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Volume 4

February 2023

Feature Article

During the Pandemic: A Perspective
from a First-Year Teacher

Reviews and Best Practice

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Higher Education: A Path Towards Building
Learning Circles or Just Closing the Feedback
Gap?

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in Nigeria: Critical Reflections on the Breast
Cancer Clinical Pathway Development Course.

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and Attitude Toward Seeking Mental Health
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Attitudes Toward Participation in Organized
Religion: Its Impact on Mental Health and Life
Satisfaction

Enhancing Emotional Safety in a Graduate
School Setting



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During the Pandemic: A Perspective from a First-Year Teacher

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ABSTRACT

This feature article aims to blend oral impressions with concrete "best" practices in secondary education. Through the most basic methods used throughout history--listening, interpreting, and translating stories shared among groups of people--this singular perspective questions whether the conversations among teachers positively impact the narrative of educating students as COVID-19 continues to have effects that are more difficult to perceive. Without bringing the two parties into conversation, the article offers its readers the observation and reflection of one who is invested in students' learning in the context of the classroom as much as the context of a world still dealing with a pandemic.

If you will allow me, let's begin with a rather mundane imaginative exercise. Picture yourself seated at a lunch table with other high school teachers. The time for lunch is short, so the conversation ebbs and flows as your colleagues' attention flits between words and food. After a few minutes of this, someone picks up a fresh tale about what a troublemaker did in class earlier today:

"Well, I had to break up a fight during first period. You'll never guess who started it..."

This formula usually piques everyone's interest, and today's episode is no exception. After the verdict is relayed and the moral is pronounced, the other teachers weigh in with their own takes on what the story means. Most of these adages are specific and reductive--"He's never gotten along with any of the other guys," or "I doubt he has anyone to look up to at home"--but a few decide that this particular story warrants some general philosophizing about "kids nowadays." One teacher takes this on, and as the affirmation perpetuates the oration, suddenly it happens--a new story begins with these words:

"During the pandemic..."

This phrase, "during the pandemic," works exactly like "during first period"; they are both timestamps denoting events that are *over*. In the conversations around me, "during the pandemic" stories have become quite normal; they presume that COVID-19 is over, and nobody seems to object. I find it to be amusing, and perhaps I am uniquely positioned to be amused: I grew up here in West Tennessee, and when the country locked down in the Spring of 2020 I was in my junior year of college at Freed-Hardeman University. After an online semester and a summer spent at home, my senior year was spent back on campus, with lots of talk about a "new normal." After most of the students--including myself--got sick and the year clouded over with a

tenuous sense of herd immunity, I gave up the quest for a new normal and identified with another popular phrase instead: “uncertain times.”

Halfway through my senior year I applied to graduate school, and after my graduation and wedding ceremonies my wife Rebekah and I packed up and moved to Chicago. As I studied history and anthropology at the University of Chicago, I wore a mask to all of my classes, and in January of 2022 the University postponed the start of the winter quarter because of record-setting numbers of cases and deaths. From the time I was sent home from Freed-Hardeman in the Spring of 2020 to when I moved back to Tennessee to start teaching in the fall of 2022, I, like so many in the country, was the recipient of an ever-changing set of information. While the CDC shifted health protocols and regular people fought on social media, my friends, family, and community formed and reformed their thoughts about what to do, what to believe, and what to value. For over 2 years, I had spent my fair share of days pretending that nothing was different, but I had also experienced several days laid up in bed, my aching body preventing me from pretending even if I had wanted to. In short, the consistent reality of “the pandemic” felt as difficult to grasp as a “new normal.”

I cannot help viewing all of this through the lens of a history student. I remember one discussion in particular where a group of masked graduate students talked about how difficult it is to set accurate boundaries for a historical event. The question, “When did World War II begin?” is an interesting question for high school students and graduate students because finding a universal answer is less helpful the more one tries to apply it. In this example, the “correct” answer an American high school student might give is 1941; this answer would be completely inaccurate if one was looking at Pablo Picasso’s moving painting of *Guernica*, which reveals that for some in Spain, World War II began in the spring of 1936.

So then, when I first heard “during the pandemic,” I was amused at how ridiculous it is for people to talk about something as though it is over. However, the more I have listened to teachers talking about what it was like “during the pandemic,” the more invested I have become, both as a new teacher and as a history student. My argument makes no effort to be scientific, for I am not quantifying what makes the pandemic a present or past phenomenon; nor is it political, for I am not trying to persuade anyone to wear masks, or vote for Donald Trump, or even change their verb tense when they talk about COVID-19. Instead, I am facing a reality: the teachers around me have decided that “the pandemic” is a thing of the past, and my perspective—that of a student-turned-teacher—is in pursuit of meaningful teaching practices for students who are enduring the various phases of the pandemic.

We don’t need another imaginative exercise to understand why teachers might talk about the pandemic as though it is a completed event. At the school where I work, for some it is as simple as the return to in-person schooling after several

versions of online or hybrid learning, for others it is the suspension of mass-quarantine protocols throughout the school year, and for others it is the absence of masks. Their careers have never changed more rapidly in such a short period of time, and returning to how things looked and worked before COVID-19 only logically precedes the end of the pandemic for these teachers.

