students of color experience more stress and perceive the institution as less welcoming. Greer and Chwalisz (2007), in their research on minority-related stress and coping strategies, found that African American students at PWIs practiced avoidance coping more than students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). This concept of retracting into same racial groups was true for many students in this study. Students desired what they believed to be a safe place where Whiteness was not so pervasive (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Things like the Black table and racially homogenous social groups resulted. Interestingly, it did not seem to matter if the students shared the same cultural background. It was their status as a student of color that made this place safe.

Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) found that peer support was more important than family support for first generation minority students. Partly due to the practical closeness of peers, these students seemed to rely heavily on the support of their friends. Most students talked about feeling most comfortable with their friends or around people they knew were safe. These “safe” people seem to line up with Reason, Roosa Millar, and Scales’ (2005) concept of Racial Justice Allies. They were people who worked to understand the reality of being a Black student at a PWI. These allies were

often faculty and sometimes were White student peers. Each of these allies seemed to be beneficial for the participants in this study.

Related to this desire to be supported socially, there is evidence that minority students consider the social support they will receive at a university more carefully than White students when selecting an institution (Loo & Rolison, 1986). This is due in part to White students' assumption that the university is supporting minority students well. Minority students often do not feel the same way. This is an obstacle in developing supportive White peers because these peers do not perceive the need. Interestingly, the students in the study experienced this to be true. Also essential to consider is the importance of residence hall in sense of belonging for first year undergraduates (Johnson et al., 2007). This social setting is vital to think about because it is not a place many of these students felt most comfortable.

Something also important to consider is the presence of Black faculty and staff. One focus group ended with students citing the need for more faculty as a significant enhancer to their experience. One can only imagine how the influence of more older, wiser staff and faculty members on the campus could ultimately encourage the Black students to persist.

Ignorant and Naïve Comments

The students often communicated that the campus was not, in their terms, blatantly racist. However, the perpetual reminders that they were Black on a campus that was mostly White drained them. While Pewewardy and Frey's (2002) research notes that minority students are not having as positive an experience as White students, they mention this is true "regardless of the variables that influenced the participants' response"

(p. 87). This study seemed to reveal one of the most significant variables being comments consistently heard from their peers. The prevalence of these comments seems to line up with the concept of racial microaggressions developed by Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000). Similar to that study, these students described “the subtle and overt daily putdowns they encountered – attempted to avoid – in their interactions with some Whites” (p. 67).

While the students acknowledged that many of these comments might not have been intentional, their frequency constituted a continual challenge. And, while this study had no comparative analysis, students’ perceptions of racially motivated comments toward Black students are consistent with previous research (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Hurtado, 1992; Phillips Morrow, Burriss-Kitchen, & Der-Karabetian, 2000; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003).

Research has commonly shown that White students experience less racial harassment at a PWI. Consistent and often coinciding with this finding, White students also perceive the campus climate as more welcoming for students of color (Rankin & Reason, 2005). In this study, students consistently mentioned what they believed to be the underlying reason for this finding. They believed their White peers were naïve and had minimal contact with people of color before college. They felt as though White students at the institution often did not know how to respond to the presence of Black students.

In their study on White identity, Mercer and Cunningham (2003) found that a positive White identity was related to interest in racial diversity and perceived cross-racial competence and comfort. These dimensions are a part of Helms and Carter’s (1990) White Racial Identity Attitudes Scale. Based on the general demographics and

backgrounds of White students at the institution where this study took place, it is likely that many White students were in early stages of the development of their White identity. Moving White students from colorblindness to racial cognizance should be an intentional goal in higher education (Reason & Evans, 2007).

Expected More from a Faith-Based Institution

These interactions were more hurtful because of the nature of the institution. Participants expected that their common faith would decrease negative encounters regarding race. From their experiences, it had not. Few studies have explored experiences of minority students at religious or faith-based institutions.

In their study on psychological sense of community on religious college campuses within the Christian Evangelical tradition, Bohus, Woods, and Chan (2003) found that non-Minority students experienced much higher levels of sense of community than minority students. Participants reported higher expectations solely based on the fact that it was a faith-based institution espousing a sincere commitment to shared values. The complexity of factors contributing to these expectations and experiences at faith-based institutions needs further study.

