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The Impact of Campus Climate and Student Involvement on Students of Color

Jimmy Doan

Historically disenfranchised populations have had struggles in higher education ranging from access to academic achievement to retention rates. Research indicates that over half of all students of color who matriculate to four-year college careers fail to complete their degrees within six years. As the number of people of color who enroll in post-secondary education increases (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), these issues remain pertinent concerns for college administrators and educators. One factor that contributes to this trend is the campus climate, especially for students of color. A second factor that affects the success of students of color in higher education is their involvement in student organizations, specifically ethnic student organizations. This paper examines these factors and their implication on the success of students of color. Factors are supported by qualitative and quantitative research examining racial-minority students, particularly at predominately White institutions (PWIs). In addition, suggestions for future research are discussed to develop the understanding of performance and perception of college experiences for students of color.

The 2000 Census indicated approximately one quarter of the United States' population self-identify as a race other than White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). This percentage increased with the collection of the 2010 Census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). As the population of people of color in the United States increases, colleges and universities will begin to see an increase in enrollment of racially diverse students. This projection, coupled with the statistic that more than half of racial and ethnic minority students will fail to graduate within six years, requires colleges and universities to examine factors within the institution that influence the achievement of students of color (Museus, 2008).

Enrollment of students of color in higher education institutions has increased

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significantly over the past 30 years, specifically among African American and Hispanic/Latino students. A majority of these students are enrolled at predominantly White institutions (PWI) (Fischer, 2007). Since then, attention has been required from college administrators to ensure that students of color are provided with services to ensure their success in higher education. Research has explored factors that affect the success of students in historically disenfranchised populations. This article examines two specific factors that contribute to achievement and attitude of the campus environment among students of color: campus climate and culture, and student involvement in student organizations, particularly ethnic student organizations.

This article compiles a wide range of scholarship on factors that affect the achievement of students of color in higher education. It is important to note that specific racial identities will be discussed throughout the article and it is not intended to generalize to all racial minority groups.

Problematic Trends

The achievement gap between students of color and White students is present in the classroom before students step foot on the college campus. Standardized test scores, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Testing (ACT) test, which students traditionally take to gain admission into college, indicate that White students are scoring higher than their peers of color (Jaschik, 2009). This performance gap continues into college and is perpetuated in the higher education system.

Baccalaureate degree completion rates are a significant concern for higher education administrators in the United States. This issue is more relevant for students of color, who “exhibit extremely low degree completion rates relative to the overall college student population” (Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008, p. 1). A study at a four-year institution showed White students earn their bachelor’s degree within six years at a rate higher than their Black and Hispanic peers. Asian students, in the same study, earned bachelor’s degrees at rates equal or greater than White students (Keller & Silverman, 2002).

Beyond the perpetuated achievement gap, stressors also contribute to students’ of color achievement and attitudes toward their college experiences. An epidemiological study by Silverman, Meyer, Sloane, Raffel, and Pratt (1997) concluded that the rate of suicide among college students was approximately 7.5 per 100,000 (as cited in Choi, Rogers, & Werth Jr., 2009). Furthermore, the results of the 2000 National College Health Assessment (NCHA) Survey indicated that Asian American students were 1.6 times more likely to have seriously considered attempting suicide than their White peers. The report indicated that Asian and Hispanic

students are at a high risk for suicide ideation and attempts on college campuses. These stressors, which can develop from the climate that students of color find themselves in, are important to consider in order to create environments that will allow all students to succeed.

Using a campus climate assessment tool developed by Susan Rankin in 1998, students were surveyed about their experiences on campus. The results indicated that students of color experienced harassment at higher rates than White students. Also, students of color perceived the campus climate to be more racist and less accepting than their White peers (Rankin & Reason, 2005).

As data from the 2010 US Census shows, the number of people of color has increased. As a result, it is evident that the number of racially diverse students in higher education will continue to increase. The aforementioned problems must be considered to ensure that all students, White students, and students of color are obtaining a quality higher education experience that prepares them for the diverse world they will enter after graduation.

Campus Culture and Climate

Campus culture and climate are significant factors that affect student of color achievement and attitudes during their collegiate experience. While institutions such as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) exist to serve disenfranchised racial populations who have historically been excluded from higher education, most students of color enroll at PWIs (Carter & Wilson, 1993). Therefore, creating inclusive campus environments for students of color to ensure their academic achievement and success is an issue for higher education and not solely the responsibility of particular institutions within higher education.

Multicultural Student Centers

Institutional climate or physical environmental conditions also play a significant role in the attitudes among students of color toward their institution and their academic achievement. Many institutions provide services such as multicultural student unions and student centers for students of color. These offices were created with the purpose of offering “safe havens in an alien environment” (Young, 1986, as cited in Palmer & Shuford, 2004). Professionals within these offices provide academic advising, leadership development opportunities, and social support for students of color. In addition, many offices also provide additional services such as student leadership development and diversity trainings.

Some colleges and universities take multicultural student centers a step further by

creating safe spaces for specific racial identity groups. During the Black Student Movement of the 1960s “Black students wanted their culture recognized and integrated into the academic, social, and administrative functions of their universities” (Patton, 2006, p. 628). From this, Black cultural centers were created as a safe space for Black students who had been immersed into the predominately White higher education system at the time (Patton, 2006). In a study that was conducted to attain student attitudes toward Black cultural centers, one student described the space by saying, “It’s good to be together and actually feel like you’re wanted somewhere ... because there are so many things for everyone else. It’s good to just feel like you have something that you belong to, something for yourself” (Patton, 2006, p. 637).