Qualitative evidence would probably bolster this phenomenon and its support by teachers across the country, but in this case qualitative evidence distracts from why the teachers are telling “during the pandemic” stories. They are not saying, “it was different then, but now it is back to the way it was before,”; they are saying, “look at the mess we are in *now* because of what happened during the pandemic!” If this basic translation of mine is true, the conclusion of “the pandemic” is a necessary measure in order for the teachers to make sense of the problems they are having now, even though they are back in the preferred, non-pandemic school environment; in other words, “during the pandemic” may be better translated as any number of things:

“During the lockdown,”

“During the mask mandate,”

“During the mass quarantine,”

“During online school...”

If these translations are tied up (in a somewhat lazy fashion) with the word “pandemic,” I propose that this phrase and these stories suggest a concrete pandemic—measured in cases, deaths, vaccinations, boosters, lockdowns, masks, quarantines, and online school, one that can enter the past in the absence of its components—and an abstract pandemic, measured in awareness and meaning, one that the “during the pandemic” storytellers may not recognize as ongoing even as their stories perpetuate it. Picasso’s *Guernica* reminds its viewers that there are many in Spain who are still at war.

The aftermath of the concrete pandemic is already being subjected to an array of analytical frameworks, from post-COVID syndrome to the global economy. For the teachers in my world, “during the pandemic” stories I have heard essentially say,

“They lost two years of school,” or

“They lost two years of social and emotional development...”

I’m really not sure about this one. Our test scores do not show a two-year gap, and the teachers talking about social and emotional development cannot describe to you what those developments look like. It is a conundrum for me: it sounds like the “lost years” are an explanation for bad behavior and an excuse to complain about bad behavior. It is agreed that the school is the best place for them to learn, but that doesn’t have to mean that the teachers always want to teach them.

I wonder whether the students would say that this is the best place for them to learn, or if they lost two years of

development...or if the pandemic is over. But then again, these stories are only told at teacher lunch tables. Thus, in my translation, the two years lost is not owed by the students; it is a debt to be paid by the *teachers*. Which leads me to a crucial question: if “during the pandemic” is for teachers—that is, if the pandemic is over for the teachers, what should it be for the students? How do teachers who manifest the pandemic’s end help students to move forward in its continuation?

There is one student in the entire school who still wears a mask. He is new to the school this year, just like I am. His brother does not wear a mask. He chooses to wear it every day. Nobody objects, but nobody else wears a mask every day, either, and I once heard a teacher say that he hides behind it. His mask does not protect him, but I suppose it protects everyone else from him if he ever gets sick. The reality of the cloth on his face alone confirms that the pandemic is over at this school, but what the mask represents revives the pandemic every time I see him. If he were to stop wearing it tomorrow, it would soon be forgotten that he ever wore it.

And yet, his mask has become meaningful to me, representative of what the students here are hiding behind every day that I cannot see. In the expectation of more and more qualitative and quantitative evidence as the pandemic continues to affect teachers and students, the stories teachers tell themselves also affect the students. I assert that students need to hear from teachers who acknowledge the pandemic’s continued presence and impact—teachers who are not dismissive, but willing to champion an honest and resilient spirit. In time, maybe some history students will sit around and debate about when the pandemic began and when it ended. Some days I see a quiet perseverance in the same teachers I criticize, whose stories sustain them; for who in the little town of Guernica did not wish for the war to be over before it was?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caleb Johnson is an aspirant storyteller and historian from Henderson, Tennessee. He graduated with a B.A. in History from Freed-Hardeman University, and he received his M.A. in the Social Sciences from the University of Chicago. He is passionate about the importance of meaning achieved relationally, with sincere care and attention to detail. He plans to continue his field work in oral history, evoking cultural and historical narratives through qualitative methodology. Presently, he is teaching high school sociology in Jackson, Tennessee, and he always strives to listen to and learn from the people around him.

Innovative Assessment Feedback Practices in Higher Education: A Path Towards Building Learning Circles or Just Closing the Feedback Gap?

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ABSTRACT

Considered a vital aspect of learning, feedback is usually a common element in instructional practice. In higher education, assessment feedback has been found to lack the ability to impact student learning. Therefore, recent feedback literature has stressed a change in practice to address this issue. This review examines the extent to which innovative assessment feedback practices succeed in engaging undergraduate students to use the feedback they receive. Findings indicate that making assessment feedback a dialogic, reiterative process that provides opportunities for reflection and interaction with peers can enable adaptive engagement and promote mastery learning. However, most of these affordances revolve around designing effective learning-oriented assessment tasks. Further research is needed to provide evidence of any long-term impact of learner-centered feedback practices.

Keywords

Assessment feedback, Higher education, Feedback agency

INTRODUCTION

Pursuing a college degree is a matter of choice as tertiary education is entirely optional. With this choice, students take the responsibility of controlling their personal life so that the associated costs of attending college pay off by achieving mastery of the skills and competencies necessary to fulfill their potential in a 21st century professional environment. Since the main aim of higher education (HE) is to prepare students for a successful professional life, tertiary institutions must strive to create learning environments where students can continue to exert their agency while participating in learning. Although assessment feedback is meant to provide learners with the performance information needed to inform their learning process and promote their agency, these practices have been deficient in fulfilling their potential because they have largely failed to engage learners actively and effectively (Black & William, 1998; Sadler, 1989.)

