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Race and Retention in the Division of Student Affairs

Cole MacCollister & Lexi Kane

Through our topic of “The Great Resignation: Race and Retention of BIPOC Staff within the Division of Student Affairs” we hope to better understand how the racial identities of student affairs practitioners impact their professional experience. We decided to execute this project by sending out a questionnaire to current, and past professional staff at UVM who identify as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person Of Color). Each questionnaire was tailored with questions that could provide us with a clearer insight into the experience of these professionals, while maintaining their privacy and honoring their stories. We gave professionals options regarding what level of anonymity they would like while participating in the survey in order to provide them with a safe space to share any impactful experiences that they may not feel comfortable sharing otherwise.

Through this exploration, we hope to achieve a clearer understanding of how student affairs practitioners’ racial identities have impacted their professional experiences. We hope to gain insight from people who are currently in The University of Vermont’s division, those who have departed from the division, and those who are contemplating leaving their role. Through the analysis of resources such as statistical data as well as qualitative research, we aim to have a clearer idea of the relationship between race and retention in the Division of Student Affairs.

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1: The topic of “Race and Retention in the Division of Student Affairs” appealed to me because I want to gain a greater understanding of how the structure, operations, or culture of the department can affect a BIPOC professional, and how I can attempt to remedy these problems or at least bring attention to them. I especially want to understand how their experience has been at The University of Vermont, since UVM is not the most diverse in terms of racial identity. Since I identify as a cisgender white male, I know my experience in the division has been different from that of BIPOC professionals, and think that I can benefit tremendously from this project as well as become a better advocate for my BIPOC colleagues. I believe that by researching this topic and learning from the personal experiences of BIPOC practitioners who were in the field, or are still currently serving in the field, I can better marry my research with first hand experiences and work towards making this division a more equitable and supportive environment for all people.

2: After much thought and consideration, this topic is one that stood out to me the most in terms of needing to be addressed on a larger scale. As a BIPOC student who works within the Division of Student Affairs, I have been seeing many BIPOC individuals leaving the university altogether. For example, my current supervisor, Cristina Vega, is leaving the university this week, and she is one of many BIPOC individuals who has made the decision to leave. I have also talked to other BIPOC individuals within my division who are contemplating if it is worth staying in a place that doesn't create the best working environments for people of color. I have taken note that some BIPOC individuals have remained within the institution for quite some time. I would love to explore more about what drives these particular practitioners to stay, or if it is only a matter of time before they leave as well. As someone who picked the institution because it felt diverse and like it aligned with my identities, I am feeling my circle of BIPOC professionals getting smaller and smaller. I would like to determine why race and retention are linked in student affairs, especially within the University of Vermont, and why the spaces that have already been created for BIPOC individuals are not serving them well.

General Questions for Form:

- Where did you obtain your undergraduate degree?
- Where did you obtain your graduate degree?
- Did the geographic location of the institution affect your decision to work/study there?

- What department/field of student affairs do you currently work in?
 - What position do you hold within the department?
 - How long have you been in this current position?
 - What departments have you been a part of and what positions have you held in the past?
- What affinity spaces/resources are offered to you as a BIPOC professional at UVM?

Yes or No HR Retention Questions:

- Do you feel like you are reaching your full potential in your current position? Please explain.
- Have you had any opportunities for advancement in your current position?
- Do you feel valued for the work you do? Please explain.

Open-Ended Questions:

- Why did you choose to work at The University of Vermont?
- How would you describe the dynamic of your office from your perspective as a BIPOC professional?
- Would you encourage a BIPOC colleague to work at this institution? Please elaborate.

Leaving Questions

- What influenced your decision to leave your previous position and why?
- If your decision to leave was influenced by the institution itself, what do you wish UVM had done differently?
- If you were on the fence about leaving, were there certain things that would have enticed you to stay?
- Audre Lord said: "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change." What are your thoughts about this particular quotation?
- What kind of feedback did you receive from your supervisor? If so, did it affect your decision to leave the institution?
- Can you describe to us your relationship/s with former supervisors and if it influenced your overall work experience?

- Did you obtain a job at a different institution? If so, what are some qualities that drew you to apply for that position?

Overview of Research Method

Through our topic of “Race and Retention of BIPOC Staff within the Division of Student Affairs at The University of Vermont” we hope to better understand how the racial identities of student affairs practitioners impact their professional experience. We decided to execute this project by sending out a questionnaire to current, and past professional staff at UVM who identify as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person Of Color). Each questionnaire was tailored with questions that could provide us with a clearer insight into the experience of these professionals, while maintaining their privacy and honoring their stories. We gave professionals options regarding what level of anonymity they would like while participating in the survey in order to provide them with a safe space to share any impactful experiences that they may not feel comfortable sharing otherwise.

