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McNair Scholars: Identifying and Overcoming the Obstacles in Academia Faced by Underrepresented Populations

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McNair Scholars: Identifying and Overcoming the Obstacles in Academia Faced by Underrepresented Populations

Adrianna Smell

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Abstract: Using qualitative methodology, this study identifies obstacles faced by students underrepresented in academia (i.e., first-generation, low income, race/ethnic and gender minorities) participating in a high impact program, and how self-efficacy is maintained while combating obstacles. This study adds a new dimension to understanding the relationship between underserved populations in academia, self-efficacy and student success. Findings, based on interviews with nine McNair Scholars, identified multiple themes as both obstacles and benefits to their academic education e.g., minority status, support, knowledge, time/ organization, stability and community. A better understanding of the complex relationship between success and hardship for non-dominant identities in academia is needed before adequate changes can be implemented, promoting success for all students.

Keywords: *underrepresented students, self-efficacy, high impact program, McNair Scholars*

Those in power, dominant identities, dictate what society views as acceptable and expected behavior for non-dominant identities. Through a variety of socialization agents including family, individuals learn what behaviors and roles are acceptable and expected. Socialization agents affect an individual's life in a variety of realms, including higher education. Society has taken on the perspective that higher education promotes equality provides equal access to students. Social acceptance and expectations greatly influence self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to achieve a specific task. While higher education is working towards promoting equality there is still work that needs to be done.

Many underrepresented populations (i.e., first-generation, low income, race/ethnic and gender minorities) in academia face issues thought to be expunged. Often students who are underserved identify with multiple underrepresented populations (Lundber, Schreiner, Hovaguimian and Miller 2007). Students who identify with non-dominant identities in academia often find adapting to college life harder than the more privileged student (Kenzi, Gonyea, Shoup, and Kuh 2008). This project identifies the obstacles faced by students participating in high impact program, including generation status and lack of stability, focusing on how participants overcome obstacles and maintain self-efficacy.

Continuing to integrate underrepresented populations into academia is key for higher education. The number of students from underrepresented populations entering higher education continues to increase, but graduation and retention rates remain low. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 2012 about one-third of all college students were first generation students. Of these first-generation students, 60 percent end up in college for six years without receiving a bachelor's degree (Smith 2012). Four and a half million undergraduates in the United States, 24 percent, are both first generation and low-income students (Ramsey and Peale 2010). Of these first generation-low income students, 89 percent drop out of college within 6 years without their bachelor's degree and 25 percent of these students will drop out within the first year (Ramsey and Peale 2010). One third of first generation college students are over the age of 30 and these students are more likely to be enrolled part time (Smith 2012).

Over half (59.3 percent) of all undergraduate students identified as white/ non-Hispanic (NCES n.d). Race/ ethnic minorities make up less than half of the undergraduate student population but disproportionally represent a large number of first generation, low-income students, about 49 percent (Smith 2012). Female students also make up a

disproportionate percentage of first generation/low-income students, as well; about 64 percent of female students are considered first generation/low-income (Engle and Tinto 2008). Higher education continues to see an increase in female and non-white students (Davis and Bauman 2012). Unfortunately, these students are increasingly likely to be from other underrepresented populations, e.g., first generation and low income; identifying with multiple non-dominant populations further decreases the chance of retention and graduation for these students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-Efficacy, High Impact Practices, and Underrepresented Populations

The non-dominant identities that encompass underrepresented populations in academia are complex and intersectional. Students who are underserved identify within multiple layers of the underserved paradigm; ethnic/ racial minorities are often first generation, low-income students and non-traditional students are often first generation, minorities (Engle and Tinto 2008; Smith 2012). Students from underrepresented populations face challenges with marginalization based on personal identity, stability, and lack of support (Tate. et al. 2014).

Students from non-dominant identities e.g., underserved populations, do not have the access to or knowledge about resources that promotes success in higher education (Tate, Fouad, Marks, Young, Guzman, and Williams 2014). When an individual does not adhere to their assigned gender role, cold climates often ensue, leading to low self-efficacy (King 2004). Low self-efficacy negatively impacts students' motivations, academic goals, and perception of the environment; with low self-efficacy, students are less likely to participate in high impact practices. Underserved students often work through school, are financially independent, and/or have dependents (Engle and Tinto 2008). These students often live off-campus, as a way to lessen financial costs at the expense of their sense of inclusion and community (Taylor and Francis

2007). Family is a social location that heavily impacts students' lives while pursuing an undergraduate's degree. Underrepresented students express disconnect between family obligations, expectations and educational pursuits (Tate et. al 2014). Underserved populations often perceive professors as less invested in their academic success and more invested in more privileged students' success (Pike and Kuh 2005). Depending on the time commitments and activity expectations, students encountering obligations and expectations based on their identities may be less likely to participate in various high impact practices.