When undergraduates have been given a voice, their dissatisfaction with feedback has surfaced in national surveys, and research has shown that the undergraduate curricula actually provides few opportunities to use feedback (Evans, 2013; Taras, 2006). A reexamination of assessment practices in HE has further revealed a focus on traditional assessment emphasizing knowledge acquisition over knowledge construction; feedback as a unidirectional, instructor-centered occurrence, often concerned with justifying grades; misalignments between instructors' and students' perceptions

and interpretations of assessment feedback; and issues with instructors' and students' assessment and feedback literacies (Carless, 2015). Finally, the massification of HE along with increasing student diversity, the rise of digital learning environments, and use of multidimensional feedback have added further challenges for providing effective feedback (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Gumpert et al., 1997).

Within the assessment for and as learning movement, feedback has reclaimed its critical role in facilitating learning within a socio-constructivist framework that supports self-regulation and emphasizes lifelong learning (Black & William, 2009; Carless, 2015; Nicol & Mcfarlane-Dick, 2007). Therefore, models of effective feedback practice proposed in the last decade focus on feedback as a dialogic, ongoing process revolving around sustainable assessment tasks that provide opportunities for implementation and development of students' feedback literacies and evaluative judgment (Boud, 2000; Carless, 2015). These models also stress the role of peers and reflection in creating assessment feedback processes that support learning (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Therefore, this literature review seeks to examine the impact that extant student-centered assessment feedback practices have on undergraduate students' agentic engagement by reviewing innovative student-centered feedback practices, exploring their theoretical underpinnings, and noting possible directions for future research needed to further support a paradigm shift in assessment feedback practices in HE.

RELATED LITERATURE

Feedback Literacy

Sutton (2012) has postulated that students must first develop the necessary academic skills needed to enable their engagement with feedback as many embark on their college career with little or no previous experience interpreting or using feedback. His framework for developing students' feedback literacy focuses on capabilities for understanding and interpreting feedback to facilitate its effective utilization and was later enhanced by Carless & Boud (2018) to also include a focus on students' ability to manage feedback-related emotions effectively. In practice, Winstone and Nash (2016) have developed, in collaboration with students, a toolkit to support students' development of skills and strategies associated with understanding and implementing feedback.

Some recent research supports the positive effect of feedback literacy on students' agentic engagement when students understand their role in the feedback process (Ducasse & Hill, 2019). Also, interventions where students can develop their feedback literacy early in the course are more effective at enabling students' sustained engagement with feedback (Hoo et al., 2021; Noble et al., 2020; Winstone et al., 2019). In addition to its seemingly short-term application, feedback literacy has also demonstrated potential to develop evaluative practice that in the long-term would transfer to discipline-specific and professional contexts (Carless, 2015). Although equipping

students with skills and strategies needed to navigate the feedback process has shown potential in developing adaptive engagement behaviors, this approach does not fully address the social and affective aspects of using assessment feedback.

Dialogic Feedback

When viewed as a socially-mediated practice, assessment feedback must include opportunities for dialogue that can contribute to shaping students' engagement and use of feedback (Nicol, 2010). An approach based on two-way communication adds further layers of complexity as a dialogic model must address a variety of individual and contextual factors in building the positive relationships and supportive environments needed for successfully engaging learners (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017). Access to dialogue with the course instructor has been found to support learners' adaptive engagement with feedback as dialogue provides a means to clarify task criteria, decode written comments, and reduce misalignment between instructor and student conceptions and perceptions of feedback (Henderson, Ryan, & Phillips, 2019; Hill & West, 2020; Vattøy et al., 2020).

Empirical research also provides evidence of a lack of or even maladaptive engagement when the interventions do not successfully assist in regulating students' emotional responses to feedback or recognize different culturally-oriented expectations (Hill & West, 2020; Ryan & Henderson, 2018; Vattøy et al., 2020). As much as it desired by learners, a shift to more face-to-face dialogue is largely impractical given instructors' workload/time constraints; however, affordances for interaction created by Web 2.0 technologies and the provision of multimodal feedback have proven to be sustainable methods of significantly facilitating engagement with feedback and increasing achievement (William et al., 2013; Winstone & Carless, 2020; Zimbardi et al., 2017). Finally, dialogue can successfully enable adaptive engagement with assessment feedback when learners are prompted and guided to engage in reflection and inner dialogue processes about their learning and progress whether feedback dialogue involves teachers, peers, or students themselves (Hill & West, 2020; Nestel et al., 2013; Vattøy et al., 2020).

Peer- and Self-Feedback

Since the communication process about student performance extends to sources other than the instructor, self- and peer-evaluation have been identified as viable models for not only activating students' engagement in the feedback process but also for providing opportunities to generate and seek feedback, which are considered key aspects of demonstrating an active role in managing use of feedback and developing self-regulation (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). While issues of expertise and social-affective challenges arise with this approach, with appropriate guidance and support, participating in peer and self-review has been demonstrated to enhance students' cognitive engagement, support reflection, improve self-regulation, and reduce dependence merely on instructor

feedback (Hill & West, 2020; Hoo et al., 2021; Ladyshevsky, 2013; Winstone & Carless, 2020).

