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Beyond the Rhetoric: "Supporting" Graduate Students of Color

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With the increase of graduate students of color at predominantly White institutions, graduate programs, affiliated departments, and the institution as a whole are being forced to look at issues of race. Feelings and attitudes that students of color experience during their graduate careers are often difficult to overcome when there is a lack of acknowledgement and action on the part of the institution and graduate program to educate themselves about issues associated with race. This, unfortunately, is a reality for many graduate students of color at predominantly White institutions. Through the review of literature and personal communications the author will share some of the challenges associated with the graduate school experience for students of color and its impact on their self-concept.

With the increase of African American or Black; Hispanic, Chicano/a, or Latino/a; Asian American; and Native American applicants at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), we are observing more and more seats being occupied at the graduate level by individuals of color (Wild, 2001-2002). This significant increase not only has an impact on the population and culture of institutions of higher learning, but also has an impact on graduate programs, faculty, and campus departments.

According to *Minorities in Higher Education 2001-2002 Nineteenth Annual Status Report*, between 1991 and 2001, the enrollment of graduate students of color in higher education has increased and is still on the rise. As of 2000, there were a total of 457,056 master level students enrolled in graduate programs (Wild, 2002). Students of color, including non-U.S. citizens, represented 79,849 in 2000 compared to 36,841 in 1991 (Wild, 2002). African American or Black students comprised 8% of the total graduate students enrolled in 2000; Hispanic, Chicano/a, or Latino/a, students represented 4%; Asian American students represented 5%; Native American students represented 0.5%; and non-U.S. citizens represented 11% (Wild, 2002).

Although these statistics may be startlingly low, there has been an increase of graduate students of color. With this increase, graduate programs and affiliated departments at PWIs are forced to look at issues related to race. According to Mueller and Pope (2003), the increase of students of color has been the most common reason for colleges and universities to put forth an effort to raise awareness of multicultural issues. Although this effort is being made, "there has been little discussion about the racial identity or consciousness of higher education administrators who are predominantly White" (Mueller & Pope, p. 149-150). Because graduate students of color are surrounded and supported predominately by White faculty and administrators, who according to Wild (2002) make up approximately 85% of the population, it is important to consider the dialogue taking place on the topic of race. As Diaz (2004) proposed in his dissertation:

Education as a system contains within it the power structures to destroy any positive self-concept that a student has and reduce it to shreds before he/she leaves higher education. On the other hand, I do believe that there are actors within the system of higher education that challenge these structures and work hard at changing them from within. (p. 77)

Students of color look to faculty advisors and/or administrative supervisors for guidance and understanding of their experiences. When there is a lack of awareness and knowledge about issues graduate students of color face at PWIs where or to whom do students turn?

Literature Review

The support systems available and/or provided by graduate programs to graduate students of color at PWIs are minimal. Even though graduate programs, such as those at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University and The Ohio State University have support networks for students of color, including advising or mentoring opportunities, students of color continue to face challenges in and out of these networks (Brown, Davis, & McClendon, 1999). As the following excerpts expressed, tensions caused by race in classrooms, in cohorts, in work environments, and at campus or community events are not uncommon for graduate students of color to experience at PWIs (Moody, 1996; Robinson, 1999). As one graduate student of color noted in a personal journal entry:

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When I am with them [the support group], I don't have to wonder if any comments, thoughts, or interactions are based upon assumptions or expectations attributed to my skin color. I am not considering how my experience as a person of color will "fit" into the curriculum, my learning, or dialogues I participate in. My small group of support allows me rest from the racial challenges present within my classroom, work place, and campus community. (April 23, 2004)

Diaz (2004) also noted:

Being a man of color at UVM gradually became a focus of my life. I would sit in amazement at times with White colleagues who would openly express their discomfort with hiring people of color. I choose the word "amazement" because for the first time I began to see and feel the utter distrust and hatred that some White people have towards people of color. (p. 82)

Research reveals that students of color, most often African American or Black; Hispanic, Chicano/a, or Latino/a; and Native American, frequently feel alienated, alone, and misunderstood, which often leads to isolation (Granados & Lopez, 1999; Gaston-Gayles & Kelly, 2004; Moody, 1996). The feelings and attitudes that students of color experience during their graduate careers are difficult to overcome when there is a lack of acknowledgement and action on the part of the institution and graduate program.