For both current and past staff, we chose to ask questions like, “How would you describe the dynamic of your office from your perspective as a BIPOC professional?” and “Would you encourage a BIPOC colleague to work at this institution?” We wanted to give all professionals a chance to explain the ways in which they felt supported in their role, and if there were any opportunities for advancement in their position. We also asked if they felt valued for the work that they did, and invited them to elaborate on why or why not. These questions were chosen because we wanted to give each participant a chance to share their personal opinions regarding the university and how their racial identity has impacted their experience at UVM.

There were additional questions for past staff that allowed us to observe the circumstances surrounding their departure from UVM. Some of these questions included, “What influenced you to leave your position and why?” and “Was your decision to leave influenced by the institution itself? If so, what do you wish UVM had done differently?” The answers to the questions gave us a clearer picture of why individuals chose to leave the university, what influenced their decision, and how they have adjusted since their departure.

Analysis of Data from Current Staff Members

First, it must be acknowledged that only two current staff members have

participated in the survey, which restricts our data. However, we value the information that we did get from the two participants, and their answers are very insightful as to how they navigate The University of Vermont as a BIPOC professional. It should also be addressed that both participants have been with the university between three months to two years, so their experiences are very much attributed to the current climate of UVM.

Both professionals shared that they were offered affinity spaces/resources for BIPOC staff, such as the ALANA (Asian-American, Latino, African-American & Native American) Coalition. Outside of this organization, participants noted that a few organizations hold safe spaces for BIPOC employees of the university. When asked if they were reaching their full potential in their current position, results were somewhat positive. One participant noted that they feel partially supported, but feel as if their work is, “disrespected, disregarded, or even undermined [by upper level administration].”

When asked exploration questions (questions meant to spark personal reflection) participants were very vocal in their feelings toward the university and the departments that they work in. The leadership in their office was a notable reason for why they chose UVM in the first place, but that leadership has since departed from the university. Participants expressed that colleagues were more interested in performative allyship and fake progressiveness rather than true solidarity with professionals of color. It is also important to note that while one participant would encourage a BIPOC colleague to work in their department, both participants said that they would discourage a BIPOC colleague from working for UVM in general. This was impactful to our understanding of the data because it suggests that certain departments within The University of Vermont are supportive/positive work environments for BIPOC staff, but the institution itself is not seen as a great place to work if one is a person of color.

Analysis of Data from Past Staff Members

In looking at the responses from past staff members, there are some limitations to discuss at this point in the data collection. There are two responses thus far, which limits the scope at which we can analyze the data. Our first past staff member had left the university on good terms and before the rise in racial tension occurred at UVM. This is important to note because many of the other participants interviewed through the process have been here

throughout the pandemic and administrative transitions. The second past staff member was employed more recently, and has more current experience working in this particular climate. It is interesting that in doing these studies, there were differing responses to some of the same questions. These limitations will help to inform our perception of the topic and how this topic has affected past staff members of UVM.

In asking general questions about their background, it was interesting to see that one participant was motivated to move to Vermont not because of the geographic location, but because of the job opportunity. This was also evident in the participant's decision to choose a master's program, which was based on the assistantship offered. This is a stark contrast to the other past staff member, who noted that the "areas in which I studied, negatively impacted me and my studies. I found that some of the knowledge that was in those spaces were meant to coddle white individuals". During their time at UVM, the first participant cited that there were numerous opportunities offered to BIPOC professionals, such as "WOC (women of color), POC (people of color), space in my office". From current institutional knowledge, not many of these spaces are still offered, especially within the office that has been mentioned within the participant's answer.

Within the retention questions, the first participant's answers were quite short, and did not give as much detail as hoped for. The participant did have opportunities for advancement, but only in pay. It raises the question of whether there were even opportunities for them to advance in the field they worked in, or if this was the end of advancement for the field. From prior knowledge and understanding, the position this individual was in was a dead-end, meaning that they could not advance further in the field. It is also intriguing that the candidate wrote they "felt that my voice mattered in the majority of the spaces and that I was asked for my thoughts". Compared to the results found in the survey for current staff members, this seems to be a positive experience and deserved recognition and validation for the work being done.

A stark contrast is seen in the second participant's answers, who noted their supervisor's positionality "was not easy for my growth as a student affairs professional". In talking about feeling valued for their work, the participant noted, that "I don't believe so. I found that white professionals will continue to exploit their grads of color". This stood out to us as a very different climate

from the one that was relayed to us previously by the other participant, and shows that during a short time period, a lot can change within an institution.