The empirical research on the use of self-assessment and self-generated feedback is emergent and inconclusive at this time; however, the interplay between guided self-reflection and engaging in the process of giving and/or receiving feedback has been studied more extensively (Andrade, 2019). Some of the research into the role of reflection in peer review interventions demonstrates that when students deliberately capitalize on internal feedback, they become engaged in the feedback cycle of evaluating task criteria, assessing their work quality, generating rich, specific, and personalized feedback for themselves and peers which in turn develops their metacognitive skills and capacity for monitoring and regulating learning (Nicol & McCallum, 2021; Nicol & Selvaretnam, 2021; Nicol et al., 2014).

Sustainable Feedback Design

The new paradigm of sustainable assessment feedback is based on the notion that in order to engage and enact the feedback received, students should have opportunities to do so within the course or module rather than operate under the assumption that feedback will be used in a future or subsequent course (Carless, 2015). This approach requires that feedback is integrated in the curriculum through carefully designed pedagogical interventions involving iterative assessment tasks that avoid overreliance on rubrics in promoting student engagement and development of evaluative judgment to ultimately serve the goal of developing effective lifelong learners (Boud; 2010; Sadler, 2010; Winstone & Carless, 2020).

Some impactful feedback design interventions include orientation tasks where students can receive guidance and assistance understanding assessment task criteria and expectations as well as exemplar assignments for illustrating best or different levels of performance (Nicol & McCallum, 2021; Zimbardi et al., 2017). Research also demonstrates the crucial role of designing interlinked or overlapping tasks in creating iterative opportunities for enabling recurring dialogue around feedback and its implementation as well as for monitoring progress (Ajjawi et al., 2021; Esterhazy & Damşa, 2019; Zimbardi et al., 2017). A cyclical, iterative, sequential feedback process not only engages students but also develops feedback literacy, fosters motivation and self-regulation, and improves achievement (Ajjawi et al., 2021; Hoo et al., 2021).

LEARNING THEORY ASSOCIATION

Feedback plays a role in all major learning theories; however, conceptualizing it around the learner recognizes that the locus of knowledge construction is within the student and constitutes a highly subjective process that is influenced by the social interaction within the learning environment, as postulated by Vygotsky (Schunk, 2020). These assumptions ground contemporary learner-centered feedback in social constructivist theory although some are also shared with social cognitive

theory, such as those related to the role of cognitive and environmental elements. As learners' cognitive development can be facilitated through interactions that go beyond simple input of information to create opportunities that allow individual factors to shape one's learning experience, feedback becomes a vehicle for the social interaction needed to mediate learning and facilitate self-regulation (Schunk, 2020). Involving students in self-assessment and self-feedback through verbalizing task-related criteria and procedures further assists with developing self-regulation and engages students in the task as both constructivism and social cognitive theories emphasize the important role of private speech in learning (Schunk, 2020).

Contemporary learner-centered assessment feedback is predicated on using authentic assessment tasks designed to incorporate recurring opportunities to implement feedback and engage in reflection that promotes self-regulation and internalizing meaning, so this feature of extant feedback practice reflects constructivist assessment principles that require continuous assessment situated in the teaching context (Schunk, 2020). Sequenced, interrelated assessment task designs also place learners in the zone of proximal development where they can make progress with the appropriate guidance or scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978; Bandura, 1986, as cited in Schunk, 2020). Moreover, task orientation interventions where the instructor clarifies assessment criteria and models feedback procedures before students take turns practicing as well as the sustained dialogue throughout task performance reflect the social-constructivist application of reciprocal teaching (Schunk, 2020). Peer review approaches to feedback also acknowledge peers as active agents in constructivist learning environments although task design must account for possible issues relating to competency as it is also mandated by the social cognitive concept of modelling (Schunk, 2020).

Congruent with constructivist views of prompting student feedback about assessment and learning, when learners have the opportunity to share their feedback-related experiences through institutional surveys or research studies, the results have highlighted their stated need for effectively engaging with feedback. Findings indicate that, from the students' perspective, effective feedback should be not only timely and cumulative but also comprehensible, specific, facilitative, and relevant to the task in order to enable uptake and facilitate meaningful engagement (Carless, 2015; Vattøy et al., 2020). Students appreciating the value of feedback demonstrates their perceived active role in the process. Since assessment tends to drive learning, assessment and feedback are perceived by students to be important events in their academic life, so, as hypothesized by Bandura (1986), they will seek to take control by becoming active agents in the process (as cited in Schunk, 2020). As a result, students act intentionally by regulating the behaviors as well as the affective and cognitive processes needed to achieve their goals. Corrective feedback provided to students as they practice skills plays a crucial role here as it can affect self-efficacy which in turn affects agency; goal progress feedback is also as valuable for raising self-efficacy (Schunk, 2020).

As a communicative process, feedback must also be understood in order to be useful to learners, as the feedback literacy approach proposes. Beyond its conceptualization as a tool for mediating learning in constructivist theory, language also plays an important role in information processing theory as language comprehension is presented as a challenging process that can overload working memory (Paas et al., 2010; Sweler, 2010, as cited in Schunk, 2020). Whether orally or in writing, relating feedback information to students should account for the possibility that students might misunderstand or misconstrue the message given that decoding it involves both domain-specific and procedural knowledge (Anderson, 1990, as cited in Schunk, 2020).

