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Abstract

The recruitment and retention of ethnic minority students lies at the core of diversity efforts instituted by colleges and universities in the U.S. Withstanding the changing racial demographics of the U.S. and the need to have qualified ethnic minority professionals serving diverse communities, retention and matriculation heighten in importance. With the recruitment and retention challenge that many predominately White institutions (PWI's) face in mind, this study aimed to understand how "social connectedness" related to retaining African-American students in a hospitality management program. Focus groups were utilized to chronicle the lived experience of African-American students. The findings suggest that the following factors play an important role in the retention of African American students: (1) being connected to the program, university community, and other ethnic minority students; (2) the depth and quality of relationships with faculty.

KEYWORDS: African-American student retention, social connectedness, qualitative research, hospitality educational programs.

Introduction

The Brown v. Board of Education (1954) Supreme Court decision declared that school segregation deprived "the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities" (Cozzens, 1995). After this decision, and during the Civil Rights Movement, many believed that education was the key to creating equality in the U.S. Today, colleges and universities provide ethnic minorities greater access to higher education; however there is still a significant difference in the graduation rates of ethnic minority and White students. Fifty-nine percent of White students graduate within six years. Conversely, only 38% of African-American students and 46% of Latino students graduate within that timeframe (Smith, 2004, p.48). One explanation for this rate disparity is the campus experiences of ethnic minority students.

Despite the existence of affirmative action policies, racial discrimination has increased on college and university campuses (McCormack, 1995). This is evidenced by the "differential treatment and stereotyping by fellow students, faculty members, campus police, teaching assistants, administrators, and staff" (Suarez-Balcazar, Orellana-Damacela, Portillo, Rowan, & Andrews-Guillen, 2003, p. 428). These experiences influence an ethnic minority student's decision to remain at a university or college, and graduate.

The social aspect of collegiate life significantly impacts ethnic minority student academic success (Black Issues in Higher Education, 2002). For example, the formal social integration process was more important than the informal process for African-American students' academic performance[1] (Furr & Elling, 2002). Ethnic minority student organizations have an immense impact on retention. These organizations often offer academic support programs that acknowledge students' cultural backgrounds and provide them the necessary academic tools they need to succeed (Rhoads, Buenavista, and Maldonado, 2004). Moreover, it is important for

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[1] Informal social integration is defined as participation in campus social life (Furr & Elling, 2002, 189).

ethnic minority students to develop peer networks and garner support from faculty. These

processes work together to create a safe and positive social climate for ethnic minority students, which subsequently increases the likelihood they will graduate (Frater, 1997; Shinew & Hibbler, 2002).

Understanding the influences on ethnic minority college/university graduation rates is not only important for these institutions, but for industry as well. Racial and ethnic minorities are underrepresented in the management ranks of the hospitality and tourism industry, even though they are well-represented in the industry's labor force. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009), today 39.4 % of foodservice and lodging employees are racial and ethnic minorities (p.225). In the lodging segment of the industry, 45.9% of the workforce is Latino, African-American or Asian-American (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009, 225). A study of ethnic minority representation in lodging management; however, revealed that in 2002, 75% of the managers were White (Costen, Cliath & Woods, 2002).

One of the key roles hospitality and tourism management programs serve is to provide knowledgeable and trained management candidates to the industry. If faculty and administrators in these programs understand what influences ethnic minority student retention, these programs can establish practices that increase ethnic minority student retention, which will subsequently increase the number of qualified ethnic minority management candidates available.

This study explores the experiences of ethnic minority students in a hospitality and tourism management program on a predominantly White university campus in the southeastern United States, and how those experiences impact the ethnic minority students' decisions to stay. More specifically, this study investigated the degree to which ethnic minority students felt

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attached to their academic program and the university at large. Finally, this paper discusses the implications of this attachment for ethnic minority student retention.

Theoretical Framework

Two relevant theoretical constructs important for understanding the degree of social integration college students experience on campus are social connectedness and sense of belonging. Since social integration plays an important role in ethnic minority student retention, it is helpful to understand how these constructs operate and how they are related to retention.