Students from underrepresented populations also face a lack of cultural capital, influencing their ability to succeed in higher education. Academic cultural capital refers to one's ability to navigate the norms and process of the institution (Taylor and Francis 2007). First generation, non-native English speaking, foreign born, and minority students do not have the proper skills to navigate the obstacle course of higher education or utilize campus resources.

Understanding the relationship between marginalization, self-efficacy, and student coping mechanisms is extremely important especially in academia. "Self-efficacy beliefs are correlated with others self-beliefs, motivation constructs, and academic choices, changes, and achievement" (Pajares 1996:552). Self-efficacy is derived from: vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, performance accomplishments, and emotional arousal (Ancis and Phillips 1996). These four sources of self-efficacy are impacted by a variety of behavioral, personal, and environmental factors: role models, academic environment, personal interpretations of situations, and understandings of social expectations (Pajares 1996). Underrepresented students have a low self-efficacy and coping mechanisms help boost self-efficacy. By boosting self-efficacy students will have a higher motivation, which in turn increases their academic achievement and choices e.g., pursuing a harder degree.

High impact practices (HIPs) are techniques designed to encourage student engagement, promote retention in academia (NSSE n.d), and promote high self-efficacy (Soldner and Rowan-Kenyon and Inkelas and Garvey and Robbins 2012). High impact practices are beneficial for all students; however they have a profound effect on students from underserved populations (Finely and McNair 2013). High impact practices positively implement the four components of self-efficacy and the factors that impact self-efficacy components. High impact practices have shown to decrease the achievement gaps between dominant and non-dominant racial/ethnic identities (Kinzie n.d). When women have confidence in their academic ability, e.g. math, it hugely impacts their pursuit of a STEM major in college (Moalker et. al. 2014).

The McNair program utilizes research with a mentor, encourages and advises students through the research process, and makes sure students are actively involved in all aspects of research. High impact programs facilitate the same learning objectives as high impact practices: "require students to make their own discoveries and connections, grapple with challenging real-world questions, and address complex problems" (Kinzie 2012). An engaging learning environment and positive experiences lead to higher self-efficacy (Morris and Daniel 2007). High impact programs help students become active members of their community.

Prior to being part of the McNair Scholars program participants showed a low research self-efficacy (Williams 2004). In the program students were required to conduct research with a faculty mentor, network and participate in academic advising and counseling. These interactions were identified as beneficial and important for McNair Alumni: "Role models provide the vicarious experiences that McNair participants need to increase levels of self-efficacy" (Williams 2004). Student self-efficacy is high when they receive the support and benefits from a high impact program like the McNair Scholars Program.

Research Gap

Much of the previous research identifies how the characteristics of underrepresented populations and agents of socialization (e.g. family, religion, school) create obstacles for students who identify within these populations. Previous research is limited in understanding of the obstacles encountered by students who identify with multiple underserved populations and lacks in understanding how these students combat biases in higher education. Focusing on how students engaged in a high impact program (e.g., McNair Scholars Program), overcome obstacles adds a new dimension to understanding the relationship between underserved populations in academia, self-efficacy and student success.

Theoretical Framework

Grounded in a conflict theoretical framework using the uncritical-conflict paradigm, this study is examined through power conflict theory. The uncritical-conflict paradigm focuses on a broad relationship between power and conflict in understanding social stratification (Kerbo 2012). Power conflict theories focus on how dominant groups are able to get subordinate group(s) to do what they want, when they want it, and how they want it regardless of the other group's interests, needs, or desires (Kerbo 2012). Power conflict theorists' focus on understanding organized class or group interests and their conflicts rather than individual conflicts (Kerbo 2012).

A disproportionately low rate of college graduates come from first generation, low income, non-white, female backgrounds (Tate et. al. 2014). Non-dominant identities, underserved populations, have less access to academic resources (Kenzi et. al. 2014). I examined the relationship between dominant and non-dominant identities within academia by focusing on how a lack of resources for non-dominant identities created conflict (obstacles) but allows for change (methods of conquering) (Kerbo 2012).