Anchoring feedback practices in socio-constructivist theory further reveals the complexity of the process and multitude of factors that must be successfully addressed in creating effective learner-oriented assessment feedback designs. Student engagement with feedback goes beyond perceptions of its value as learners must have the motivation to engage in the process, and this can be influenced by individual and environmental variables. Dialogical, sequenced, and scaffolded aspects of learner-centered assessment feedback designs has been found to promote student needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy leading to increased motivation to engage, as proposed by Deci and colleagues' (2000, 2005, 2009, 2016) theory of self-determination (as cited in Schunk, 2020; Ajjawi et al., 2021).

DEFINITIONS

Identified in the work of Sadler (1989) with the critical role of closing the gap between students' actual and desired performance level and in the research of Hattie and Timperley (2007) with providing the performance and process information needed to develop students' self-regulation skills, a new paradigm of assessment feedback emerged to serve multiple functions in attempting to empower learners to monitor, evaluate, and regulate their own learning and even develop independent evaluative judgment and problem-solving skills as capacities of lifelong learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Sadler, 2010). By linking feedback to sustainable assessment practices, Boud (2000) further identified principles for designing incrementally challenging tasks that enable feedback practices to shift towards a reiterative process in which learners must play an active role.

Placed within a socio-constructivist framework, assessment feedback is currently conceptualized as a dialogic, sustainable, learner-centered process that allows clarification of expectations and negotiation of meanings and interpretations of feedback information received from different sources: instructors, peers, and self (Carless, 2015; Winstone & Carless, 2020). Learner-focused assessment feedback is only considered effective if learners actually use it to improve their work and abilities which underscores the need for feedback processes to enable student uptake and engagement (Carless, 2015). The

concept of student agency or "agentic engagement" with feedback has only received attention in the past five years and has, until very recently, focused mainly on the psychological aspects of students' active engagement in the process, or what Winstone and colleagues (2017) have termed "proactive reciprocity."

As active agents in the process, learners are expected to make contributions and share responsibility in enabling effective feedback processes; however, barriers have been identified that interfere with students' feedback agency (Winstone et al., 2017). Of these barriers, feedback literacy has been postulated by Sutton (2012) as the academic language and skills needed to interpret and enact feedback; however, Carless and Boud (2018) have extended the term to address four distinct aspects: appreciating feedback, generating evaluative judgments, managing emotions, and enacting feedback (p. 1316). Currently, the interplay between feedback seeking behavior and feedback literacy as well as an exploration of feedback agency as framed within a socio-cultural and political context are examined to further a deeper understanding of learner agentic engagement with feedback (Joughin et al., 2021; Leenknecht et al., 2019; Nieminen et al., 2021).

GAPS IN THE RESEARCH

To date, learning-focused assessment feedback research has provided useful data on the effectiveness of using these innovative feedback practices to motivate students, enable uptake and engagement, and impact learning. However, with a few notable exceptions, these results come from small scale studies, are based on self-reported use of feedback, or were conducted in the context of research-based universities within courses taught, in many cases, by award-winning instructors with sufficient, much-needed, and highly valued academic freedom to make curricular design decisions about assessment in their respective courses. Also with few exceptions, the research on this topic has not addressed the role and influence of demographic and ethnic/cultural variables on students' engagement with learner-centered assessment feedback interventions.

These limitations call for replicating this research with larger populations that better reflect the challenges and diversity created by the massification and globalization evident in HE and to collect and interpret data of actual student engagement with learner-centered feedback. More longitudinal studies are needed to demonstrate the extent to which students can indeed develop evaluative judgment that can extend beyond single courses and into their professional life. Further research is also needed on the impact of technology-enhanced feedback and the use of learning analytics as technology has been demonstrated to have a strong potential for scalability by allowing personalization and timely delivery, and learning analytics is currently envisioned to further enhance feedback processes by facilitating student synthesis of multiple-source and multiple-instance feedback and by guiding instructors in designing impactful interventions that support learners on their

educational journey (Ryan, et al., 2019; Winstone, 2019; Winstone & Carless, 2020).

Although identified as a crucial component in shifting to a new paradigm in assessment feedback practice, teacher assessment feedback literacy has been under researched, with a framework for the concept only recently published (Carless & Winstone, 2020). Issues of power and bias and their relationship to students' perceptions and emotions while unpacking instructor-generated feedback must be explored as these issues have been identified to play an essential role in students' engagement with feedback (Carless, 2015). Moreover, while the current literature provides some evidence of student perceptions, characteristics, and behaviors and their interplay with using learner-focused feedback, more research is needed on the impact of the newly proposed features of learner-centered feedback messages (Ryan et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

Worldwide, the number of those seeking a HE experience is projected to reach 400 million by 2040 (ICEF Monitor, 2018). While more people now have access to tertiary education, a college graduation rate of only 46% in the U.S. indicates that the choice to attend does not necessarily equate a universally successful college experience (Hanson, 2021). Therefore, creating supportive educational environments which can successfully engage students in all aspects of their learning journey becomes imperative for their success. Students should have access to academic information that would facilitate choices that improve their learning and performance. Since active learning strategies based on constructivist principles have already been more prevalent in contemporary HE contexts, another way to actively engage students in their learning is by involving them actively in assessment processes through sustainable feedback. This could extend equity in access to education to equity in successful participation and graduation (Jankowski et al., 2021).

