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A Commentary about the Black and Latino Doctoral Experience in the United States

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Doctoral education is a special segment of our educational system because it produces the next generation of scholars who use their expertise to inform policies, conduct research, and facilitate the development of future scholars. In an increasingly diverse and global society, it is imperative that doctoral education be pursued and completed by more diverse students. Currently, there is significant disparity in doctoral degree completion evident by the fact that in 2008 Blacks and Latinos represented less than 4,000 of the total number of 48,802 doctoral degree recipients (Hoffer, Hess, Welch, and Williams 2008).

The importance of hiring diverse faculty and staff is noted as more critical now than ever before. Consequently, the challenge of diversifying faculty is correlated to the doctoral degree production “pipeline problem” characterized by the lack of qualified doctoral graduates of color to move into academic positions (Villalpando and Bernal, 2005). In addition to the pipeline problem, Allen, Jayakumar, Griffin, Korn and Hurtado (2005) and Villalpando and Bernal (2005) acknowledge attention must also be given to the pervasive issues associated with racialized structures and practices that marginalize students and faculty of color. To address the need to improve doctoral student persistence, particularly for Black and Latino students, these issues must be considered along with those pervasive issues that might be impeding their socialization at the doctoral level.

Several researchers have discussed the importance of understanding the experiences of diverse graduate students (Bonner & Evans, 2004; Cherwitz, 2005; Gaston, 2004; Hughes, 2004; Milner, 2004; Felder, 2010). For instance, in their exploration of the doctoral student experience in the United States, Nettles and Millett (2006) suggest that there is more to learn about the socialization experiences of doctoral students from various cultural backgrounds. They state:

Consequently, the socialization of the growing and diverse population of doctoral students in the United States is a much more nebulous component of graduate education ... As university graduate program enrollments grow and become more racially diverse, the variation in the socialization of students from different backgrounds who are expected to provide academic and research productivity and leadership in the nation and around the globe becomes increasingly interesting. (Nettles and Millett, 2006, pgs. 89-90).

It is this variation in the socialization of students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds that needs more attention in educational research (Castellanos & Jones, 2003).

The Pipeline Problem

The paucity of Blacks and Latinos with doctoral degrees contributes to the lack of representation of Black and Latino faculty at American colleges and universities. In 1977, Blacks earned 3.8% of all doctoral degrees and by 2005 that increased to a mere 5.8% (DOE, 2006). In 2003, Blacks comprised 6% of all full-time faculties, with 5.4% as full professors, 6.2% as assistant professors, 7.3% as instructors, and 5.1% as lecturers (DOE, 2006; DOE, 2005).

In comparison, the Latino population is growing at a much faster rate than the general U.S. population and has a younger age distribution than non-Latinos in the U.S (Hurtado, 2005). The U.S. Latino population increased 58% between 1990 and 2000, and increased another 17.3% between 2000 and 2005 (U.S. Census, 2006). The median age for Latinos is 26 years, whereas the general population median age is 35 years (Guzman, 2001). This means that one of the fastest growing segments of our society is also of school age, making them the next generation of possible scholars. Yet, Latinos comprised 1.6% of those who received doctoral degrees in 1977 and 3.5% of those in 2005 (DOE, 2006). Overall, the majority of faculty members (80%) continue to be White and highlights the need to improve the persistence of doctoral students of color in an effort to create a pool of diverse faculty (DOE, 2009).

Concern Over Persistence

These statistics suggest that there is much to consider regarding the impact of racialized structures and pipeline issues on the Black and Latino doctoral student experience. Previous research identifies socialization as playing a significant role on doctoral experiences for Black and Latino students (Ellis, 2001; Gonzales, 2006). Higher education research largely contextualizes the Black and Latino student experience in the aftermath of the Brown Decision of 1954 and the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-1960's. This literature often discusses the impact of racialized institutional structures that contributes to students' experience of isolation, alienation, marginalization and discrimination (Allen et al., 2005; Hurtado et al., 1998; Nettles, 1990; Solorzano, 1998; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Little research exists regarding factors that contribute to the successful experiences of these students including their resiliency and navigation towards to doctoral degree completion.