Social connectedness

Social connectedness is an internal sense of belonging and "the subjective awareness of being in close relationship with the social world" (Lee & Robbins, 1998). According to Timpone (1998), it is also the degree to which a person is woven into her social environment, and the depth of one's social networks. One's social connectedness evolves through relationships with family members, friends, peers, acquaintances, communities, and society at large. Satisfying long-term relationships with others, who accept the person as she is, strengthen a person's sense of connectedness (Lee & Robbins, 1998).

Social connectedness guides a person's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in social situations (Lee & Robbins, 1998). A person with a high level of social connectedness identifies with others in her network, and seeks to participate in activities with those in her network. Additionally, social connectedness helps people manage their own needs and emotions through self-evaluation and social comparisons (Tesser, 1991). In general, social connectedness measures how close a person feels to others.

Social connectedness is related to one's sense of belonging. A person has a strong sense of belonging when in addition to being involved in her environment, she also feels like an integral part of that environment (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema & Collier, 1992). One's sense of belonging includes having similar or complementary characteristics to others, which allows a person to feel part of a group (Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, & Early, 1996). There are two components of sense of belonging: 1) being valued, needed, and considered important by other people or groups, and 2) fitting in with others (Hagerty et al., 1996). Thus, sense of belonging is a measure of how socially integrated a person feels in a particular environment (Steinkamp & Kelly, 1987).

One's sense of belonging helps people develop and manage their relationships with others (Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, & Early, 1996). Those who lack a sense of belonging are often lonely and depressed (Hagerty & Williams, 1999), and can subsequently withdraw from their environment.

Relationship with retention

Both social connectedness and sense of belonging play a role in ethnic minority student retention. The more attached college students are to their institution, the more committed they will be to the institution (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow & Salomone, 2002), and the more likely they are to graduate (Gardner, 2005). Rogers and Molina (2006) found that the degree of social support ethnic minority students received from faculty, staff, classmates, campus support groups, and department committees had a significant impact on their decision to remain at their institution. Social support also influences the degree to which ethnic minority students feel connected to their academic institutions. It also effects whether or not these students feel they

belong at their academic institutions. Ultimately, social support has an impact on students'

academic performance (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001).

Feelings of belonging have been associated with academic motivation, persistent effort in

school, and expectations for success. In a study by Voelkl (1997), students with higher academic

achievement and greater classroom participation had higher degrees of identification with school.

Research has also revealed that students who developed interpersonal ties with others, who

provided them with guidance and feedback on academic issues, were "more resilient and

comfortable in the university environment" (Hoffman, et al., 2002, 237). These interpersonal

relationships with others also helped the students feel "cared for" (Hoffman, et al., 2002, 237).

These findings suggest that social connectedness may be an important factor in retaining ethnic

minority students on predominately White institutions (PWIs).

The Campus

University

The university is nestled near a national park. It is home to over 27,000 students (21,475

undergraduates and 5,773 graduate students). Demographically, the university's student

population is fairly gender-balanced with 13,434 males and 13,814 females. The institution

classifies as a predominantly White academic institution in that 83.5% of the students are White,

approximately 7.9% are African American, almost 4.9% are Asian or Hispanic, and 0.4% are

American Indian[2] (Cunningham, Waller, & Halic, 2008).

The one year retention rate for students who entered the university as first time, full-time

freshmen in the fall of 2007 was 83.6%. While male and female students had a similar retention

rate (83% for males and 84.2% for females), White students had a higher retention rate than

ethnic minority students (Whites = 84.2%, African Americans = 78.8%, and Other = 82%) (p.

48). In 2002, the six year graduation rate was 59.8%. A larger percentage of females graduated

compared to males (63% to 56%), and Whites had a higher graduation rate than ethnic minorities

(Whites = 60%, African Americans = 58%, and Other = 57%).

The ethnic composition of the faculty is similar to that of its students. Of the 1,405 full-

time faculty, 85% are White. Asians comprise 8.8%, African Americans 3.5%, Hispanics 2.6%

and 0.4% of the faculty indentify as American Indian. The majority of the faculty are also male

(62%) (Cunningham, et al., 2008).

College

Approximately 7% (1,434) of the undergraduates and close to 19% (1,159) of the

graduate and professional students are enrolled in the College. For undergraduates, females

account for almost 70% (997) of enrollment. Similarly, approximately 72% (830) of students

enrolled in graduate programs are female. The limited diversity of the university as a whole is

mirrored within the college. White is the predominant race in both the undergraduate and

graduate programs (1,238 [86%] and 973 [84%] respectively) with African Americans following

second at a mere 8% (120 and 89 respectively) for both undergraduate and graduate programs.