When students have opportunities for interaction and for becoming valued members of their learning communities, they are more apt to engage with feedback actively and adaptively thus also potentially addressing issues with maladaptive engagement in using authentic assessment. A reconceptualization of assessment practice in HE to allow effective student-focused feedback processes that facilitate development of self-regulatory skills and create more personalized learning paths that have an impact on student learning could also facilitate the long-term practice needed to hone discipline-specific competencies and evaluative judgment skills needed for success in a 21st century workplace (Carless, 2019; Dawson et al., 2021).

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Best Practices for Improving Blended Learning in Nigeria: Critical Reflections on the Breast Cancer Clinical Pathway Development Course

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ABSTRACT

Although cancer clinical pathways (CPs) are standardized care plans for the treatment of specific cancers, they are not commonly used in Nigerian hospitals. Many Nigerian clinicians do not have the requisite skill for developing and implementing the use of CPs. Critical reflections provide an important perspective in the philosophy, design, implementation, and outcome of interventions. This paper critically reflects on the design and implementation of a multidisciplinary, blended learning (i.e. online and in-person) course which sought to improve the competence of local doctors, nurses, and allied students in developing clinical pathways. Reflective feedback was obtained from a mix of project designers (n=4) and participants (n=3). The group critically analyzed the project planning and implementation in comparison with best practices. The analysis considered the design of the online course, the distribution of learners, the conduct of the in-person workshops, and the overall evaluation of the educational intervention. Positive aspects of the online learning included the unique design of the green-themed PowerPoint slides and the vibrant discussions through a WhatsApp group. Poor internet services in many parts of Nigeria affected synchronous online discussions that were conducted on Google Meet. The in-person workshops at the three locations enjoyed great community support, especially because the course provided free cancer screening. Future courses should emphasize asynchronous models while ensuring that online tools that allow for low bandwidth are used for synchronous meetings. Community involvement must be emphasized during the planning of blended learning courses in which participants would need healthy volunteers to practice skills. The use of multidisciplinary teams for the planning and implementation of courses should be the standard of practice

Keywords

Nigeria, Early detection of cancer, Critical pathways, Students, Breast neoplasm

INTRODUCTION

Clinical pathways (CPs) are evidence-based multidisciplinary care plans that outline the essential steps needed in providing care for patients with specific clinical conditions (e.g. breast cancer). When properly developed and implemented, CPs optimize patient outcomes and maximize clinical efficiency. (Pittathankal & Davidson, 2010; Zon et al., 2016) In the treatment of breast cancer, the use of CPs has been shown to reduce hospitalization, improve patient care process, reduce patient anxiety (Pittathankal & Davidson, 2010), and improve overall patient satisfaction. These care plans are critical for linking the wealth of empirical evidence for specific health conditions with basic rule guides for clinical practice. (Cui et al., 2014)

The development of clinical pathways requires skills that involve translating universal clinical guidelines into local protocols to inform clinical practice. Although such skills are not directly taught during regular undergraduate education, there is evidence that professional development courses can be used to improve skills regarding clinical pathways development. (Eguzo et al., 2018; Eguzo et al., 2019) With the increasing prevalence of cancers in Nigeria, (Azubuike et al., 2018; Morounke et al., 2017), the use of clinical pathways (CPs) for the management of breast cancer is not common practice in Nigerian hospitals. (Eguzo et al., 2019) It is therefore important to promote this practice using a combination of approaches, including blended learning.

Meanwhile, reflection is a process of 'inward evaluation' that helps practitioners gain a greater understanding of both themselves and their context or situation such that the understanding would guide future actions. (Horton & Deutsch Sherwood, 2021; Sandars, 2009) It is a key component of experiential learning, which involves an iterative cycle of experience, analysis, critical review, and planning for future action. (H, 2021) Critical reflection provides an avenue for teachers and learners to reconsider the design, process, and outcomes of an educational experience with the view to gain better insights into the experience. Earlier reports described the process and outcomes of a blended learning course that sought to improve the competence of Nigerian clinicians in the development of clinical pathways. (Eguzo et al., 2018; Eguzo et al., 2019) The development of clinical pathways is an iterative, consultative process that involves experts from different disciplines. (Girgis et al., 2018) This article critically reflects that educational intervention. It draws from the perspectives of course participants (n=3) and project designers (n=4).

OVERVIEW OF THE EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION

The intervention was a blended learning course, which was deployed in two consecutive parts. The first part consisted of a six-week online course that focused on breast cancer guidelines and clinical pathway development delivered using Google Classroom®. As part of the online course, participants were instructed about breast cancer guidelines using the National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) Harmonized Guideline for Sub-Saharan Africa. Content on steps to develop clinical pathways was adapted from the Cancer Institute of New South Wales. During the online course, participants were reminded periodically to complete assigned tasks, such as quizzes. The quizzes were self-grading, such that participants obtained their quiz scores upon submission. The quizzes were formatted in a way that question and answer options were shuffled automatically. This was aimed at reducing the potential for cheating among course participants.