Research about the Black doctoral experience has slowly evolved over the last two decades. This student experience is often addressed within the historical framework of Black underrepresentation in higher education due to centuries of racial and systemic oppression (Allen et al., 2005). Literature about doctoral education has focused largely upon matriculation trends and predictions of student performance in graduate school with little emphasis on student belief systems about degree completion.

In their work, *African Americans and the Doctoral Experience: Implications for Policy* Willie, Grady & Hope (1991) examine the Black doctoral experience by exploring the impact of the historical exclusion of African Americans in doctoral education and its evolution out of historically Black colleges and universities; with the exception of a few, these were the only institutions offering graduate training for Blacks (Willie et al., 1991). Willie et al. (1991) present findings from 65 faculty scholars who were faculty at HBCUs and pursued doctoral degrees through the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) faculty development program. Out of the 65 participants in the program 8 were White faculty members who attended predominately White universities to complete their graduate work while on leave from their HBCU posts. One significant finding in Willie et al.'s work is the lack of mentoring received by the Black faculty scholars. In their study, mentoring was characterized Willie et al. found that half of the participants in the study did not have mentors and may have been at a grave disadvantage for doctoral degree completion when compared to their White counterparts.

Similar to the literature on the Black student experience, the Latino student experience is characterized by racialized structures of exclusion in higher education. The literature captures these exclusions by

focusing on the demographic progression of this group and the nature of higher education access within policy (Gándara and Contreras, 2009; Hurtado, 2005). In particular, states that serve the greatest number of Latino/a students in higher education (New York, California and Texas) tend to be in the forefront on debates about access policies and affirmative action (Hurtado, 2005). Other scholars have sought to better understand the experiences of exclusion present through campus climate (Hurtado et al., 1998) and interpersonal experiences with peers and/or faculty; Gonzalez, 2006).

Additionally, the cultural experiences of the Black and Latino students are rich and include meaningful information that translates into belief systems about commitment to educational achievement. For example, previous research has highlighted the significant contributions of family and spirituality to the success of Black doctoral students and call for additional studies to be conducted to understand these aspects of a student's experience (Gasman, Hirschfield, & Vultaggio, 2008).

The demographics of students participating in higher education have changed dramatically in the last several decades. As a result the potential of evolving trends in research interests that are progressive and culturally adaptive to the needs of a changing doctoral student population. Recognition of this transition is essential in moving the discussion of emerging leadership towards a cultural transformation in higher education where discussions of diversity move beyond the conceptual ideals towards the practice of cultural competence.

One of the most striking catalysts of this transformation is the election of President Barack Obama and his nomination of the first Latina to the Supreme Court, Judge Sonia Sotomayor. These dramatic political events will indubitably shape new discussions about the Black and Latino experience in the United States. In fact, Gumport (2005) mentions that the "changes in political and economic contexts during the last three decades of the twentieth century also altered the operation of graduate programs, both directly, in research training practices, and indirectly, through academic research" (p. 427). In keeping with Gumport's notion on the impact of politics on doctoral education, it is interesting to ponder the way in which the first African American President and the first

Latina Supreme Court Justice will shape the belief systems and doctoral degree progress of students. In addition, future research should consider assessing the ways that peer mentoring could be used to improve institutional climate for doctoral students of color. This includes learning more about faculty with successful mentoring relationships with students of color and providing recommendations for other faculty looking to achieve that similar success (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Felder, 2010; Gasman et al., 2008).

As our country changes demographically, colleges and universities have an obligation to heed the call to social justice; ensuring that we are an educated and well prepared nation. This means that students who pursue doctoral degrees should focus more on advancing their fields as opposed to using their energy on navigating their way through hostile campus environments.

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