Faculty in the college represent 10% (139) of the total faculty employed at the university, and

identify themselves as predominantly White (White = 84%, Asian = 9%, African American =

6%, American Indian = 0.7%, and Hispanic = 0% (Cunningham, et al., 2008).

Methodology

Qualitative research methods were used in this study, because they place emphasis on the

"socially constructed nature of reality and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (Denzin

& Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). These methods work best with research that attempts to uncover or explore individual experiences in particular instances. Qualitative methods can generate specific and elaborate details about events, and provide new insight about situations (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

Since one of the goals of this research study was to examine the lived experiences of ethnic minority students, and African-Americans in particular, within their academic department, we used focus group methodology. Focus group methodology is "particularly suited for obtaining several perspectives about the same topic" (Gibbs, 1997, p.1). This process provided the researchers the opportunity to explore how different demographic groups of students perceived their experiences on campus. This analytical approach also gave participants the opportunity to share their personal experiences in their own words.

E-mail messages were sent to all ethnic minority students in the department encouraging them to voluntarily participate in a series of focus groups that were designed to collect information about their experiences at the university. The researchers created fliers that were posted throughout the department and made announcements about the research opportunity in all classes. Fifteen students responded to the call for participants, and four focus groups were conducted in fall 2008. The groups were designed to be homogenous by gender and race (e.g. one group comprised White females, and one group consisted of African-American males). Kahan (2001) noted that "focus groups should be homogeneous with respect to the topic of interest because the objective is to highlight areas where agreement exists" (p. 130).

The researchers developed a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A) to examine how connected participants felt to the university, college, and department. The questions addressed socio-cultural alienation, academic challenges, relationships with faculty, department

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operations, and the participants' perceptions of the university's environment. Each of the focus

group sessions was audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriber. The data were

then analyzed using QDA Minor/WordStat qualitative data analysis software.

Findings

Connected to campus

One of the key differences that emerged from the data analysis was that White students

seemed to be more connected to the university campus than African-American students. For

White students this connection was primarily based upon being a spectator in athletic events. A

White student confirmed this by stating he was not too connected to the university "outside of

sporting events, no, not too much". Another White student explained, "I feel pretty connected to

the [university] community. I mean I attend a lot of the basketball games, [and] football games."

Another White student agreed, "[The university] has a lot of events. The school's like, so based

on tradition, you know, it's really a whole university". This participant even mentioned that the

university's athletics tradition was a key factor in deciding to attend the university: "[That] was

one of the main attractions for me coming here initially. I would say that, because they put so

much emphasis on like football and basketball, the transition's a lot easier to get directly

involved".

African-American students; however, did not feel connected to the university or the

athletic programs. One African-American student claimed, "As far as to the [university]

community within itself, not as much [as the department]". When asked to explain the degree to

which he felt connected to the university, another African-American student stated, "I'd say very

little".

The hospitality and tourism management program at this university is rather small (less than 300 students), which may have resulted in the overwhelming majority of both African-American and White students feeling connected to the program. A White student explained, "I feel very connected to [the department], basically because it's pretty small and we see the same people every day". One White student mentioned that while the university was quite large, the hospitality program was not: "I feel really connected to our department, mostly because we do go to such a large school but our [program] is [in] a relatively small department". Another White student elaborated, "The department, I really feel like I don't have a choice but to be connected to, because I see most of the [faculty] every single day, so". One White student added that he felt connected to the department, because a lot of his friends were also in the program: "A lot of the people in the department are my good friends, so–and also, you know, I feel pretty close to these people". One White student explained that the faculty in the department frequently communicated with the students, which helped her feel more connected in the department.

