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Lean On Me: The Support Experiences of Black Graduate Students

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Abstract: The social support experiences of Black graduate students who graduated from a major Southern Research University from 1962 to 2003 were examined in a comprehensive survey that explored three areas: relationships with faculty, students, and the institution. The study revealed that the Black graduate students believed that White graduate students experienced a different campus and a more positive environment.

Introduction

In the higher education environs in the United States Blacks remain underrepresented as students, faculty, and administrators. For the most part, Blacks are still invisible women and men against the backdrop of an American educational system where education is a primary route to upward mobility and increased wages (Adair, 2001). This circumstance is even more evident at elite research institutions (Bowen & Bok, 1998; *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2004). The elusive graduate degree, which has a greater impact in helping to close the economic gap between the White and the Black middle class than any other factor (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002) and therefore it is doubly discouraging that the retention rate decreases to between 50 to 25% “the higher up the educational pipeline” (Onwuegbuzie, 1999, pp. 189-190), lessening chances of Blacks securing a slot in the middle class via the higher educational track..

The physical location of the Southern Research University in this study, the University of Georgia, which is located north from the capital city of Atlanta, Georgia. Athens, a city of 100,000 residents, is dominated by the University’s presence. This research university historically serves undergraduates from Georgia, approximately 25,000 in the Fall of 2006. As a group Blacks have historically been considered the special population at the University since its 1961 turbulent desegregation and this study only focuses on African Americans. The graduate and professional programs currently enrolls an estimated 8, 300 students. Two-thirds of the enrollment for in the university’s graduate degree programs are Georgia residents and 90% of Georgia residents comprise the university’s professional degree programs. In a state where the percentage of Blacks citizens is 29.2 percent, a mere 1,900 Black students (undergraduates and graduates) or 6% attend the state’s premier university. A disproportionate percentage of the 1,900 students, 649 students, are graduate and professional students. So the undergraduate percentage of Black students is approximately 5% of the total undergraduate enrollment and the graduate and professional degree level it is at approximately 9% of the total graduate and professional school enrollment.

The desegregation of the University of Georgia’s graduate programs does not parallel the University’s stormy undergraduate desegregation that centered on the enrollment of Charlyne Hunter-Gault and Hamilton Holmes (Hunter-Gault, 1992; Trillin, 1991). Their presence was met with student riots, a court injunction, and a temporary administrative shutdown of the University. Given this legacy and current struggles, many Southern citizens, especially Southern Blacks, have a necessarily complex view of their state universities.

However, little media attention was paid to the enrollment of a Master's Music of Education student, Mary Frances Early, who subsequently entered the school in 1961 and became the first Black Graduate of the University of Georgia in 1962 (Daniels, 2004). From the beginning the paths of the undergraduate and graduate experiences have been divergent. The percentage of Blacks attending and graduating from the University's graduate programs has not only been proportionately higher than the undergraduate programs at the University. In addition, the graduate programs have been successful in their own right, ranking 13th in the nation for doctoral degrees conferred on African Americans (Diverse Issues in Higher Education, 2006).

Background and Purpose of the Study

Now that Black students can gain acceptance to the elite flagship colleges of the South, what happens after admission? Is access alone enough? Overwhelmingly, the answer is a resounding, "No!" A more telling marker is whether or not Black students obtain degrees (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2004). The national graduation rate for undergraduate Black students is 40 percent, compared to an undergraduate graduation rate of 61 percent for White students (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2004). The graduation rate decreases with professional and terminal degrees (Ellis, 2001; Golde, 2005; Reid & Robinson, 1985). Therefore the retention rate for Black graduate students is even less than the retention rate for Black undergraduates. The research question that is the focus of this article sought to discover the social support experienced by Black graduate students during their studies.

The 1980s saw a decrease in Black graduate school enrollment at historically White universities, with Black students comprising approximately 5 percent of total graduate school enrollments (Onwuegbuzie, 1999). The lack of access is of course compounded by retention problems which were mostly due to Black graduate students experiences undue stress during their schooling compared to their White counterparts (Cokley, 2000; Feagin, 1992; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Swim et al., 2003). Therefore, finding support is essential to the retention of Black graduate students. To that end, we studied Black students who were alumni of graduate and professional degree programs at a large Southern Research University, asking them the extent to which they experienced *social support* during their studies.

Review of the Literature

Black Americans have a long and troubled record with American higher education: legal prohibition on education, de jure segregation, de facto segregation, and futile efforts towards real integration and full participation. Since the 1970s, the majority of Blacks are attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Nettles, 1988) and research attests that these students routinely struggle with isolation and loneliness, discrimination and indifference/insensitivity (Allen, 1985; Cockley, 2000; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Feagin, 1992; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003). Additionally, lack of social integration, participation in campus organizations and activities, interacting with peers and faculty, has more of an impact on the grade point averages of Black students than it does for White students (Nettles, 1988). Compounding the dilemma for Black college students is the significant impact that positive student satisfaction has on performance and completion (Astin, 1982; Tinto, 1975).