METHOD

Researcher's Stance

As an underserved undergraduate and McNair alumni at the University of Northern Colorado, I

became interested in conducting research to help better understand to better understand the relationship between self-efficacy and underserved populations specifically the coping mechanisms developed by underrepresented to combat obstacles they face. I am invested in promoting social justice and equality. This research will help promote inclusion for underrepresented students by identifying the obstacles, assets, and coping mechanisms these students use to maintain self-efficacy and be successful.

Method & Sample

Taking a qualitative approach this study addressed the research question: how do underrepresented students overcome obstacles in academia. Nine McNair Scholars from the University of Northern Colorado were asked to sit down for in-person, one-on-one, semi-structured in-depth interviews regarding their experiences at UNC (see appendix A for a full interview guide). Participants were gathered using snowball sampling. I asked the director of the program to pass along the information for my study and contacted peers who are participating in or that have participated in program and asked them to pass along an informational flyer to those who may have been interested. Eleven students responded with interest but only nine could find time to participate. Interviews were conducted in an agreed upon location and lasted anywhere from 45-90 minutes.

The sample consisted of five females and four males. Three participants identify as Mexican or Hispanic, three as white, one as Native American, and two as biracial; e.g., white/Hispanic. Eight of the nine participants attended public school and one attended a vocational school. Three participants identified as low class, two as low-middle class and four as middle class. Four participants were pursuing non-gender congruent fields and five were pursuing gender neutral or gender congruent fields.

Prior to the start of the interviews questionnaires were used to collected basic demographic and academic information. Most of

the questionnaire questions were covered during the actual interview; questionnaires were precautionary in case interviews exceed time. After interviews were transcribed and data was thematically coded for themes that emerged in the literature and were emerging within the data.

Findings

Obstacles that underrepresent students faced are often related to the different identities they encompass within academia's underrepresented population, e.g., first generation, low income, non-white, and females. Being first generation students and identifying as a minority were the biggest obstacles for students and caused many other obstacles including the self, stability, knowledge, support, community, and time/organization (see Figure 1). Obstacles faced by students had a complex and interwoven relationship. For example, students who identified financial stability as an obstacle often worked to pay for school, creating time/organization as an obstacle and in turn creating an obstacle with community involvement.

Figure 1. Obstacles faced by underserved students in the McNair Scholars Program at UNC.
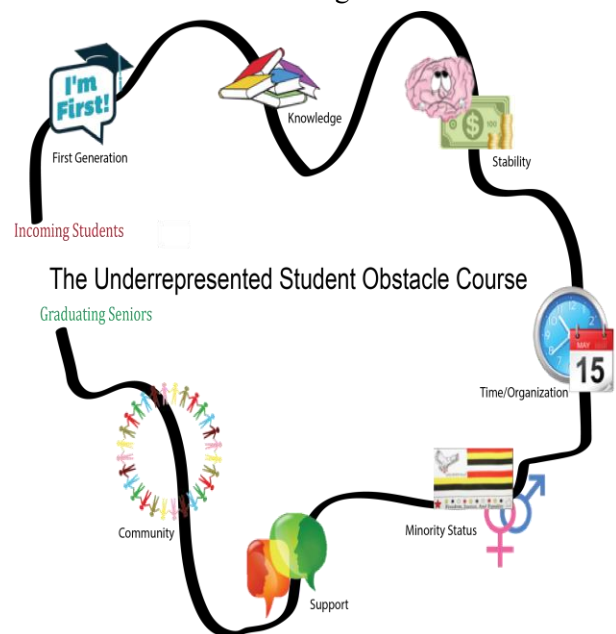
While these non-dominant identities produced many obstacles for students, they also helped develop assets, motivations, and coping

mechanisms, helping students navigate through the obstacle course of higher education. Non-academic activities were also identified as an additional way to cope with stress, though not seen as a barrier. For example, often when students became overwhelmed with the amount of work they had, students would play with pets, watch movies, or take a break.

Obstacles

Generation Status

Many students found their first-generation status to be one of the biggest obstacles because it often correlated with other obstacles. Interviewee three; a race/ethnic minority, first generation, low-income, male, pursuing two degrees (one gender and one non-gender congruent), quickly identified his generations status as his biggest obstacle. Emphasizing the relationship between being a first generations student and lack of knowledge. "Definitely being independent youth and figuring out how to figure out everything really quickly on [my] own have been my biggest obstacles." This point is further explained by Interviewee six; a biracial, first generation, low-income, male alumni pursuing a gender-neutral field very bluntly explained that non-dominant identities find themselves in social and economic restraints when furthering their education.