African-American students appeared to be equally connected to the department. An African-American student explicitly stated that he was more connected to the department than to the college or university, "When I compare my connection with the department, I don't feel as connected to the [university] and the college". Another African-American student explained more in-depth how connected he felt to the department: "Very connected to the department. I feel like I can get into the department and really, really speak with faculty and staff and other students and I really feel connected to the department". Similar to the White student, one African-American student felt that his degree of connectedness was related to the size of the department, "I would definitely feel very connected to my department. I'll tell you because it's

so small that you have the same classes with the same individuals, and a lot of times you repeat instructors. In fact I've had one or two instructors, two or three times". African-American students also discussed the opportunity they had to develop relationships with other students outside of classes, "I have a very good chance of socializing with almost everybody".

Relationships with faculty

In general the participants in this study indicated that the faculty in this program were approachable and accessible. According to an African-American student, faculty were "always at office hours; if I need them for references…". He went on to add that this access provided him an opportunity to "build a true relationship". Another African-American student commented that he knew "almost all the faculty".

White students concurred. One White student explained, "you get to know your teachers on many levels". Another White student commented that having access to the faculty meant that "all of the students in this department know their professors, each professor knows almost if not every student by the time they're a junior in the program".

Importance of ethnic minority faculty

Both White and African-American students felt that it was important to have diverse faculty. One White student shared his view on how having diverse faculty impacted his experience in the program, "I think it's important to have ethnic minority in our faculty, because they bring so many like different examples and past experiences to us." Another White student commented that the ethnic minority faculty in the department discuss topics related to diversity "the ethnic minority faculty members that I've had, they kind of, you know, stress diversity more than, you know, other faculty members would. I mean, so yeah, I think it's important". An

African-American student added, "I feel that it's very important to have an ethnic minority faculty. It kind of brings cultures together". A White student commented on how having diverse faculty could help the department: "I just think it makes you a stronger department, with the more diverse you are, and we also I think could recruit more people, with the more diversity that we have to offer. I think having an ethnic minority faculty member is extremely important". Another White student added, "I'd say the majority of students at [the university] are White, so it's good to have minority faculty, sort of to broaden people's views on certain things where people may tend to be more closed-minded. You can't have all White kids, all White teachers, just, you know".

Discussion

Tinto (1998), one of the most prominent researchers in the area of college student retention, posits that social integration significantly influences student persistence, which increases retention, and subsequently increases graduation rates. The more socially-connected students are to their academic programs, as well as their college or university, the more likely they are to earn a degree. Being socially-connected and feeling a sense of belonging is particularly important for ethnic minority students on predominantly White campuses.

The participant comments in this study suggest that both White and African-American students feel connected to their hospitality program. The student participants indicated that this attachment is related to the size of the program, which facilitates students and faculty building relationships over the students' academic careers. There appears to be a disparity however, in the degree of connectedness White students feel toward the university versus African-American students. The attachment White students feel is related to their attendance at various athletic events. Outside of these experiences however, White students do not appear to be connected to

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the university. Given the size of the university, it might be helpful for the institution to create

opportunities for students to connect with others on campus.

Both African-American and White students commented that it was important for the department to have ethnic minority faculty. Their comments suggest that ethnic minority faculty bring diverse ideas and perspectives that can help broaden student viewpoints.

Conclusion

Keeping ethnic minority students socially-connected to their hospitality program, faculty, and other students is crucial to retention efforts. The results of this study indicate that both African-American and White student participants feel connected to the hospitality program, but have different levels of connectedness to the university as a whole. This finding could positively impact recruitment efforts by highlighting the camaraderie amongst the students, and the level of attachment between faculty and students. This approach could be of particular importance when recruiting ethnic minority students, for whom social connectedness is uniquely influential in determining whether or not they will graduate. The African-American students who participated in this study indicated that they had positive relationships with the faculty in the department and were comfortable engaging with the faculty. These experiences can help build strong interpersonal relationships between faculty and the African-American students, which can provide increased levels of social support for these students. As discussed earlier, this increased level of social support can positively influence an ethnic minority student's decision to remain at the university, and in the program.

One method for enhancing the sense of belonging for all students, but especially ethnic minority students is the creation of student hospitality clubs and associations. These

organizations serve a social role in helping the students bond together. Moreover, these clubs and associations can serve as a vehicle to give students a voice on matters that are important to them (e.g. curriculum, internships, etc). Finally, these organizations can provide more senior students the opportunity to mentor students who are new to the program. The more closely connected students, and ethnic minority students in particular, feel to the program and each other, the more likely students are to remain in the program and graduate. Through this process hospitality programs can provide the much needed and requested entry-level ethnic minority management talent for hospitality organizations, which can also serve to enhance the diversity of these organizations and the industry as a whole.