In the classroom, I sat for weeks waiting anxiously for someone, other than myself to raise the issue of race and its impact on higher education. I recall vividly, sitting in a course where we learned of the history of higher education and weeks passed until the mention of racism occurred. I approached my professor to talk about this, questioning my role, not knowing what to do in this situation. He responded with this statement, "Jake, it is not your job to raise these issues." I walked away feeling validated, but also confused. If it was not my job, then whose was it? The job was not being done. (Diaz, 2004, p. 82)

As Granados and Lopez's (1999) research discovered:

Many universities operate at status quo, without making efforts to accommodate the needs of minority students to help them continue their studies and finish graduate degrees. Rather than making an effort to help students become part of the culture, these universities expect the student to change to fit. (p. 135)

If this is the unfortunate case, graduate students of color are experiencing graduate programs with little or no support, sufficient guidance, or appreciation of their experiences. Even though allies are present at PWIs for graduate students of color, it is questionable whether these individuals are sufficiently supporting the needs of the students of color they supervise, sit on committees with, or academically advise. There are true allies in the academy that support graduate students of color by challenging the stigmas that people of color face, as well as by creating an environment where graduate students can openly express their own struggles. However, there are also individuals who teach and work with graduate students of color who place themselves in the ally category who talk about the issues and how to support students of color, but rarely take the initiative or action to work towards true change.

At the present time, the majority of graduate students of color look to faculty and administrators of color for support. The truth is, however, "there are more students of color than faculty of color" (Brown, Davis, & McClendon, 1999). In 1999, the ratio was one faculty or administrator of color to every 58 students of color (Brown, Davis, & McClendon, p. 109). This reality is an indicator for PWIs to restructure systems within graduate programs and departments. It is necessary to recognize and acknowledge that graduate students of color are a growing population and have different needs from White graduate students. Given this, graduate programs and institutions need to promote awareness and educate individuals working with graduate students of color. As Brown, Davis, and McClendon expressed:

To recruit, enroll, graduate, and employ a diverse population is only a beginning, albeit an essential one. The educational opportunities – and obligations – that must follow these initial steps will test higher education's commitment, energy, resources, and imagination in profound and enduring ways. (p. 116)

Implications and Recommendations

Although there is a growing interest in this topic among student affairs professionals, there is still a void in the literature about the graduate student of color experience. Without dialogue and research, student affairs professionals at PWIs are struggling in creating better resources for graduate students of color. Even though many institutions now embrace diversity as part of their mission statement, there is rarely any discussion around the heterogeneity of graduate students of color. This allows student affairs professionals to remain stagnant and in the same, non-action-oriented frame of mind as their institutions (Robinson, 1999). This attitude includes the idea that the playing field is leveled and there are resources because of the presence of affirmative action in admissions and hiring processes (Milem, 2000). As a result, there is a perpetuation of tokenizing, which is defined in this article as when one member of a particular race or ethnicity is expected to represent the entire race or ethnicity. Tokenizing painfully continues to oppress graduate students of color at PWIs pushing their experiences to the periphery.

Recommendations for White Student Affairs Professionals

Student affairs professionals at PWIs need to take a stand; instead of merely saying they are allies, they need to actually be allies. This can be achieved through initiating and promoting diversity education as it pertains to race as well as being present at events that promote awareness.

Research suggests that faculty and administrators openly discuss their own conscious and unconscious biases towards people of color. This offers White student affairs professionals an opportunity to explore their own racial attitudes, which is important when working with graduate students of color (Mueller & Pope, 2003). The knowledge and self-reflection that can come from a dialogue about race can be profound for one's personal growth as well as for the individuals one educates.

Furthermore, it is important that student affairs professionals at the administrative level do not advocate for diversity simply to enrollment numbers. Rather, each institution has a responsibility to understand the needs of students of color, and to encourage faculty and administrators to educate themselves through dialogue, events, workshops, conferences, and relevant literature in order to provide the best support and education. It is important to create an environment where graduate programs, which include students, faculty, and administrators, are aware and knowledgeable about the different needs of graduate students of color.

Recommendations for White Faculty

Faculty working with graduate students of color should also dialogue with one another about issues of race. Through these conversations, faculty can uncover their own biases concerning race and discuss how this might influence interactions with students of color. Gaining awareness of one's own perceptions of race is essential in building advisory relationships with graduate students of color.

