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Resisting the Deficit Framework: Practices for Student Services Professionals to Effectively Support BIPOC Students at Predominantly White Institutions

Joshua Ravenscrof

Student services professionals are employed across the United States as a key resource to support undergraduate students as they enter higher education. However, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) face unique challenges which not all student services methods are prepared to address. For student services professionals to effectively promote the wellbeing and academic achievement of BIPOC students requires that they receive additional resources and training to avoid deficit thinking and be equipped to assist BIPOC students in their specific contexts. As student services professionals and departments learn to resist deficit thinking, they can intentionally design policy and practice to center the experience of BIPOC students and encourage students' existing skills and resources. Student services structures must connect students with a variety of supports, including community centers, faculty, advisors, tutors, and peers. These efforts should be unified by institutional leadership, to ensure sufficient resources for students and adequate training for staff.

Keywords: student services, BIPOC students, deficit thinking, advising, predominantly white institutions

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Introduction

“[Critical Race Theory] acknowledges the contradictory nature of education, wherein schools most often oppress and marginalize while they maintain the potential to emancipate and empower.” - Yosso (2005)

Focusing specifically on equity for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students, this paper aims to address a complex topic: what practices are recommended for Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) to effectively support BIPOC students? Student Service Professionals (SSPs), including the growing trend of professional academic advisors, are positioned by higher education institutions to support students across many dimensions (Keup, 2021), and so have an opportunity to contribute to BIPOC student success. BIPOC students at PWIs require nuanced support; this paper outlines some of what SSPs at PWIs need to know to serve BIPOC students effectively and equitably. Critical Race Theory (CRT) will be used as a lens to discuss how to structure SSP practices so that BIPOC students are centered, connected with community, and seen through the lens of their strengths rather than ascribed deficits. Predominantly White Institutions have an opportunity to apply CRT principles to fully utilize their SSPs as resources for BIPOC students.

This paper is primarily concerned with student services in general. My intent is to provide a discussion of deficit frameworks and SSP practices that will assist any student services professional, but especially those at PWIs who wish to challenge negative views of BIPOC students in higher education and support their academic and social journeys. As a White person currently working as an academic advisor, I am personally and professionally invested in understanding what practices best allow SSPs to support their students, especially those who experience marginalization in higher education. My work as an advisor grants some insight into how passionate many advisors are about assisting students, and how SSPs can be valuable support to BIPOC students. Nonetheless, I bring my own biases, as I experience the student services dynamic as a White academic advisor at a PWI.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

Yosso (2005) defines CRT in education as “a theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses.” Critical Race Theory serves as a theoretical framework to analyze and critique PWIs and their structures of student support, particularly regarding their efforts to serve BIPOC students. CRT will provide a foundation for recommendations and inform analysis of the ways SSPs both succeed and struggle to support BIPOC students. I prioritize CRT because “CRT challenges White privilege and refutes the claims that educational institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality and equal opportunity,” (Yosso, 2005) which I consider necessary critiques of how institutions prefer to portray themselves and their systems. Instead of accepting the status quo, “CRT in education refutes dominant ideology and White privilege while validating and centering the experiences of People of Color” (Yosso, 2005). By prioritizing the experiential and academic knowledge of BIPOC communities PWIs and SSPs can reassess advising habits, structures, and methods.

Impacts of SSPs and PWIs

Student Services Professionals can benefit students in a myriad of ways and have been shown to support BIPOC students at PWIs when their work is defined by proactive, humanized, and multifaceted advising (Museus & Ravello, 2010). Professionals such as academic advisors can be helpful in supporting student connections to campus, academic planning, course selection, and a plethora of other services (Keup, 2021). BIPOC students benefit when SSPs provide students a space to discuss their experiences and share their own stories (Harper, 2020), as cited in Keup (2021). Academic advisors can also be an important part of the coordinated support system for student success as they adjust to campus life and academics (Arámbula Ballysingh, 2016; Young, 2019). In general, institutions increasingly turn to SSPs to promote the success of students (Keup, 2021). While many SSPs already support BIPOC students; the challenge lies in equipping SSPs to help mitigate barriers for BIPOC students at PWIs.

Predominantly White Institutions are colleges and universities that are historically and presently predominantly White, a context largely unchanged by policies such as affirmative action (Ashkenas, 2017). Lowe et al. (2013) document how some institutional practices at PWIs may aim for inclusiveness, but students still experience microaggressions and negative interactions across campus. Furthermore, students perceive a lack of support for diversity and sense that “the administration’s rhetoric on diversity does not match its practices” (Lowe, Byron, Ferry, & Garcia, 2013). Even Predominantly White Institutions which place vocal value on diversity may still be, in material terms, sending the message that BIPOC students do not belong.