While this study revealed new insight about student experiences in hospitality programs, it is clearly limited in scope. First, this was an exploratory study conducted in one program at one university. Moreover, the results are not necessarily reflective of all students in the program due to the limited number of students who participated in the focus groups. Recommendations for future research include conducting in-depth face-to-face interviews with a significant number of students in the program to see to what degree these findings are representative. Additionally, a self-administered survey can be developed based upon the qualitative findings, and distributed to hospitality programs across the U.S. It would be particularly interesting to explore any differences between social connectedness and sense of belonging for ethnic minority students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

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Appendix A
Focus Group Interview Protocol

Sociocultural alienation

1. To what extent do the values at UT reflect your own values?
   A lot? A little? Not at all?
   If response is "a little" or "not at all":
   Why do you believe that UT's goals and your goals are not the same?

2. How often do you feel "left out", or not included in social events taking place on campus?

3. To what extent do you feel connected to the UT community? To the college? To the department?
   A lot? A little? Not at all?
   If response is "a little" or "not at all": Why do you feel disconnected?

4. Do you feel/think that there are enough ethnic social and cultural events focused on campus?
   If no: Why not? What types of ethnic social and cultural events would you like to see on campus?

Academic challenges

5. Do you think you were prepared for the degree of academic rigor at UT?
   If no: Why not? How do you deal with academic challenges?

6. If you have a problem understanding something in class, do you go to office hours?
   If no: Why not?

7. Have you ever thought of dropping out?
   If yes: Why? What makes you stay?

Relationship with faculty

8. In general, how approachable do you feel/think your professors are?
   If not very approachable: Why?

9. How often are you or your contributions acknowledged by faculty in your major? In your department? In the college? In the university overall?
   If not often: Why do you think you're not recognized?

10. How would you describe your relationships with the faculty you're taking classes   with right now?

11. How comfortable are you about talking or sharing your thoughts and ideas in class?
   If not very comfortable: Why?

12. Do you think faculty in your major treat all students the same? In your department? In the college? In the university overall?

If no: Why not? Can you give us an example of something that happened that makes you believe all students are not treated equally?

13. How important is it to have ethnic minority faculty in your major? In your department? In the college? In the university overall?
   If important or very important: Why?
   If unimportant: Why?

14. Overall, are you satisfied with how you're treated by faculty in your major? In your department? In the college? In the university overall?
   If no: Why not?

Department operations
15. Why did you choose your major?

16. Would you recommend your major to your friends? Another major in your department? A major in the college?
   If yes: Why?
   If no: Why not?

17. Which courses do you think/feel were most helpful in preparing you for your future position in the industry?
   What was it about these courses that was valuable or helpful?

18. Where there any courses you thought/felt were useless or of little value in preparing you for your future position in the industry?
   What was it about these courses that made them useless?

19. Are there courses you think/feel should be added to the curriculum?
   If yes: Which courses/topics? Why?

20. How do you find out about information related to your program? For example, funding opportunities (scholarships & grants), career opportunities after graduation, research opportunities?

21. Did you receive any assistance from the department (faculty or staff members) in getting your internship?
   If yes: From whom? Was this helpful?
   If no: Could you have used some help? How did this make you feel?

22. Do you think you possess (or will possess) the skills, knowledge, and abilities to obtain an entry-level management job in your industry?
   If yes: What prepared you?
   If no: Why not? What could the department do to better prepare you for an entry-level management position?

University support/environment

23. Have you found it easy to make friends on campus?
   If yes: What has helped you make new friends?
   If no: Why not? What gets in your way of making friends?

24. Do you think/feel UT is accepting of diversity?
   If yes: What makes you think/feel this way? *Ask for specific examples.*
   If no: Why not? *Ask for specific examples.*

25. In general, do you think/feel that UT is supportive of ethnic minority students on this campus?
   If yes: What does UT do that makes you feel supported?
   If no: Why not?

26. Have you ever had any issues related to your race or ethnicity on campus?
   If yes: Could you share what happened? What did you do?
   Did you tell a faculty member or staff person?
         If yes: What happened?
         If no: Why not?