> Neither of my parents knows what the hell goes on with graduate school… When I said hey mom wouldn't it be really cool if I go to duke the first thing she said to me was how are you going to afford that. If [first generation students] get [to college], these people are really only perceived to be good enough for a bachelor's degree.

Interviewee seven; a race/ethnic minority, low-income, first generation, female scholar pursuing a gender-neutral degree, expressed frustration with the lack of support she experienced which caused her to miss many opportunities that could have proven beneficial to her education.

> If I would have had [an advisor] more involved [in my education] it would have helped me. I'm first generation; I had no idea what I was doing. I [decided] I'm just going to try and survive like I did in high school by doing my work. I didn't really learn until later in my career and I'm still a learning I had different options. I kind of missed out [on opportunities], now I'm trying to figure out where I'm at and where I can go.

Interviewee four; a female, first generation, low-income alumni pursuing a non-gender congruent degree who self-identifies as white but continually brings up her Hispanic heritage further expresses frustration and infuriation with the lack of support associated with being an underrepresented student.

> I think a lot of [obstacles] have to do with negativity from the department when I say I want to go to professional school [because I'm female] and I'm a first-generation student… there is more negativity and concern like "oh can you really do that, [professional school] is really competitive. I don't think you know what you're doing."

Interviewee eight; a race/ethnic minority, first generation, low-income, female alumni who pursued a gender congruent field expressed the difference in cultural expectations when coming from a first-generation family and further reinforced the points made by interviewees six and seven.

> My mom didn't take the reins to [get me ready for college], she said this is your thing and you've got to figure it out. I had to figure it out for myself… I almost had to drop out because I was learning the financial aid process the hard way my freshman year.

These responses illustrate how hard it can be for first generation students to gain the economic and cultural capital in higher education. Many students found navigating through the college experience extremely hard. Unlike the more

privileged students, participants did not have the same access to and knowledge of resources or outside support.

Social Norm

College has become a social norm, participants felt like it is expected of them. They were prepped to go, making the process natural. Interviewee six nonchalantly identifies college as something related to a social expectation. "Really, [I] only [went to college] because it was expected of me societally… I took [Advanced Placement] classes in high school but didn't take them seriously." Interviewee seven expands on this idea, a little bit more anxiously, identifying college as a natural transition. "I wanted to [go to college] plus it just seemed like the natural next step…it was expected, people go to college… [Also] in high school I was taking [advanced placement] and honors classes, it seemed more like a natural transition".

Both alumni continue discussing the idea of college as a social norm and how a high impact program helped get them prepare for graduate school, something they did not receive when transitions from high school to college. These alumni shed light on how the "naturalization" of socially constructed ideas creates obstacles for non-dominant identities.

Obstacles Also Identified as Assets, Motivations and Coping Mechanisms

What many participants identified as obstacles was also identified as types of motivations, assets or coping mechanisms. The themes identified in this section are the obstacles and assets, motivations, coping mechanisms for participants.

Minority Status

Multiple students identify being a minority in academia as an obstacle. While students generally find their department community more welcoming and inclusive, the general community can be different. Interviewee seven expressed insecurity when placed in academic settings on campus where the ratio of race/ethnic minorities was low.

For me it is a little awkward because I am the only brown person. [I] get those looks and the oh I don't want to talk to you, you can't be in my group kind of thing. That actually did happen to me before… if you don't want me to be in your group why wouldn't you just tell me that in the beginning… I feel like if I was not brown and presented myself as I am, I would probably have stuff in common with these people and they would not make me the 'other.'

In addition to the university's academic environment being awkward for interviewee seven, she also expressed the intimidation and insecurity she felt while working for the university.

I have had a little bit of a weird experience here and I think it has to do with my old job. I worked on campus, in a department where I was the only female and minority. When [campus] was hosting the Black Lives Matter march one of my co-workers was like 'Oh, I saw [the marchers] while I was driving by and wanted to run them over with my truck. When the adults, actual university employees, didn't say anything… it made me think these people aren't going to stand against what he just said because they probably agree.

Interviewee seven's responses exemplify how the lack of cultural capital can cause a low self-efficacy and create the idea of a cold climate and limit the inclusive environment of higher education. Interviewee 8 further echoes the relationship between lack of cultural capital and cold climate; while she did not find the environment of higher education to be cold she experienced a cold environment in high school because of her race/ethnic minority.

I've had worse experiences [with a cold climate] in high school when people found out my dad was Afghani because [of] nine eleven and everything that happened… I've ever had any experience

with marginalization [on campus] but I surround myself with people from [sociology and other departments] that have a more open and accepting mindset…I think [a lot] depends on your major, [whether] you're inclusive or exclusive.