While resources such as Black cultural centers are essential for increasing the positive attitudes of students of color on their respective college campuses, the placement and location of these buildings also contributes to the campus climate and institutional commitment to inclusion. In the same study at the University of Florida, one student described the institution’s Black cultural center as,

A wonderful home away from home for Black students, but I thought it was just very small and was very shocked. That’s the first thing that came to mind, why was it so small? Why was it so far away from the actual campus? Like, it’s on the other side of campus. (Patton, 2006, p. 637)

To prevent such opinions from students, it is important for campus leaders to consider the placement of such offices and their proximity to other buildings on campus. As Kuh (2000) mentioned in *Understanding Campus Environments*, the non-strategic placement of buildings on campuses can contribute to the perception that the university discourages intermingling between various groups.

Institutional Diversity

Perceptions of climate and culture are assessed prior to student enrollment at post-secondary institutions. Racial diversity is a significant factor of campus culture and climate when students are considering undergraduate institutions. Beyond the current percentage of students of color that are enrolled at the institution, “a college’s historical legacy of [racial] exclusion can determine the prevailing climate and influence current practices” (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998, p. 283).

Recalling the history of higher education in the United States requires evoking the unpleasant struggles of racial minority groups as they worked to achieve equity and equality. Universities and colleges have their respective histories of exclusion and barring access to historically underrepresented student groups. In order to create inclusive environments that positively influence the success of students of color, institutions need to realize that they cannot change or deny

their history. Campus leaders should use their institution's history of exclusion as an opportunity to educate the campus and to ensure that diversity becomes a core value for the community.

Institutional diversity spans beyond the racial demographics of undergraduate students. Campus culture is also influenced by the representation of diverse staff and faculty. As Hurtado et al. (1998) explained, structural diversity, as it relates to representation of various racial groups in leadership positions, is a significant factor that contributes to the perception of campus culture. The presence of faculty and professionals of color creates a more comfortable and trusting environment for students of color. This comfort is due to "homophily" (Park, 2008, p. 116); a concept that explains how individuals seek to associate with those who share similar backgrounds.

Student Involvement

Park (2008) explains that, "Humans desire a sense of belonging, and an easy way to foster such community is to create groups with strong in-group bonds where participants share similar traits" (p. 116). Student organizations evolved to provide students with an avenue to meet over common interests. Ethnic student organizations developed from such clubs, with the additional purpose of providing a safe space for students to establish connections with racial and ethnic peers and for students who have the desire to learn more about different cultures. Similar to the role that multicultural student centers play in providing a safe space for students, ethnic student organizations positively contribute to the adjustment and attitude of students of color.

Tinto's Theory of Student Integration (1993) explained that students must detach from their own culture when they attend college where a culture exists that does not align with their own. Ethnic student organizations exist to allow students who come from disenfranchised backgrounds to establish a community of their own, rather than assimilate to a dominant culture. Students of color experience the stress of foregoing a subordinate culture and assimilating to a dominant culture. Creating environments where students of color can embrace their own culture, without needing to shield it, enhances the opportunity for the institution to embrace diversity and increase student success.

Ethnic student organizations offer a crucial venue for the social integration of students of color at PWIs. Harper and Quaye's (2007) research concluded that racial-minority students join ethnic student organizations to express their cultural and racial identities. Missions of such student organizations vary from campus to campus. Common practices and organized events within ethnic student organizations are discussions centered on race, home-cooked meals, and reenactments of

traditional ceremonies. Research shows that beyond providing an opportunity for students to connect with their peers and familiar traditions, participation in these student organizations also provides students with the chance to connect with faculty and staff and give back to their community (Museus, 2008).

Astin (1999) posed that “the amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program” (p. 519). The research further explained the significance that particular programs have on student academic achievement and attitude; specifically honors programs, academic clubs, and student government.

A significant component of the college experience for students is connecting with peers of diverse backgrounds. These interactions enhance student learning, both in and outside of the classroom. In a study conducted by Guiffrida (2003), one student explained his involvement in a Black student organization as rewarding; “I met a lot of my friends through the organizations so they are usually there. My classes do not have a lot of African Americans to meet people, I met them through the organizations” (p. 309). While it is important to have groups on campus that allow for students to connect through common interests, it is equally as important to create space for students who “look alike” to connect as well.

Suggested Future Research

According to Tinto (1993), college retention can be attributed to fit between a student and the institution. To enhance student learning and welcome students from different backgrounds it is important for institutions that serve diverse students to create inclusive environments. In 1994, the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) discussed the role of student affairs professionals as educators who are responsible for creating conditions and experiences to enhance student learning in *The Student Learning Imperative*. As the United States higher education system becomes more diverse, it is important for institutions to remain intentional when considering environments for all students, especially students of color. Creating inclusive environments for all students enhances student learning and, ultimately, success and achievement in the academy.

While there is abundant scholarship on the effect that campus climate and student involvement have on the achievement of students of color in higher education, the approach to research among scholars has been very similar. Research in this field could be expanded by examining more quantitative data, specifically grades and retention rates for students of color, in correlation with qualitative data suggesting attitudes each student has towards their campus climate. It is significant to note that this research cannot be conducted across various institutions as climates vary from one campus to another.

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