If given the opportunity to speak with the first participant further, it would be interesting to find out more of the why behind their answers. The participant answered some questions saying “This is more of a conversation”, or “This is a conversation. I don’t have time to write this essay :)”. Although the questions posed seemed simple and succinct enough to answer efficiently, it brings into question the scope of the question being posed by the investigators. In the future, it will be important to tighten the scope of the question more and make it easier to answer succinctly.

One answer that shed some perspective on the topic was the response to the question, “How would you describe the dynamic of your office from your perspective as a BIPOC professional?” The participant wrote, “One of my supervisors struggled to supervise BIPOC, the other named the struggles and really was a great listener. The second knew they were not perfect but tried really hard not to do harm and apologized when harm occurred. At times I worked with 50% BIPOC in my office, it was wonderful.” This participant gave a new perspective to this aspect of working within the Division of Student Affairs, and provided a positive experience to the supervision that was being given. It is also important that the second supervisor recognized where their positionality and identity may have a lapse in supervision, but attempted to not further the harm that could be done. In contrast, the second participant noted that the dynamic was “a pretty chaotic one” and that it “didn’t feel like a safe space for me”. Again, it important to note the lapse in time and how a specific office can either retain or lose their BIPOC professionals very quickly within an institution.

In analyzing the exit questions, the first participant provided the response that the decision to leave was due to a “wonderful opportunity, closer to home!” The individual found the opportunity for advancement within their field and chose to leave when they could not advance further in their role. When posed a similar question about a position at a different institution, the second participant said that “the qualities that drew me to apply was the following items” 1. Residential curriculum, 2. My supervisor being women of color, 3. Student staff of color in the department, and 4. Location”. In posing Audre Lord’s quotation about a master’s tools not being able to dis-

mantle the home, the first participant noted “I was able to make change at UVM, change that stuck. I was privileged to create a team and a program that became nationally well known. UVM helped me find my values, create so much and is in my heart even today (even if it feels and looks different today).” In being somewhat removed since their time at UVM, it speaks volumes to see that some of the program elements that this individual created are still being implemented and utilized today. It has been crucial to look at the difference in answers and how the passage of time, however short, can affect BIPOC professionals’ experiences within the same work environment.

Thematic Summary

The themes we have identified after collecting data from the survey are invisibility, lack of structure and support for BIPOC individuals, performative actions, and assimilation. Many of these themes were also demonstrated in the presentation that Amer Ahmed gave to our Social Justice and Inclusion class. Through further exploration of the presented themes and direct quotations, we hope to draw more conclusions and present possible solutions to this growing problem.

Core Story & Themes

Theme 1: Invisibility

Participant A: “...I feel that much of what we try to do is combated by upper level administration who are not on the ground doing the work and who do NOT trust the capabilities of our department and our staff members. We bring the MOST diversity and do some of the HARDEST work here....and are often disrespected, disregarded, or even undermined.”

Participant D: (Did you feel valued in the work you did) “I don’t believe so. I found that white professionals will continue to exploit their grads of color, their ideas will be continued to be taken, their needs/concerns will always continue to be pushed aside.”

Summary: Staff members are not feeling recognized for the value and hard work that they bring to the institution. Amer Ahmed had brought some great points to our discussion in which he said, “Are we supporting and harnessing who they are, their identities, and their experiences, or are we

devaluing and marginalizing them?” In recognizing that the latter is happening, there should be a system in place to elevate these marginalized and underrepresented voices.

Theme 2: Lack of Structure/Support for BIPOC Professionals

Participant B: “Yes, the body of work I complete is valued, however, no matter how good my work is, I feel unsupported when my current direct supervisor lacks the knowledge that I currently attain to advance the department forward in the direction in which the university wants to go. Rather than having a partner that advances the department forward, I am having to do my work and consistently close the gap of their “learning curve.”

Participant D: “Counseling Services was my only resource”

Summary: Staff members feel as if there is a lack of support for BIPOC professionals. In respect to work life, staff members felt as if leadership did not value their vision or knowledge surrounding ways to advance the department’s mission. They felt as if they have to do not only the work expected of them, but support leadership in their work also because they are still “learning” what direction the university is heading in. Outside of the functions of their job, staff noted Counseling Services as their only means of support for their experience as a BIPOC professional.

Theme 3: Performative Actions by Administration and Staff

Participant B: “Performative. Many people within the department have learned the DEI language to talk the talk, but they do not walk the walk, because their actions still centers whiteness and white supremacy culture. There is a lot of platitudes being spit around especially at the top. If anything the work being done is perceived not to be done to uplift BIPOC voices, but rather to allow themselves to feel good about themselves. They are not doing the work to change policy to be more equitable, but rather upholding it. Yet, when BIPOC professional do the work, they are labeled as unprofessional by both the staff and students. In order to survive, BIPOC staff need to sound “professional” by ensuring they appear “safe” by their white colleagues.”