After identifying their minority status as an obstacle, being a minority was attributed to an asset or motivation. Students wanted to alter stereotypes and believed perspectives on who could accomplish what is changing. Interviewee nine; a race/ethnic, first generation, male alumni pursing a gender-congruent degree used his minority status as a motivation, rigorously describes how his experience with being stereotyped has contributed to his desire to inspire others.

I'm already in college-that should be enough to shut someone up- especially a janitor… after I explained things to him, he actually teared up and started crying. He even gave me a hug and said how proud of me he was, even though he didn't know me, that someone like me [a minority] was in a field like that…It really got to me and that portion of it was the motivation. It wasn't him assuming that I was the wrong place. It wasn't him assuming that I didn't belong there. Him being brought to tears that I'm a chemistry major; that, to me, is the greatest motivation. That is what I mean [when I say] I want to inspire.

Interviewee two, a race/ethnic minority, low income, first-generation female alumni pursuing a non-gender congruent field expanded on the notion of minority status being more than an academic asset, discussing the positive changes being made in society and the potential for an even more inclusive environment.

I think things are changing, and I won't have issues in the future; being a double minority may help me in the future... I think that society is still working at letting both women and

different ethnicities stand higher in society, and it is working. We are not quite there yet, but we are getting there.

Students who do not "show" but identify with a specific race or identity acknowledge the extra hardships faced those who do "show." Interviewee five expressed frustration and confusion when discussing the obstacles faced by tribe members fit the visual stereotype.

I look white… It is hard for me to reconcile that I don't look like [others in] the tribe but other people within the tribe may face different biases and obstacles because they 'show' whereas I don't.

Interviewee six elaborated on how society's perceptions of individuals who "show" and creates more obstacles reflecting on the how people would treat him based on their perception of his race/ethnic identity.

I think, often times, folks of color especially [those who identify within the] Hispanic and black diaspora have a harder time [integrating into college] because people perceive them to be incompetent or understand less…it's hard not to see it. If people perceived me to be Hispanic they would treat me difficult for sure.

What we seen in these responses is a sense of how identifying as race/ethnic and or gender minority is not only an obstacle for students but also an asset and motivation. The additional obstacles created for those who identify with non-dominant populations are recognized but so is the slow change in perceptions of who can be successful in society.

Support

Lack of support, both personal and academic, was an obstacle for underserved students. However, students sought support a variety of campus clubs e.g., academic and non-academic programs, e.g. the McNair Scholars program, tutoring centers, and counseling centers. Interviewee one; a first generation, low-income, female alumni, pursuing a non-gender congruent

degree expressed disregard for organized activities identifying herself as rather introverted but openly and actively discussed participating in a campus club. "I go to Christian Challenge, once a week for two and a half hours…Every Tuesday when I go it's a good break for me from stress and school." Interviewee six further expresses the benefit of campus organization as an asset and coping mechanism. He identifies a lack of academic support systems but expressive his use exhaustive use of personal support systems.

> As far as [academic support systems] not really, I mean there are folks I can go talk to if I need help conceptualizing my assignments or homework but other than that not really…I definitely do [have a personal support system]. I have my family and I utilize our campus's free counseling center.

While participant six expressed the benefit of his family in relation to his education, participant five expressed the happiness and weariness he had while discussing his education with family but the benefit that other educational and personal relationship can have on educational success.

> The McNair Program [and my girlfriend] have been a huge support for me; they have definitely been a rock for both academic and personal stuff… my family, they are happy and supportive, but they don't understand what [graduate school] will entail. It can be frustrating and difficult at times to express what I'm doing.

Participants identified a lack of academic support from advisors and administration; advisors are only utilized for registration pins and administration is very ambiguous. Interviewee seven expressed anger and distaste when discussing her advisor because of the lack of academic support interviewee seven received, expressing her relief this person is no longer part of the department.

> [My advisor] isn't there anymore but I didn't like her and if I didn't have to go to her I wouldn't. Every time I [went to

her] she would have to make phone calls to answer my questions. [Our meetings] didn't really go anywhere [they were] more of an I'm here to get my pin kind of thing.

This lack of support is further echoed when Interviewee five anxiously identifies the murky relationship administration has with other parts of the UNC community. Interviewee seven made it a point to express he was not trying to devalue anyone in higher education.