The online course was followed by a series of two-day in-person workshops. The workshops were held at three locations (i.e., Aba, Obong Ntak, and Benin City). At each of the locations, Day One was devoted to revising the key concepts

that were taught during the online component of the course. The second day was used to practice clinical skills that were relevant to cancer management, including clinical examination. Participants also worked in groups to develop local clinical pathways using a worksheet that was adapted from the Cancer Council Victoria and of New South Wales. (Rushton, 2018; Thomas et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, course participants were primary care providers (e.g., family physicians and general nurses), specialists (including radiologists and surgeons), residents, and radiographers. Students of medicine, nursing, and allied courses were also eligible to participate. Other aspects of the intervention, including course design, have been described in the research protocol article. (Eguzo et al., 2018).

REFLECTIONS ON THE COMPOSITION OF COURSE PARTICIPANTS AND RESOURCE PERSONS

This course was set up to promote multidisciplinary training and practice regarding the care of cancer patients. Over 400 individuals self-registered for the course. The mean age of participants in the online course was 27.46 (± 9.25) years, with a range of 18 to 54 years. The participants consisted of healthcare students (55.1%), physicians (22.1%), nurses (18.8%), and others (3.9%). Multidisciplinary care has been identified as an essential component in the provision of quality care for cancer patients. This approach pools the combined skills of healthcare professionals from different fields to provide holistic patient care. Multidisciplinary teams often improve communication, care coordination, and decision-making among the participating professionals. Multidisciplinary care has been considered the standard of practice for cancer management since the early 1980s. (Silbermann et al., 2013; Taberna et al., 2020).

Similarly, individuals from different fields with relevance to cancer care (e.g. surgeons, clinical oncologists, nurses, radiographers) composed the resource persons for the online and in-person components of this project. This enhanced the richness of the course content. The multidisciplinary composition of the team was also reflected in the distribution of course participants, which included professionals from different but relevant backgrounds. It was interesting to observe the collaboration among participants, such that communication during group projects was greatly enhanced. It is expected that learning in a multidisciplinary setting will translate into managing cancer as multidisciplinary teams locally. This multidisciplinary approach to training and practice should be further promoted in Nigeria, as a potential solution to the incessant interprofessional conflict in the healthcare industry. (Oleribe et al., 2018; Suleiman & Martyn, 2020).

REFLECTIONS ON THE ONLINE COURSEWORK

The online course was divided into four modules which spanned six weeks. Registration for the course allowed potential participants to carry out a personal assessment of their

REFLECTIONS ON THE IN-PERSON WORKSHOPS

exposure to online courses, breast cancer (as a theme) the requirements both in time and data consumption needed to fully participate in the course. This set the background for some participants who were new to online courses and hardly knew what to expect. Data from the course registration showed that 63.6% (259/400) of participants did not have previous exposure to online learning. It was interesting to find that the presentation slides had a unique, green-based theme. The colourful slides design aided learning through their beauty, consistency, and easy layout of content. Research shows that the use of colourful presentations led to greater retention by participants in the long term. (Cockman, 2018). Results from the historic study involving college students indicated the colour green provoked the “feelings of relaxation and calmness, followed by happiness, comfort, peace, hope, and excitement”. by Kaya et al (Kaya & Epps, 2004, p. 400). This was also echoed by other studies. (Cretenet & Dru, 2009; Lichtenfeld et al., 2012).

Also, the organization of pretest and post-tests in each module made it easy for participants to stay focused on the content of each module. Across all the groups of learners (i.e students, physicians, nurses, others) there was significant improvement in the mean post-test scores when compared to mean pretest scores for all the modules (17.41±1.78 vs 12. 45±2.82). Future courses should ensure more variation in the wording and complexity of questions that would be used for the quizzes. It is also important to restrict student's access to new course content until they have completed quizzes regarding the previous modules. Participants in this course were able to access new modules without necessarily completing the post-tests of previous modules. This was observed as a lapse of the technology regarding Google Classroom. Although Google Classroom was easy for the learners and instructors to use due to its appealing interface, it did not have the feature that would limit access to new content pending the completion of some key activities in a previous module (i.e. ‘access restriction’). The course instructors attempted to manage this challenge by delaying the release of new content using a calendar feature on Google Classroom. The use of a different learning management system (e.g., Moodle) would overcome this limitation. (Moodle, 2021; Team, 2020)

Meanwhile, after completing the online enrolment participants were sent a link to join a WhatsApp group that was set up for the course. This tool was deployed primarily to help provide technical support regarding access to the course content on Google Classroom. As the course evolved, the WhatsApp group was used to promote discussion and collaboration among the course participants. Many participants responded to messages or questions on WhatsApp faster than they responded to posts on the Google Classroom, thus WhatsApp helped sustain interest in the course. This was perhaps because WhatsApp is one of the most popular messaging apps in Nigeria. (Varrella, 2021). The course instructors exploited this technology by posting reminders about new content or quiz deadlines on the Course WhatsApp Group.

Each of the three workshop sessions started with a revision of the concepts that were previously discussed in the online class. The topics were reviewed in order of increasing difficulty. For instance, breast anatomy was discussed before breast pathology, so that learners would be more comfortable with the content. The lessons taught included introduction to radiotherapy, ultrasound-guided breast biopsy and introduction to cancer chemotherapy. Other topics were as described in Appendix 1, which shows the complete course outline, including the workshop schedule.