Participant B: Absolutely not. The amount of fake progressiveness on this campus is unreal. I'd rather be on a campus where I know someone is racist because at least I know how to avoid them. However, here, I am in a field of snakes who present and sound as an ally, but when threatened, resort to their white supremacist ways and their actions demonstrate them turning their backs on the BIPOC community, but publicly claiming they are in solidarity with us.

In response to geographic location as a factor: "I found that some of the knowledge that was in those spaces were meant to coddle white individuals. It felt like instructors were cushioning traumatic historical events (e.g. "slavery was upsetting")." - Participant D

Participant D: No, having a white supervisor who was not aware of her whiteness and utilized her white fragility to control her narrative was not easy for and my growth as a student affairs professionals.

Summary: Staff members feel as though their positionality and identities are being used to reach a quota of "diverse staff members", which devalues the aims of student affairs and higher education. They are also noting that white colleagues are playing into the inequitable systems rather than fighting to change them, which perpetuates this harmful culture. These situations also bring to light the idea of code-switching, almost like a chameleon, in which an individual has to adapt to the surroundings that they find themselves in. It does not allow individuals to bring their whole selves, especially to their place of work.

Staff members are also noting that performative actions rather than legitimate actions are harmful in supporting BIPOC individuals. By not actively choosing to support individuals, they are embracing systems of harm that leave individuals feeling alone and hopeless. It also creates tricky systems to navigate in terms of who is actually an ally and who is pretending to be an ally to seem as though they are in good standing. This is especially true for graduate students, who feel as though they have to walk the line of balancing both a student and professional role. Power and positionality also create an

added and difficult layer in this situation. There needs to be truth and accountability within the university, which is something that has been lacking for quite some time.

Theme 4: Assimilation

Participant A: (Would you encourage a BIPOC colleague to work here?) In this department, YES.....anywhere else? NO.

Participant D: “The dynamic was a pretty chaotic one. The department was lead by a Black woman but majority of the department were anti-Black. So as a Black person, it didn’t feel like a safe space for me.”

Participant D: (Would you encourage a BIPOC colleague to work here?) No, I don’t think BIPOC individuals don’t truly get to thrive unless sacrificing parts of themselves in order for white people to feel good.

Summary: Staff noted that they would not recommend a BIPOC colleague to work at the university due to them feeling as if they must sacrifice parts of themselves to maintain white comfortability. The concept of code-switching, mentioned previously, applies to this section well and explains how BIPOC practitioners feel as if they must blend in and assimilate with the eurocentric culture of white professionalism. When BIPOC staff cannot show up to work as their authentic selves, they are either forced to code-switch or participate in a space where they do not feel comfortable or valued. When they do not feel comfortable or valued, they choose to leave the institution.

Recommendations

In collecting data and speaking with individuals about their experiences at the University of Vermont, we have identified four key recommendations to making and fostering a more inclusive environment for BIPOC staff and administration. These include: create awareness and visibility of BIPOC voices, implement ongoing structure and resources, take concrete actions while recognizing positionality, and reject assimilation. Through these four recommendations, we aim to shed light on how institutions can do better and support those that they have marginalized.

Recommendation 1: Create Awareness and Visibility of BIPOC Voices

The data provided insight into how BIPOC staff felt invisible and disregarded by administration and leadership within their department. Participants in the survey noted that they felt much of their work was being overlooked by upper level administrators, that their supervisors were not aware of how their positionality affected their supervision style, and that their needs and concerns were consistently pushed aside. To combat this, leadership can begin recognizing the value of BIPOC voices in meetings, projects, and collaborations across campus partners (Kasalak, 2019). BIPOC individuals should not be hired to reach diversity quotas, but to bring diverse perspectives and solutions to problems within the department (Kasalak, 2019).

Isolation is an issue that arises when BIPOC staff are overlooked in decision-making processes. When BIPOC staff are made to feel as if their opinions or voices do not matter, then they are likely to leave the institution to find a more inclusive workplace environment (Kasalak, 2019). Institutions should implement spaces where BIPOC staff can give constructive feedback to supervisors and administrators regarding their experience as a professional of color.