Research also suggests that faculty should expand their curriculum to be more inclusive of views and voices other than the dominant view (Milem, 2000). Bringing different authors from underrepresented groups into the classroom experience allows graduate students of color to hear a voice other than the dominant one that has pushed them to the periphery time and time again. The incorporation of different authors is also beneficial for White graduate students who have only been exposed to this dominant voice. If there are racial tensions within the program, then faculty should attempt to address them rather than ignore the discomfort that sometimes comes with dialogue about race. It is important for students to be able to dialogue about race and what it means to be in an inclusive environment. Often students of color are expected to speak when the topic of diversity comes up in the classroom. It is imperative not to tokenize students of color in dialogues about race by expecting them to educate White students in the classroom through the sharing of their experiences in and out of the academy. This is the responsibility of the faculty.

In addition to the aforementioned, mentoring programs, graduate student of color socials, or study sessions for graduate students of color are also beneficial. Programs such as these allow graduate students of color to connect with individuals in a personal, social, and professional manner. Mentoring programs, socials, and study sessions provide graduate students of color an outlet from the daily pressures of being students of color at a PWI; pressures that they may not be able to relay to their White classmates, advisors, or supervisors.

It is vital for faculty to be cognizant of the support they are offering to graduate students of color and to be aware that students of color at PWIs are challenged with assumptions, stigmas, prejudice, and discrimination on a daily basis. If faculty members have not experienced these challenges in their lifetime, then they should educate themselves instead of waiting for the institution to provide a workshop or program. It is the responsibility of the faculty to educate themselves and others in order to serve as supporters and allies for graduate students of color.

Concluding Thoughts

Before I leave home every morning, I suit up in my invisible armor so to deflect the stares, negative treatment from White individuals in the community, and misunderstandings of White classmates. Do I feel supported at a predominantly White institution? Can I trust the individuals with whom I work or interact? Could you?

It would be a lie if I said that when I first arrived at the University of Vermont I did not feel lost, alone, and unsupported. I would ask myself, "What is wrong with you? It's your imagination that you don't fit in: just try harder." I said this for weeks, which turned into months. I would step out of my door, walk up the block to campus and see only a sea of White faces staring, not knowing what to do with my brown skin walking towards them. I would smile and say hello as to cross the barrier of silence and dismay, but rarely would I get a response: my color was just too strong to overcome.

It was this experience that told me that there was nothing wrong with me, I just didn't belong here. A few faces of color would peer out of the sea of White; a friendly smile would relieve my discomfort for a split second because there was an unspoken understanding of the student of color experience that did not need to be vocalized. Some days, however, these few faces were just not enough and again, I realized, this institution of higher learning was not built with me in mind. I made it in, however, some how, some way. (S. Sulaiman, personal communication, April 24, 2004)

This paper offers a glimpse into the experience of the graduate student of color. The feelings of being misunderstood, disregarded, tokenized, and unsupported by supervisors, colleagues, classmates, and faculty are real for graduate students of color. Is this true for every graduate student of color? No. Is it true for most? Yes.

PWIs are not fully prepared for graduate students of color. There is a need at each institution to increase its numbers to meet the diversity quota set in place by the University's decision-making officials. However, there is a hands-off approach to working with the population that graduate programs and affiliated departments work so hard to get into the iron gates of higher education.

The fact is that the number of graduate students of color is growing. The individuals that graduate students of color most often turn to for mentoring and support are faculty and administrators of color, yet there are not enough people of color in these roles in higher education to serve as mentors and supporters to the growing population of graduate students of color (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Moody, 1996; Erlach, 2000). This simple truth is that student affairs professionals, including White faculty and administrators, who are not already on deck to serve the needs of this growing population need to step up to the plate. I encourage these individuals not only to advocate for issues of social justice in the classroom, in the office, at events, and on committees but to also show their commitment through self-initiated action.

Furthermore, the recruitment of graduate students of color into graduate programs at PWIs necessitates responsibility to effectively support and retain this population. The majority of graduate students of color at PWIs are currently not receiving sufficient support or guidance, which affects personal, social, and academic success. In order to serve as true supporters students, faculty, and administrators, must educate themselves about race and the role played in maintaining the system of oppression. Only then can we fully understand how to be authentic supporters for graduate students of color.

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