> From a student to administration [perspective] everything I have seen is [that the relationship] isn't very transparent which makes [what administration says] hard to trust… Plus there seems to be a lapse in the relationship between faculty and administration. Faculty and students want one thing but administration does the complete opposite.

These quotes express a sense of how underserved students face a lack of support from a variety of places, e.g., family, advisors, and administration, but combat this obstacle by finding other means of support including relationships, activities and organizations such as campus clubs, counseling, and family.

Stability

Mental and financial stability have shown to be a huge obstacle, in one form or another for participants. The lack of stability complicates students' ability to perform on academic tasks. For Interviewee five, mental stability was identified as the biggest obstacle. He discusses mental stability with an encouraging attitude, hoping other won't be as nervous to discuss the issue as he was.

> For me [the biggest obstacle] has been my struggle with school-induced anxiety. I started getting held back by [the anxiety] often skip[ing] class or not go to school at all. It was something I was too scared to address.

Students also faced issues with financial stability; students have to work in order to pay for necessities while in school. Interviewee one discussed the stress and exhaustion that comes from working so often. She also identifies the rift it causes between making connection with academic peers.

> Having to work [is my biggest obstacle] I have to work a lot and do a lot of schoolwork, I just never have time…I could take out a bunch of loans but then I would just be stressed about that…When you work nine-hour shifts [relationships with co-workers] become personal. I do not have that kind of time with people in class.

Interviewee six expressed the same exhaustion and stress that comes from being an underserved student, getting more infuriated as the conversation went on. Interviewee six expressed his constant worry about whether he would have the basic human necessities. "My college experience is synonymous with working… I always wonder what it would be like if I was just a student and not worried if I have enough for rent or groceries."

Participants did not take their current instability as just an obstacle. Students often use the idea of future stability as a motivation to continuing pushing through the obstacles faced during their undergraduate education. Interviewee eight eagerly discusses her childhood instability and the desire for a stable future as a motivation not just an obstacle. The more she talked about providing for her future family the more motivated her tone of voice became.

> I want a good job and a good paying job. I plan on having a family one day, I want to be able to give my kids the things I didn't have because I was from a financial need family. I don't even have kids yet, but they are a motivation.

Interviewee two reinforces the desire for a stable future and childhood instability. She discusses the positive stimulation her childhood struggle had on motivation to overcome academic obstacles. "Most of my family struggles [financially] and none of them went to college… I didn't want to struggle… I wanted to move away and get out of the situation I was in."

These quotes demonstrate how exhaustive and stressful dealing with instability can be on student mental and/or physical wellbeing. Participants do not let their self-efficacy disintegrate because of instability; this obstacle is turned into a motivation or coping mechanisms are developed to combat instability.

Time and Organization

Time and organization became an issue for students for multiple reasons. Students who are working in order to be financially stable have a hard time juggling their academic schedule and their work schedule. While discussing financial instability and the need to work Interviewee six gets extremely irritated and identifies how impossible it is to make a schedule fit his needs. He is constantly sacrificing time he should be spending on academics in order to work.

> If I didn't have to work all the [darn] time I would have a way easier time getting homework done and [managing my] time... I usually don't finish [work] till seven p.m. I try to get as close to eight hours of sleep as possible… so this leaves me with two hours to do four or five hours with of homework.

Interviewee six's quote echoes students' inability to participate in different academic, social, and cultural experiences that can potentially promote self-efficacy because underserved students are financially instable and have find a way to cope, e.g., working or living off campus.

As tasks and expectations continue to grow, students often reverted back to planning and organization as a way to stay on track and succeed. Interviewee three shares his passion for organization as a coping mechanism and motivation in order to overcome the obstacles he faced as an underserved student.

Organization is key [regardless of the obstacle]. Someone told me whatever happens just stay on task; it is the best way to go. It didn't matter if I had three hours of sleep, financially stable, and only had one can of food to eat that day. I just stuck with my goal and had to focus [on my] plan.

Interviewee five concurred with interviewee three on the benefit of organization and time management as a coping mechanism for overcoming obstacles in higher education. Interviewee five expressed relief and ease when discussing how helpful time management and organization has been to his education.

If I have a big assignment due, I'll make a timeline or a plan of attack and break it into smaller more manageable pieces. Personally, having this huge [amount] of things that I have to do scares the crap out of me. Breaking things down into some more manageable pieces helped me mentally.

These quotes express a sense of how underserved students face an obstacle with time and organization often associated with financial instability. Participants had to work through their undergraduate education in order to be somewhat stable yet still worried if they would have enough money to buy groceries and pay bills. While time and organization proved to be an exhaustive obstacle for students it also became a method for combating obstacles. By staying organized and on top of tasks participants were able to be more productive and produce better quality work.