Cross Cultural Experience All the Time: Being Black

As participants shared about their experiences, they talked about an inability to escape the cross-cultural nature of their experience. They are Black, all the time. And, they are Black in a context that is extensively White. Fries-Britt and Turner (2001) found similar sentiments from academically successful Black students they studied. Students in their study discussed how their physical traits affected the way they were perceived. Even

amidst success, daily challenges related to race create what these students described as a cross-cultural experience.

Important to note here are the responses students make to this challenge. Greer and Chwalisz's (2007) study on minority related stressors affirm this struggle. Students have no choice but to respond in as positive manner as they are capable and equipped. Students in this study seemed to respond by finding solace in friends (often Black friends), safe professors, and places where a common purpose was shared.

Limitations

Several key limitations must be acknowledged concerning this research study. First, the fact that a White male conducted the research inevitably played a factor in this study. At times, students seemed slower to trust a White male. Second, a selection bias played into the choosing of participants. The Director of American Ethnic Student Programs removed several students from the list, and students who regularly checked their email were the most likely to take part in the study. Also, due to the nature of the topic, some students probably consciously chose not to participate. Whether these students would have shared more positively or negatively cannot be inferred. Third, the election of an African American to the United States presidency during the performance of this study played a significant factor, especially for the underclassmen students. The Obama election was mentioned often, and students were frustrated by many experiences (comments and other nonviolent actions) due to this experience. Understanding the response of students to this sort of racially charged event remains important to the study's results. Fourth, the lack of a comparative group (i.e. White students, students from another institution) decreases the reliability of some assertions. Knowing how White

students view campus racial climate and sense of belonging could enhance results. Additionally, expanding research to other institutions would greatly enhance research efforts. Lastly, the presence of Bahamian and African students moved the scope beyond an African American focus. While their presence enhanced the study, generalization of results is limited.

Implications

This study contributes to the current body of literature relating to ethnic minority students' sense of belonging and campus racial climate. Adding to the limited amount of qualitative studies on these subjects, its focus on a small, liberal arts institution is beneficial to similar institutions that are interested in what their minority students (specifically African American and Black students) might be feeling, experiencing, and perceiving.

Most specifically, this study is helpful for predominantly White, faith-based campuses that find themselves in a predominantly White, demographically isolated environment. Institutions ought to strive to know the experiences of Black students (and other sub populations of students) on their campuses. Discovering the realities that students of color are facing on a small, rural PWI can serve to provide opportunities for institutions to come alongside these students with programming and support that will enhance the campus climate at large. These results can provide campus leaders with a lens through which to better understand some of their students of color on campus.

Serving as a gauge, adjustments are possible to positively affect the experiences of ethnic minority students. The use of focus groups in this study is also a method to consider when gaining perceptions from student populations at institutions. Other

opportunities are the creative inclusion of White faculty into diversity-related conversations. These White faculty have the opportunity to serve as role models and leaders to other White students as well as become the safe support that students of color often appreciate.

This study leads to several implications that can be applied to campus life, administrators, and potential future research. These implications focus on: (1) importance of social environment, (2) institutional wide focus on diversity, (3) systematic documentation of institutional efforts toward diversity, (4) a positive institutional climate for learning, (5) research and initiatives focused on White student racial identity development, (6) and utilizing more specifically-aimed questions.

Campus Life

It is important for campuses that espouse a welcoming, inclusive community to consider how that dynamic is experienced by *all* of its students. This study revealed a population that did not perceive the same inclusiveness it thought everyone else was experiencing. Learning and understanding how minority populations feel about their social environment can enable necessary adjustments to be made. All students possess what Baumeister and Leary (1995) call a “need to belong,” and institutions need to assist their students in this area. Specifically, faith-based institutions need to consider this as they often claim a strong community on their campus. Notably, a significant racial event on a small campus (e.g., election of African American President) can have far reaching implications, especially for young students. Responding positively to students of color when significant events take place is essential to their sense of belonging.