The results of this racially insensitive or hostile college environment are often psychological distress (Allen, 1986; Fleming, 1984; Biggs, 1974) that can result in withdrawal,

self-doubt, and lowered self-concept (Allen, 1986; Fleming, 1984; Willie & McCord, 1972; Thomas, 1981; Webster, Sedlack, & Miyares, 1979). Inevitably such issues have been shown to have a negative effect on the retention and progression rates of Black students, while such issues have not been shown to affect White students as a group (Allen, 1985; Cokley, 2000; Ellis, 2001; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Nettles, 1988; Smith, 1980). According to comprehensive study by Allen (1988), 60 percent of the Black students he surveyed had encountered racism (verbal insults and negative attitudes) during their college years. Routinely research reveals that Black higher education students feel that there is bias in, that they are invisible, unseen or ignored on campus and that White college professors stereotype them as one-dimensional representatives of their race.

While most of the research on Black higher education students focuses on undergraduate education, studies that have specifically targeted Black graduate students concur with the undergraduate studies (Blackwell, 1985; Brazzeil, 1983; O'Brien, 1990; Ewing, Richardson, James-Myers, & Russell, 1996), simultaneously adding another dimension. For example the retention rates for students transitioning from undergraduate studies to graduate studies drops dramatically, 50 to 75% for Blacks when compared to the rates for Asians and Whites (Astin, 1982; Onwuegbuzie, 1999). In addition, in 1990 Blacks in graduate school represented only 4.8% of total graduate school enrollment (Onwuegbuzie, 1999). In other studies (Baird, 1974, Duncan, 1976; Hall & Allen, 1982; Willie, Grady, & Hope, 1991), the Black graduate students surveyed believed that their professors avoided outside classroom contact and the students also reported that because of unintentional racism (social discomfort) the students received fewer research and essential teaching opportunities from their professors.

Personal relationships with faculty are essential in graduate work, especially at the doctoral level where the committee's interest and approval drives the thesis and dissertation process. Therefore this lack of mentoring, advising, and unease is particularly costly at the graduate level (Blackwell, 1985; Ellis, 2001; Howard-Vital, 1989; Nettles, 2006). As a testament to how the unfriendly social milieu of racism can affect the graduate pipeline, Stanley (1990) reported racism as the main reason reported by Master's level Black students as to why they did not pursue their doctorates.

Conceptual Frame and Methods

The conceptual framework is based on critical race theory (Bell, 1992; DuBois, 1903/1953; Foucault, 1980; hooks, 1989; Outlaw, 1983). Therefore the resulting frame focused on interpreting the data with an awareness of the diffusive nature of power and positionality. Influenced by this theoretical base, the researchers approached the study and the resulting data with an acknowledgment of the systems of oppression that had produced and structured the inequalities in the educational system.

The research sample for this study consisted of the population of all of Black graduate students since the University's desegregation in the 1960s. Therefore this study is especially significant given its scope, 1962 – 2003, and its depth, a population of 2,287 Black graduate students and a responding sample of 586 Black graduate students. This study employed a mailed, self-completion questionnaire that was developed over a six month period. In its final form, the 72 item questionnaire had five sections. Data collection consisted of the distribution of the questionnaire in three consecutive mailings at approximately three week intervals.

Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The research question that directs this study sought to discover the social support experienced by Black graduate students during their studies. Identical support questions were asked about four different social groups: Black professors, Black students, White professors, and White students. These four social groups were chosen because the literature reveals that connections or disconnections with these groups are the most significant areas to examine (Allen, 1985, 1988a, 1988b; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Gurin & Nagda, 2006; Nettles, 1988; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Smith, 1980). The results show that the support provided by all four groups was rated higher than the theoretical midpoint of the six-point scale.

Comparisons of Black professor and White professor support and of Black student and White student support. The results indicated the following findings:

- a) Black professors provided significantly more support than did White professors.
- b) Black students provided significantly more support than did White students.
- c) White professors provided significantly more support than did White students.

In order to determine whether levels of support were affected by historical time, secondary analyses were conducted. Respondents were divided into three chronological groups:

Group #1: Graduate students who graduated before 1986,

Group #2: Graduate students who graduated after 1985 and before 1996, and

Group #3: Graduate students who graduated after 1995.

To maximize sensitivity to the effects of historical time, a dichotomous variable was created for which Groups #1 and #3 were assigned the values "early" and "late", respectively; Group #2 was coded as a missing value, so that the chronological middle was dropped from the analysis. Additional analyses that compared the four sources of support across time (pre-1986 versus post-1995) showed no significant differences. Therefore an increase in the numbers of Black students across the decades did not significantly affect the support that the Black students received.