Understanding BIPOC Student Experiences at PWIs

If they wish to develop inclusive practices, institutions and SSPs must be ready to center student experiences in the analysis and formation of their practices. SSPs may already be aware of the inequities some BIPOC students face before arriving at higher education institutions, including less access to experienced teachers or high-quality education materials (Ashkenas, 2017). At the same time, SSPs must resist making assumptions about students and their resources and experience, especially as some BIPOC students are likely already dealing with the stress of being perceived in a deficit or stereotypical view by faculty and peers (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). SSPs should strive to understand both individual student experiences and broader historical contexts rather than rely on presumptions or stereotypes.

While SSPs may have the intention to empower students to learn and lead, student services practices play into the existing patterns of oppression and marginalization identified by CRT (Yosso, 2005). Many PWIs operate under the expectation that the student must adjust to the institutional structure of the campus, rather than proactively adjusting student services to be more accessible for BIPOC students. For example, Latinx students already face myriad challenges at PWIs, yet institutions maintain the assumption that students bear the added responsibility of adjusting to the PWI (Kiyama, Museus, & Vega, 2015). As a result, many BIPOC students face a dual challenge at a PWI; like all students, they must confront the challenges of university, but they must do so while learning to navigate the culture and institutional structure of a PWI.

Recognizing Deficit Thinking in Student Services and PWIs

“Indeed, one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in US schools is deficit thinking. Deficit thinking takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: (a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and (b) parents neither value nor support their child’s education” - (Yosso, 2005).

Deficit thinking is a widespread perspective that perpetuates stereotypes and views BIPOC students through a negative lens, blaming them and their communities for any struggles they may face (Yosso, 2005). While deficit thinking can be an explicit belief, it is widespread enough to lurk uncontested in the assumptions and practices of PWIs and SSPs. Furthermore, deficit thinking among SSPs ignores or misses the many skills and relevant social capital that BIPOC students bring into their higher education, such as peer and family values and supports (Arámbula Turner, 2019; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2022).

While acknowledging structural deficits impacting BIPOC communities is necessary to understand the experiences of BIPOC students, SSPs should also learn to recognize and resist deficit thinking. To demonstrate the alternative to deficit thinking, Yosso (2005) outlines how BIPOC communities access several forms of community cultural wealth, including social, linguistic, familial, navigational, resistant, and aspirational capital. This anti-deficit view highlights how these skills and values allow BIPOC students to persist and thrive in education, despite a common context of barriers and disparities. Other researchers emphasize shifting attention away from thoroughly documented examples of deficits facing BIPOC students, and instead recommend a focus on identifying and buttressing the internal resources many BIPOC students are already using to succeed (Harper, 2010). BIPOC students face real challenges, but SSPs should recognize that they have assets which should not be overshadowed by a deficit view. SSPs can learn to critically analyze advising practices and institutional supports to identify deficit thinking, and so develop new practices and systems that engage and build on BIPOC community cultural wealth.

Recommendations for Student Services Departments Student Centered and Effective Practices

One foundational step towards effective practices is to ensure that BIPOC students are considered in the development of policy, but also to ensure that practices are developed in distinct ways to serve different groups of students who fall under the BIPOC label. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the institution to analyze and understand the populations which make up their campuses, and to carefully develop practices which will serve them in their specific contexts and communities. Furthermore, for SSPs to effectively serve BIPOC students, students should be considered through multiple lenses of identity, as many live at the intersections of systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). Thought should be directed to how students with identities at the intersection of multiple marginalizations can benefit from intersectional support. One effective method of intersectional support for students has included counterspaces for women of color in STEM, who are able to support each other both culturally and academically in an adverse space (Wilkins-Yel et al., 2022). Such intergenerational spaces can serve as an opportunity for BIPOC students, faculty, and student

services professionals to connect and promote a culture of belonging.

Advising Methods Which Resist the Deficit Framework

While there are various ways to provide effective support to students through an anti-deficit approach, they all begin by focusing on current student successes. For example, SSPs can learn from what has promoted wellbeing and persistence among BIPOC students by using anti-deficit methods of gathering data, such as those developed by Harper (2010). In this case, rather than SSPs and leaders asking questions about student struggles through a deficit lens, SSP leaders can instead focus on understanding the resources and skills of many successful BIPOC students, and direct effort and attention to resources students are already benefiting from and using to support themselves. Some examples of resources BIPOC students are engaging with are pre-undergraduate community programs, same-race peer support groups, and peer identity student groups. SSPs can encourage their students to connect and remain aware of such groups on campus, or student service departments could collaborate directly with such groups to promote continuity for students. These strategies focus on the strengths and resources of BIPOC students, and so avoid a deficit approach.