We know that a positive campus climate is important for learning to take place (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). This needs to be true for all students. Leadership needs to be aware of students' perceptions of campus climate. Regularly taking the pulse of the student body, specifically the underrepresented groups, could lead to positive enhancements of the campus climate. It cannot merely be assumed that all students are doing well, even if assessment data reveals this. Assessment of subpopulations is essential. Additionally, students in this study were extremely encouraged by observed changes they had witnessed. They viewed these changes as steps in the right direction, and this often motivated them to press on amidst the challenges they faced.

Administrators

Administrators must lead the charge in moving their institution's focal point from a programmatic focus on diversity to an institution-wide emphasis on diversity efforts. Noted in the results was what students perceived as institutional resistance to change. University leaders can alter this perception. Coming from the top, policies, procedures, and programs can begin to infiltrate the culture in order to help all constituents begin to take ownership of a commitment to diversity. When this commitment lies largely within a "diversity department," many constituents seem to move to a laissez-faire approach (Owens, 2009). Sometimes, moving the discussion from diversity to the overarching goal of caring for students is necessary in order to check motives for why an institution is making such efforts.

There also seems to be a need to document more systematically and communicate opportunities and existing efforts to enhance diversity (Phillips-Morrow, Burriss-Kitchen,

& Der-Karabetian 2000). Admittedly, this effort takes time, but it necessarily reveals an intentional commitment and decreases miscommunication and overlap in diversity efforts. This would support the effort previously mentioned concerning an institution-wide focus.

Future Research

It is essential that a branch of research move toward understanding how White students can best achieve a White identity as well as how to most efficiently grow in their cross-cultural and racial understanding. Students in this study felt like they were expected to deal with all diversity-related problems and also that research studies were always focused on them. Research has discovered many contributors to the struggles for Black students. Practical approaches for educating and developing White students seems to be missing. Courses, training, programs, and conversations should be focused on bringing White students into this conversation in creative and innovative ways. Helm's Theory of White Identity Development (Helms, 1995) should inform this discussion.

Also, while the Black/White focus fits within the contextual history of the United States, students mentioned a desire to see their other ethnic minority peers included in these studies. There is a growing body of research pertaining to non-Black students of color. Nevertheless, a similar study done with students of color who are not Black is important.

In future studies, it would be useful to implement a narrower group of questions. In the context of a focus group study such as this, maintaining a realistic scope and a focus on the research questions can be challenging if too many questions are asked. One

particular study could explore the experiential factors unique to a student of color at a predominantly White faith-based institution.

Summary

Research in higher education is plentiful on the topic of diversity. This study serves as an example of the importance of understanding perceptions of student subpopulations on a campus. Even at an institution claiming a thriving community, much can be gained by understanding student perceptions relating to their experiences on campus. Taking the collective pulse of Black students allows necessary and meaningful action to be taken. While one should be hesitant to make broad-sweeping generalizations, this research can spark interest and motivation in asking similar questions.

Positive sense of belonging and perception of campus climate for every single student is a worthwhile goal for an institution. While it may be challenging to consistently reach this goal with every student, this research serves to show that perceptions are important to students. Ultimately, they play a significant part in the overall educational experience of students. Higher education practitioners have the opportunity to advocate for their students on a variety of issues.

At many PWIs, issues surrounding race need to be addressed more proactively. There are signs that this is happening. Several research questions should permeate future research: How are our White students developing in their racial identity? Are diversity efforts truly producing desired outcomes? How are students of color responding to the particular institutions' campus climate, culture, diversity efforts, etc.? These questions must encompass the "conversational and research baton" that is passed along in important ways across the realm of higher education.

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APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Adapted from Kim Case (personal communication, October 14, 2008)

The purpose of conducting this focus group is to understand in greater depth the experiences of African American students on this campus. Namely, the focus will be on students' sense of belonging and perception of the campus climate and how these feelings have affected their undergraduate experience. Your voice is an important part of this process, and we encourage you to contribute to each question so that we have a greater understanding of your experiences on this campus.

General Questions

Tell me a little bit about yourself—your major, your class level, and why you chose to attend college here.