The Self

The Self was identified mainly as a motivation and coping mechanism for students. Using self-motivation as a way to stay on track and be successful. Often students had to be self-motivated when seeking help within departments if it wasn't readily available. Interviewee 3 proudly expressed his self-determination as his main source of motivation while discussing how he succeeds in school.

My motivation was mostly me… It didn't matter what anyone else was doing [when I would get home at midnight and have to be up at 5 a.m.] I knew I had to get home and get my ass to bed. At the end of the day [I would tell myself] this is another obstacle let's rearrange everything so you can be a successful individual.

Interviewee four also expresses, with more concern the need for self-motivation. When discussing her department, she often referred to the environment as off-put and how you had to search for help. "There is a bit of support within the department, but you really have to go and look for it, [department support is] not something that is very obvious from the outside.

The Self was also identified as an obstacle, participants identified partying to much and being insecure as obstacles that negatively affected their undergraduate education. While discussing obstacles Interviewee nine expressed himself as his biggest educational obstacle and how ashamed he was that change in environment lead him to partying and getting academic suspension.

As far as the biggest obstacle it has been myself…I never partied [in high school] when I went to Boulder it was complete shock. I got focused on partying and staying out late or going to midterms drunk…[The partying] got so bad that I got on academic probation and had academic suspension. I convinced myself [to party] so for academics I have been my biggest obstacle.

Interviewee five expressed himself as an obstacle but in the form of personal insecurities. Discussing his frustration and confusion with the completing of "showing" as a race or ethnic minority, Interviewee five openly discussed the insecurities that involve the overlap in his identities.

I find myself in awkward situations, like if I'm going to fit in. When I started going to [The Native American Society group on campus] it wasn't anything

they did but I wasn't sure if they would accept me and stuff…It is just hard for me to reconcile that I don't look like the tribe but am part of the tribe.

These quotes convey the heavy impact the self has on student success. Participants heavily relied on self-motivation in order to overcome obstacles faced throughout their undergraduate education. Participants are often proud of their self-motivation because it leads to personal success. Self-motivation helped participants become more knowledgeable, organized, and overall successful in academia. While the Self often lead to positive outcomes it also negatively impacts some participants education and became an obstacle. Some students had faced issues with personal insecurity while new experiences lead others off the educational path.

Additional coping mechanisms

Media

All participants identified non-academic activities as a way to cope with stress. There was an extreme variety in these activities revolving around media, exercise, and stepping-away.

Participants often used YouTube and Pinterest to find motivational quotes or speeches. While discussing coping mechanism interviewee seven excitedly discussed a website called Pinterest and how it helps her relax. "The biggest [tool] for me right now are motivational quotes and speeches… I'm a 'pinner'; I really like Pinterest." Interviewee three, explaining his extensive use of online media, reiterated the benefit of motivational speeches. "I use motivational speeches from Youtube… No one in particular, you use type in 'motivational speech' or something related." Interviewee four, expands the use of media from websites and expresses how the benefit of non-academic activities as coping mechanisms and a way to reflect on her personal well-being.

I try to do things that are not academic; reading for fun watching TV shows looking into pop culture and things like that… I also really like to journal. The next day I like to go back

and read [my journal] and figure if I'm okay now or need to talk about it.

Exercise and Physical Activity

Exercise and stepping away from the situation are also important coping mechanisms used by participants to combat obstacles faced during their undergraduate career. Interviewee five expresses the benefit of being physically healthy and exercising when dealing with obstacles. "To relieve the physiological stress, I stay on an exercise schedule and try to burn it off because biologically it helps you stay happy." Interviewee seven discusses the happiness she gets from being active and how activities like running her dog helps her cope with obstacles in academia. "[To relieve stress] I run and walk my dog. I also like to play tennis. [I play] tennis off campus…running is on campus and I also bring my dog here, we play at Gunter." Interviewee nine extends the non-academic coping from exercise to relaxation while reinforcing just how beneficial non-academic activities can be when academic material needs to get accomplished. "Oh I step away [to relieve stress]. Say I am really stressed and have a project due tomorrow… I will step away go for a drive and then go back and finish."

These quotes express a sense of how underserved students can benefit just as much from non-academic motivations and coping mechanism as their academic counterparts. Non-academic activities help students relax and de-stress; when students return to their academic endeavors after exercising and driving, they are more equipped to perform well on the task that needs to be accomplished.