Findings revealed that patterns of support held relatively constant for the early and late graduates. Independent sample t-tests for the four sources of support revealed no significant mean differences, and the relative levels of support for the four sources of interpersonal support held constant across time. Black professors and Black students provided more support for Black students; White professors also provided support for Black students, although they provided less than did Black professors. However, the peer group of White students provided relatively little support for Black students and it has been shown in another study on this same population that White students were the primary source of hostility and open racism.

The qualitative data were consistent with the statistical findings related to social support in that responses to the six open-ended questions revealed that Black professors and Black students were the primary support for Black graduate students. However, there are five distinct categories of support. In order of consequence, the categories were: (1) Black students, (2) Black professors, (3) self-support, (4) family, and (5) God/religion/faith.

Discussion

The quantitative data revealed that the Black graduate students in this study considered Black students and Black faculty the most important factors in helping them complete their graduate studies. This finding was also supported by the qualitative data. Although the participants were asked in an open-ended question to name the biggest single factor that helped

them to graduate, they often listed several factors. The Likert survey questions that queried the degree or presence of support were very compatible with the open-ended questions on support. In combination, the survey questions and the open-ended questions on support provided a complete picture of the types and degree of support received by the participants.

Initial qualitative analysis seemed to reveal a difference between the quantitative data and the qualitative data in that when asked “What was the single biggest factor that helped you, as a Black graduate student, complete your degree at this University?” the most common response was not related to external support but to *self-reliance*. However, in secondary analysis of the data, it was determined that it was impossible to consider Black faculty and Black students as separate support factors because over half of the participants listed both Black students and Black faculty. In addition, the researchers considered the responses to the question, “*What would have made your experience better?*” as answers to the support question. This decision was based on two considerations: (1) many participants expressed a strong belief that having more Black faculty and more Black students would have made their experience better, and (2) participants seemed also to base their answers on knowledge of other students’ circumstances, experiences with Black professors and students from other programs, and observations. Therefore the responses to the question *What would have made your experience better?* were considered in conjunction with the responses of those participants who knew that the support of Black faculty and students made the positive difference in their graduate school experience. This adjustment, resulting from the secondary analysis of data, aligned the quantitative and the qualitative data in reporting that Black students and Black professors are the most important factors in providing support and positively impacting the graduate school experiences of Black graduate students at historically White institutions.

While the literature reports that having a diverse campus is the best way to recruit and to retain Black students (Allen, 1985, 1988a, 1988b; Blackwell, 1985; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Gurin & Nagda, 2006; Nettles, 1988; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Smith, 1980), this study provides more than four decades of data underscoring the significance of support from Black students and Black professors. This study also shows that White professor support can be a factor in the retention of Black graduate students.

While family emerged in the qualitative data as a response on only 44 of the 586 responses, this was not alarming given that graduate school can often remove students from their family settings for long periods of time. Another point possibly influencing the participants is that support is usually sought out and more meaningful when received from persons who are involved in or directly knowledgeable about the participants’ circumstances. This is more likely to be other graduate students or faculty.

Of the four factors listed by the participants as helping them through graduate studies, religion was the least mentioned factor. This is a departure from studies that report high levels of religious involvement and spirituality among Black students (Jagers & Smith, 1996; Walker & Dixon, 2002) and report that such involvement is greater than that found among White students (Blaine & Crocker, 1996; Taylor, 1988). Findings regarding the strong religious base among Black college students resonated with similar findings regarding the Black community. However, it must also be considered that only recently have researchers begun to study spirituality and its connection to the higher education and adult schooling experience (Tisdell, 2003). Since religion and spirituality was not a strong theme in the literature, the quantitative data did not address it and this might have influenced its absence in the qualitative data.

The connection of graduate students to their programs is essential in that their success as graduate students is directly connected to their relationship to their program areas of study, to the faculty in those areas, and to other graduate students in their programs (Astin, 1982; Chavous, Rivas, Green & Helaire, 2002; Ellis, 2001; Feagin, 1992; Gasman et al., 2004; Golde, 2005; Margolis & Romero, 1998; Onwuegbuzie, 1999). For graduate students the locus of control is the individual graduate degree program. Given the importance of the connection of graduate students to their overall graduate school experience (Astin, 1982; Chavous et al., 2002; Ellis, 2001; Feagin, 1992; Gasman et al., 2004; Golde, 2005; Margolis & Romero, 1998; Onwuegbuzie, 1999), the information in this research study can inform graduate school administrators and faculty on how to support Black graduate students during their residency. Recommendations suggested by the data in this study are to (1) encourage and support existing formal and informal networks among Black students and Black faculty; (2) monitor existing formal campus networks to insure that they include Black students; (3) to build new formal campus networks and insure during the formation that they include Black students; (4) educate faculty about the ways in which their courses as part of the a department's and the university's larger curriculum might contribute to the hidden curriculum that discourages and oppresses Black students; and (5) build accountability into the University system for faculty and administrators.

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