Dissonance may exist between the culture and expectations of student services departments versus the culture of support students expect and have received before coming to a PWI. To address this, some advising strategies require SSPs to take an especially active role in a student's support network. As students adjust to life on campus, one tool for SSPs to implement is intrusive advising, which was suggested by one Latino participant in a relevant study (Arámbula Ballysingh, 2016). Considering that Latinx students report having relied on their mothers, family, and community, SSPs could adopt an *in loco parentis* strategy to proactively outreach with Latinx students, rather than waiting for students to reach out to them (Arámbula Ballysingh, 2016). Intrusive advising encourages required or regular student meetings with goals set and accomplished during meetings; this has been shown to promote first-year student engagement with SSP appointments (Schwebel et al., 2008). As such, intrusive advising could be considered for BIPOC students in general. From an anti-deficit approach, intrusive advising serves as an opportunity for SSPs to discuss the resources BIPOC students have been accessing on and off campus. Furthermore, regular meetings give time for SSPs to encourage students to stay connected to community, family, and other kinds of community cultural wealth which will promote their success and wellbeing.

However, different individual students will benefit from different types of support. Some will benefit from intrusive advising, while others will develop support networks on their own. Some BIPOC students will opt for self-reliant support, as shown by a study by Arámbula Ballysingh (2016) on Latino men. Self-reliant support should not be confused with disengagement; students who focused on a self-reliant approach to academic success formed their own strategic plans for navigating academics, social engagements, study habits, as well as accessing support from family and friends (Arámbula Ballysingh, 2016).

By centering the stories and wellbeing of BIPOC students in practice, SSPs can work to develop and adjust practices to effectively serve students while strengthening professional skills. In the process of centering BIPOC student narratives, it is important to challenge deficit ideas that may be widespread on PWIs and in student services departments. One example would be the idea that

BIPOC students are not connecting with the SSPs assigned to them; through a deficit lens, these students may be viewed as disengaged or resistant to help. Through a student centered CRT framework, these students may be seen as connecting with resources not accounted for by the systems of PWI SSPs and their leaders. As Rodriguez et al. (2016) found, “Latino men may be reluctant to seek external coping mechanisms of the institution and prefer to cope internally.” However, “they did at times seek support of culturally congruent peers, often accessed through institutionally sponsored organizations” (Rodriguez et al., 2016). This gives SSPs and institutional leaders an avenue to support students even when SSPs may not be their first choice. Just because the institution wants to institute support via student services professionals does not mean it will be the right fit for all students. Institutions should adjust strategies and develop practices to serve those students as well. SSPs should endeavor to view BIPOC students in light of their strengths, and highlight those strengths as a path to continued academic skill and persistence.

As advisors are trained regarding different student contexts, preparations should be made for advisors to navigate the ways different BIPOC students may experience advising. As an example, SSPs and institutions must resist building practice based on the racist narratives of the Model Minority Myth which would ignore the experiences of racism of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students (Poon et al., 2016). Instead, SSPs should develop policies and services which serve AAPI students along with other BIPOC students. This could include training SSPs to help AAPI students navigate stereotypes, academic supports, family support and expectations, racial context of academic and career choices and more (Kodama & Huynh, 2017). In the case of Latinx students, SSPs are recommended to build collaborations across departments and institutions to enable holistic support. Núñez et al. (2013) specifically recommend that student services partner with academic services to target multiple areas of equitable support for Latinx students, as has been done in some Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). Other strategies to support Latinx student access to higher education is by fostering multiple kinds of capital for students, SSP institutions can promote equity by intentionally creating structures and collaborations to promote academic capital, financial capital, cultural capital, and social capital (Núñez et al., 2013). Academic capital can be expanded through promoting access to faculty, while cultural and social capital can be encouraged through spaces for Latinx community building (Núñez et al., 2013).