Definitions: *Racial Climate, Sense of Belonging*

Answer the following questions on a note card:

- Write down 2-3 things you like about the community at [this institution] and 2-3 things you struggle with relating to the community at [this institution]
- Write down 2-3 things you like about ethnic diversity on this campus and 2-3 things that disappoint you about the climate relating ethnic diversity on this campus.
- If you could change one thing about the racial climate on campus, what would it be?

- Adapted from Phillips Morrow (2000)

Now I have some questions about your experiences so far on this campus.

1. If you could choose only a few words or a phrase to describe what it is like to be “you” as a student on this campus, what would that be? This is just to get a quick sense of your experiences. (This part will be done fairly quickly, in a “popcorn” fashion. Its intent is to get a quick read of people’s gut reactions, before they have been influenced by what others say in the rest of the focus group session.)
2. In what ways have your experiences on campus so far met your expectations? Talk a little about what you expected college to be like and what it has actually been like for you.

Sense of Belonging (I will only use some of these)

3. How would you describe your sense of the community on this campus? What specific experiences and people have impacted your overall experience?
4. When have you felt most “connected” on this campus or felt deeply that you belonged? (Elaborate: Who were you with or where were you? What were you doing?)
 - a. *Probe:* If you have never felt connected or experienced a sense of community on campus, think about another time or place in your life where you did. What is different about this place—what is missing—that you have experienced elsewhere?
5. Tell me about a time it felt very challenging to be a student on this campus. Where on campus do you feel most included?

6. Do you feel that [this institution's]'s emphasis as a Christian institution has played an impact on your sense of belonging?

Campus Climate (I need to work on these)

7. How do you perceive the institution's commitment to creating a positive, diverse learning and living environment?
8. Talk about what it's like to be a student of color on a predominantly white campus.
9. Describe your view of how students on this campus generally view race and ethnicity.

Extras

10. As you think about your own learning, what kind of classroom experience helps you learn most?
11. What have been some of the "highs" and "lows" you've experienced so far on this campus? (elaborate: What has been most satisfying about your college experience so far? Give me some examples of events or experiences that you felt really good about. What has been disappointing to you?)
12. What is your greatest area of need as a student on this campus? What would it take for this institution to meet that need?
13. If you could change one thing about your college experience so far, what would it be? Why did you choose that? (Encourage them to frame their answer as a positive suggestion rather than just leaving it as a criticism—probe and clarify for how things could be made better)

Each protocol will end with the following question:

As you think back on all the questions I've asked today, what have I missed?

What else do you think I need to know about your experiences here?

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

This research study is being conducted in order to better understand the experiences of African American students on a predominantly white campus. A focus group format will be utilized which will involve 5-8 peers answering questions together for approximately 120 minutes. You will be asked various questions pertaining to your experience at your university and given ample time to respond. Results will be presented to campus leaders in ways that might promote positive change.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Participant may discontinue participation at any time without penalty. All answers will remain confidential.

Our conversation will be audio recorded for transcription purposes. The recording will be destroyed as soon as necessary transcription is completed. Transcribed data will be stored in safe location.

There are minimal perceived ill effects from participating in this study. However, [this institution's] University counseling services are available should you experience any feelings of anxiety. Appointments can be made through Patty Stigers (765.998.5360).

I, _____, agree to participate in this research project. I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate.

Participant's Signature

Date

Principle Investigator's Signature

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APPENDIX C: REQUEST TO PARTICIPATE

Name,

Hi, my name is Kyle Lantz. I am a graduate student at [institution name] in the Masters in Higher Education program.

I'm asking you to consider taking part in a focus group research study with me, giving us insight in your experience as a student at [your institution] who claims an African American ethnicity. We really need your input to help us be more aware of ways to make [your institution] a hospitable place where all students can reach their full potential.

These focus groups will consist of 5-7 of your peers. This should allow for a comfortable atmosphere to discuss your experience as a student. Most likely, we will meet at a time in which a meal will be provided. Your time is valuable, and we are asking for approximately two hours to conduct this meeting. Please respond to this email before Nov. 10 if you are willing to participate and let me know which times work for you:

Example Times

I am happy to answer any questions you might have. Please know that your answers as a participant in this study will be confidential.

Please consider being a part of this important study. Thank you for considering this. I would really enjoy the opportunity to meet with you.

APPENDIX D: CHARTS