DISCUSSION

Students from underserved populations face many obstacles associated with their non-dominant identities. It is in the best interest of the normative, white middle-class males, hierarchy in America to promote institutionalized privilege for the dominant identities. Institutionalized privilege naturalizes the inequality built into the framework of society hiding the social construction of higher education. Participants identified the

normalization and naturalization of college, also mentioning their lack of preparedness. Higher education claims to provide inclusion hiding behind the idea that "hard work" will get you anywhere without aiding students. Participants graduate/ get ready to graduate without being aware of basic campus resources like tutoring and counseling.

Along with the naturalization of college as the next step to success, institutionalized privileged promotes stereotypes about the social roles specific identities are expected to play. Similar to previous research, underprivileged students do not get the same encouragement and investment as their more privileged counterparts. When students express their desires to follow "unwarranted" paths in academia, that can affect the status quo within other social locations, faculty, staff, and peers discouraged participants. Men aren't supposed to go into counseling and first-generation students do not go into professional school. The more non-dominant identities succeed in going against the flow the more likely there is to be a disturbance in the force. Verbal persuasion can either increase or decrease self-efficacy; when students go against the flow verbal persuasion is negative leading to a low self-efficacy and pushes students back into their normative role.

Although coping mechanisms are beneficial in maintaining self-efficacy for underserved populations losing power is not something privileged populations' want. Keeping minorities, first generation and low-income students from succeeding in higher education ensures the stratification system will continue to promote those in power. More privileged students will continue enter the workforce prepared for a career while underserved students will enter the workforce without a degree or the connections to start a career. The naturalization of inequality within higher education has created a continuing cycle between the lack of resources that promotes successful learning and underserved populations.

Underserved populations are starting to get their claim to fame. Higher education has become

invested in promoting the success of underserved populations; graduation rates and repetition rates remain low. High impact programs e.g., the McNair Scholars Program, promotes self-efficacy. McNair alumni have identified the obstacles faced as undergraduates. Instead of falling back into the normative and staying in a subordinate position, these students turn their obstacles into assets and methods of motivation. When an obstacle could not be turned into its own asset or motivation participants found an alternative method of coping.

Through a high impact program, students have learned to believe in themselves and their abilities. Many participants identified their generation as being aware of the biases and stereotypes that exist. Being aware of the obstacles is the first step to making change. McNair Scholars at UNC have developed methods for dealing with the obstacles faced as underserved populations and want to continuing altering the stereotypes and creating a safe space for everyone. Promoting the self-efficacy of populations going against the flow can allow for a change in power distribution, disrupting and making visible the institutionalized stratification system of higher educational that naturalizes inequality.

Conclusion

While the sample population limits the transferability of these findings to a larger population, interesting themes emerge that have the potential to benefit other underserved students. The point of this study was to dig deep and figure out how students in higher education made it through the academic obstacle course to graduation. Students use a variety of academic and non-academic resources as motivations, assets and coping mechanisms to overcome their generation and minority status, instability and lack of the following: knowledge, inclusion, support, and community.

Much of these findings coincide with previous research underserved students face hardships related to their non-dominant identities; being first generation, low income, race and ethnic minority

students. Also, underserved populations of face a lack of economic and cultural capital affecting their access to resources such as knowledge. This research sheds light on how underserved students combat obstacles; undeserved students use self-motivation, various forms of media, non-academic activities, various relationships, and campus resources. Interesting themes also emerged identifying college as a social norm, minority status being a career asset, and altering stereotypes as a motivation.

Future research can benefit from replicating and expanding this study. It would be beneficial to see the obstacles and coping mechanisms used by students in other high impact programs. Including more non-dominant identities such as sexual orientation could expand this study as well as focusing on emerging themes e.g., college as a social norm. Also, taking a quantitative approach by taking the findings (obstacles and coping mechanisms) and turning them into a survey for the general underserved population will provide more generalizability between underserved populations and coping mechanisms that promote self-efficacy.

McNair Scholars are self-motivated and driven individuals, it was not always this way and participants continue to struggle. Being part of a high impact program takes a lot of dedication but yields numerous benefits. UNC McNair scholars and alumni have developed ways of turning negative identities and experiences into assets, coping mechanism and motivations, these help participants maintain academic and personal self-efficacy through academic achievements, verbal persuasion and emotional arousal. Exposing undeserved students in the general academic community to different types of assets, motivations, and coping mechanisms can potentially increase the retention and graduation rates of underserved students.

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