Engaging with Existing Student Resources

Even if the institution assigns SSPs the role of primary support, SSPs can encourage students to remain connected to their existing support networks. Students at a PWI who remained in contact with their family, cultural values, and cultural networks were able to support their wellbeing and persistence (Mendoza et al., 2011). One major way this occurred on campus was through Latinx student groups (Mendoza et al., 2011). As another example, when Indigenous students experienced anxiety in transitioning to university began by connecting with family and previous connections for support, but after some time connected more with campus resources such as faculty and staff (Rodriguez & Mallinckrodt, 2021). For Black students, the support of family and community can promote engagement with cultural capital and persistence, as shown in the case of Black men studying engineering (Tolbert Smith, 2022). SSPs can actively encourage students to identify and

connect with resources in their family and community in tandem with institutional support. Student services leaders and professionals at PWIs must understand that BIPOC students already have existing support networks, such as how Latinx students may draw on relationships with family and community for support to promote their academic persistence (Arámbula Turner, 2019). Furthermore, connection to Black faculty can help Black students find support and reinforce that they are not alone in navigating stereotypes and challenges in higher education (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). SSPs and their leaders can work to encourage students to include these networks in their success plans.

While many students will have existing community support before coming to university, it is nonetheless important that institutions commit consistent effort to organize programming on campus where students can connect with peers and community members from similar identities and backgrounds (Kiyama, Museus, & Vega, 2015). In the context of SSPs, this could mean advisors should make the effort to be aware of communities on campus that students can connect to, or SSP departments can partner with local organizations to help facilitate those spaces. As SSPs develop practices to support students, they can keep in mind their existing support and cultural capital to enable students to integrate their existing resources with new SSP resources on campus (Arámbula Turner, 2019).

Institutional Changes, Not Just Individual Student Service Professionals

It is necessary that SSPs are not alone in their intentional work to support BIPOC students. Institutional leaders must provide training to expand skill sets to target support to various distinct groups, such as first-generation and BIPOC students, while being prepared to approach them through the lens of the capital they bring to campus (Arámbula Turner, 2019). Collaboration across departments can also provide more holistic support for students to navigate the systems and jargon of higher education. Institutions can integrate connections to affinity spaces and support programs at convenient nexuses, such as in residential life or classes for first-year students (Arámbula Turner, 2019). When students are working to build their social and academic capital at their college, vibrant peer mentorship and academic support programs can provide students with confidence that they will have community and support while choosing which institution to attend (Arámbula Ballysingh, 2016). When institutions consider implementing academic support programs to provide students with a cohort and extra academic support structures, they should bear in mind the role it serves both in supporting student wellbeing and academic performance (Arámbula Ballysingh, 2016).

To paraphrase Chamberlain and Newkirk-Kotfila, this discussion of practices should not replace efforts by senior leaders and student services professionals to understand their own student populations, but should prompt discussion to foster inclusive systems (2022). Each context has its own different dynamics, history, and populations, and so need tailored solutions at an institutional level to accomplish change. Institutional leaders of PWIs “must acknowledge that the institution and its spaces are racialized and that race, space, and power relations play out differently contingent upon the context” (Lowe, Byron, Ferry, & Garcia, 2013). If institutional goals include retention and success of BIPOC students, leaders should remember that improvements in creating a culturally relevant and responsive campus environment supports the learning and experience of BIPOC students (Museus &

Smith, 2014). Student service departments and campus leaders should actively challenge structural assumptions that prioritize the PWI rather than accessibility to BIPOC students.

For campuses to effectively provide BIPOC students with resources, they need to promote a campus culture where faculty and SSPs are informed and proactive to connect BIPOC students with services (Museus, 2011). However, while cultural campus clubs or centers can serve as a hub for student support, the task of supporting BIPOC students on campus should not be placed only on such centers. As Chamberlain and Newkirk-Kotfila (2022) suggest, “Identity-based centers have immense value but are not a catchall” for supporting students. As they go on to explain; “compartmentalizing supports by a student’s presenting identity is largely an oversimplified approach” for institutions to take. While SSPs may know where to send BIPOC students on campus to connect with community and support, there is still work to be done outside of those spaces. When institutions expect identity-based centers to be the primary support base for BIPOC students, they risk leaving students to navigate the rest of campus without support.