Recommendation 2: Implement Ongoing Structure and Resources

Data shows that participants were unable to create change within respective departments due to the “lack of advancement” by higher supervision. BIPOC professionals were often left behind and meant to create their own support while not receiving any from their built-in support system. Their visions were also unsupported when brought to higher supervision, possibly because of their positionality as well as the positionality of the supervisor(s). It is also important to note that resources were not provided for individuals from the onset, and that counseling services were the suggested support for having to lessen the gap between professionals. In acknowledging these resources, one can draw the conclusion that little to nothing is being done to support BIPOC professionals both inside and outside of the workplace. They are tasked with having to find and create their own support without the help of others.

From this theme, we recommend that the institution implement an ongoing structure and wealth of resources that can be accessible to professionals at any point in time. The word ongoing is also key in this recommendation because the structure and resources cannot be implemented only once; it needs to be a continuous process of striving to do better and provide better. Kasalak (2019) notes in their article that mutual support is also something to be achieved and that by creating affinity spaces or support groups, a ground level of trust and understanding can be fostered within the professional workplace. The author also noted that by not striving to create these spaces, individuals would be tasked with implementing them on their own “as a means of survival” (Kasalak, 2019). Institutions should not leave BIPOC professionals without support, but rather should be implementing these spaces that can, in return, provide good work for the institution. By not supporting individuals completely, it could have a negative effect on retention and create overall burnout. This recommendation leads into the next: take concrete actions while recognizing positionality.

Recommendation 3: Take Concrete Actions while Recognizing Positionality

In further analysis of the data, participants claimed that the institution is “performative” and perpetuated “fake progressiveness”. In unpacking these words, it is important to realize that the campus climate has a large impact on how BIPOC individuals view and conceptualize the institution. Kasalak (2019) notes in their own findings that how long an individual has remained at the institution can have an impact on the overall view as well. If an individual has been there for a short amount of time, maybe less than a year, then they are more likely to view the institution in an inviting light whereas anything beyond that year-point can be viewed in a harsh and negative perception.

The positionality of the supervision or higher administration can also play a role in a BIPOC individual’s perception of the institution. One participant noted that “having a white supervisor who was not aware of her whiteness and utilized her white fragility to control her narrative was not easy for and my growth as a student affairs professional.” These moments can have harmful repercussions on the BIPOC individual and force them to navigate further situations differently (Kasalak, 2019). For example, Kasalak (2019) notes that in trying to navigate institutions safely, the individual would have

to determine if their “negative racial experiences were worth the physical or mental sacrifice.” Individuals should not have to choose which battles to fight and should instead be supported in their pursuit of higher professionalism.

In reflecting on both of these findings, this institution needs to do better in actively striving towards equity and social justice rather than producing performative media to satisfy the discussion. One way that this can happen is in financial reparations to the affected individuals for the harm that has been caused. It shows an active step towards trying to fix the gap between the victims and the perpetrators. Recognizing positionality is also important in this case because individuals need to recognize that taking up space and causing harm towards BIPOC individuals can ruin their perception of the campus as well as affect retention rates. Another example could be to let BIPOC individuals take more days off of work for either mental health reasons or to advance their professional development. Professional development should be emphasized more as well to create better opportunities for individuals to succeed in this environment. By creating more space for these individuals, some of the harm that was previously caused can be repaired. This recommendation also allows for the final recommendation to take place: reject assimilation.

Recommendation 4: Reject Assimilation

Participants in our data collection noted that they felt as if they must sacrifice parts of themselves to maintain white comfortability. BIPOC staff are oftentimes held to higher standards of professionalism compared to their white colleagues (Kasalak, 2019). Due to this, BIPOC staff deal with extra stress and pressure when trying to fulfill everyday work responsibilities (Kasalak, 2019). Recommendations include improving supervision practices to empower BIPOC professionals to show up to work as their authentic selves. Additionally, the workplace environment itself must be transformed to create an inclusive environment where BIPOC professionals feel as if their perspectives are valued, their voices matter, and that they can practice individuality when performing in their role (Kasalak, 2019).

In reference to Recommendation 1, institutions can provide BIPOC staff with space to work and function as their holistic self, rather than code-switching or hiding parts of their personality/identity to fit into predomi-

nantly white culture (Kasalak, 2019). Giving BIPOC staff an opportunity to share how the institutional environment is falling short of meeting their needs, and taking into account their recommendations for improvements of the workplace culture will help to prevent BIPOC professionals from forced assimilation into eurocentric cultural norms.

Conclusion

These four recommendations show active steps towards dismantling a culture and system that repeatedly oppresses BIPOC individuals. In doing this research and collecting data, we ourselves are working towards elevating BIPOC voices that were once left in the shadows. Through our work to engage other individuals, we seek to find solutions that benefit all and raise the level of equity we strive towards.

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