To begin to understand how to support the BIPOC students on their campus, institutional leaders need to recurrently assess the campus environment and student experience via tools such as the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Survey (Museus & Smith, 2014). Institutions can also engage with tools and campus racial climate assessments such as those done by Harper (2020) or the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates (NACCC) and use that information to make institutional changes to address the findings. Engaging productively with recent data can guide the development of policy, practice, and the assessment of existing support structures through the consideration of BIPOC students. This promotes understanding of the campus climate and centers the experience of students when determining effective practice. When SSPs are not accurately informed of BIPOC student experiences, their ability to craft effective support structures is diminished. SSPs and institutions should engage proactively in work to identify how further structures of support can be created for BIPOC students on campus. Rather than passively waiting for some students to connect with them, they can take action to reach and include BIPOC students in academic, social, and financial support plans (Museus, 2011). In addition to creating structures of intrusive advising, “institutional leaders could encourage support units across the university to develop plans—or expand existing ones—for intentionally reaching out to students who might not otherwise come seek their services” (Museus, 2011). For this cultural change to occur on campus, leaders must prioritize networking between departments and faculty to connect students to support and community, humanize faculty and the student experience, and intentionally work to connect students to support rather than leaving them to navigate the system themselves (Museus, 2011). Leaders can also allocate extra resources to SSP departments, so that staff have the time and flexibility to go the extra mile to provide BIPOC students with humanized support (Museus & Ravello, 2010). As the process of getting help from student services professionals is a system of higher education, SSPs should be ready to question why and when it does not work for some students, and then organize alternative approaches.

It is possible for PWIs to effectively support racially marginalized students, but it requires assessment and significant effort by leadership to promote practices and structures in a holistic manner - it cannot be resolved by a single program or policy (Museus, 2011). That responsibility

ultimately lies with college and institutional leaders to “consider and understand the role that the cultures of their campuses already play in promoting or hindering the success of racial and ethnic minority students” (Museus, 2011). Leaders should not form their plans through a color-blind lens, but must identify which student racial groups require intentional support in order to craft structures that will make a difference for students (Harper, 2020).

Further, it will be necessary for staff and institutional leaders to receive training for it to be possible to assess campus culture and achieve these various goals. Staff and leaders may require remedial training regarding discussion about race, as among coworkers and professionals alike, discussion about race, racism, and student racial disparities are often taboo subjects (Harper, 2020). It may be necessary for leaders to set the expectation or requirement that White staff and leaders engage on racial issues on campus and learn how to have conversations about race and racism. Otherwise, the onus is left on BIPOC staff and students, especially given the likely context of racial tension already among staff and student teams, which contributes to racial battle fatigue and disengagement among BIPOC staff (Harper, 2020). To paraphrase Harper (2020), racial equity cannot be achieved on campus unless leaders and staff are able to talk about race and racism. These skills can be built through consistent and ongoing training, education, facilitators, and intentional discussion. SSPs will not be able to effectively apply these interventions without leaders providing thorough resources and training across the institution.

Conclusion

Specific practices are required for Student Services Professionals to help BIPOC students overcome barriers, navigate the institution, and promote a support network. BIPOC students will be best served by SSPs at Predominantly White Institutions when the staff and institution incorporate a variety of support strategies into their work. PWIs and SSPs should intentionally engage with student capital and resources in addition to involving on-campus resources like student identity centers, academic supports, faculty and staff. Student Services Professionals should pursue and request training that will promote their ability to resist deficit thinking; leaders should ensure that staff training and institutional practices are defined by anti-deficit frameworks. Collaboration between BIPOC students, staff, faculty, and local community can allow for their experiences to be centered, and for PWI cultural and structural assumptions be revisited with more effective practices in mind. SSPs must learn to incorporate proactive advising tools like intrusive advising while partnering with other campus organizations. This way, students who need proactive support will receive it, and students who take a more self-reliant path will be able to access campus or community resources on their own. As professionals learn to incorporate culturally responsive support into their regular practice, they will be able to promote student centered goals like wellbeing and academic achievement.

The effectiveness of student services will increase when institutional leaders are unified with staff and faculty in working towards a culture that resists deficit thinking and capitalizes on student strengths. Institutional leaders and SSPs do not need to start from scratch in this effort. Departments may wish to begin with an understanding of campus student groups and existing cultural centers to ensure a localized set of recommendations by using surveys developed by Harper (2020) or Museus

and Smith (2014) and use this data to develop institutional standards for student support such as those laid out by Harper and Kuykendall (2012). Student services could implement training based on the work done by Chamberlain and Newkirk-Kotfila (2022) for the Advising Success Network, and review the Advising Success Network's many other publicly available online resources. For Predominantly White Institutions that wish to foster the inclusion and retention of a diverse student body, it is necessary to assess the gaps between their student services methods and culturally relevant best practices. For SSPs who wish to support the wellbeing and success of BIPOC students, it will require careful work and attention to unlearn deficit thinking and engage in new strategies like collaboration and proactive advising, all while encouraging students to stay connected to their preexisting skills and resources.

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