In planning the workshop locations, the team considered the use of functioning but remote health centers. The consensus was to use the hands-on sessions as an avenue to promote awareness of breast and cervical cancers locally. Evidence suggests that most Nigerians do not know enough about cancer early detection, nor do they have access to such services. (K. Eguzo et al., 2020; K. N. Eguzo et al., 2020) Thus, it was decided to hold the workshops in the villages of Owo-Ahiafor (Abia State), Obong Ntak (Akwa Ibom State), and Ugbekun (Edo State). These locations were also easily accessible by road. Volunteers at each location collaborated with the project managers to promote the community screening events which were hosted alongside the training workshop. This resulted in the significant participation of community members. Such findings have also been reported in the literature, where community health educators directly increased uptake of screening services. (Chigbu et al., 2017)

Interestingly, many of the female course participants chose not to be examined, especially for cervical cancer screening. Although the examination rooms were largely private, many of the health professionals and students declined the free screening. This may be partly because many of the trainers were males, and some students did not want to be examined by their peers who participated in the training. Also, considering the sensitive nature of the clinical examinations for breast and cervical cancers, it is understandable why learners would not want to be exposed to their peers. The low uptake of cancer screening by healthcare professionals in Nigeria has been previously reported. (Afam & Ba-Break, 2017) It is possible that the attitude of being examined by peers could contribute to this low uptake. Future courses should explore the use of community volunteers or standardized patients as they would be more appropriate for such intimate examinations.

CONCLUSION

This reflective essay provides an in-depth analysis of the planning, execution, and pitfalls of the blended learning course on the development of the breast cancer clinical pathway. The project provided a unique opportunity for students and healthcare professionals to be trained on breast cancer diagnosis and clinical pathway development. At the start, many of the participants had no prior experience with online learning, so this proved to be a limitation in their comfort level as the course

became more demanding. Most participants provided positive feedback regarding their knowledge gain due to the blended learning course, showing that this approach is an appropriate intervention in the Nigerian setting.

It will be important to further deepen the online learning culture in Nigeria, as this is the way of the future. When designing course materials, the choice of colors for presentation slides could be critical to participants' engagement. Community involvement should be sought whenever health interventions are planned. The team also learned that sharing the proposed course curriculum with a sample of potential participants helped to keep the content relevant and to make the delivery engaging. Working with a select sample of potential participants would help address some of the challenges that were observed in this course, such as incremental use of technology in course delivery. The essence of multidisciplinary participation in inpatient care should be relentlessly stressed to ensure optimum uptake of this approach to the provision of health care. There should be ongoing advocacy for healthcare professionals to increase their uptake of screening services. Further research is needed on ways to promote the uptake of screening services by healthcare professionals, as they are often seen as agents of change in the community.

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Appendix 1

Table 1

Clinical Pathway Course Outline

Module	Topics	Aim
Welcome and Orientation Duration: 1 week	Welcome Overview of Google Classroom How to complete assignments	Get to meet everyone Become familiar with the learning environment Become familiar with submitting assignments
Module 1 Introduction to Breast, Ultrasounds and Breast Cancer Duration: 1 week	Breast anatomy/physiology Overview of breast cancer: pathology Introduction to ultrasound Introduction to breast ultrasound	Understand Breast anatomy/physiology Risk factors for the development of breast cancer Gain an above-basic understanding of ultrasound and breast ultrasound techniques
Module 2 Early detection and diagnosis Duration: 1 week	Breast self-exam Clinical breast examination Approach to breast biopsy Role of nurses in breast biopsy Introduction to mammography	Know how to perform and teach breast self-exam Refresher on clinical breast examination Understand how to perform a breast biopsy with and without ultrasound guidance Understand the role of nurses
Module 3 Treatment and Follow up Duration: 1 week	Introduction to chemotherapy administration Introduction to radiation therapy Essentials of breast cancer management Radiation therapy in breast cancer management Psycho-Oncology Nursing care for breast cancer patients	Become familiar with chemotherapy Understand how radiation therapy works Understand different chemotherapy options for breast cancer Understand radiation therapy used for breast cancer Understand psychological issues with cancer care. Understand nursing roles in breast cancer management
Module 4 Introduction to breast cancer guidelines, Clinical pathways and collaborative practice Duration: 1 week	Overview of NCCN breast cancer guideline for Africa Overview of clinical pathways Introduction to collaborative practice and tumour Boards Introduction to Patient Navigation	Become familiar with NCCN breast cancer guideline Learn how to develop clinical pathways Understand how to start tumor Boards Understand the importance of patient navigation.
Workshops to be held in Aba, Obong Ntak, and Benin Duration: 2 days per location	Day 1 Recap of all the modules Develop a local clinical pathway Practice breast exam Practice breast ultrasound Practice breast biopsy Refresh knowledge on chemotherapy Day 2 provide hands-on opportunity via community screening	Improve practical skills Develop a local clinical pathway for each city Ask questions about online modules Provide course evaluation

ensures effective running of the Edo State Telemedicine Hub. He is a multiple award winner from several organizations including the nursing bodies in Nigeria and internationally. He enjoys football and hopes to expand his influence in the field of nursing practice beyond Nigeria.

Dr. Nuhu Tumba is a clinical oncologist and assistant professor at Bingham University Teaching Hospital, Jos – Nigeria. His clinical duties include training medical students and residents in radiology while providing care to cancer patients. He is interested in improving access to cancer treatment and the professional development of physicians. He has collaborated with different local and international organizations, including the American Society of Clinical Oncology and Marjorie Bash Foundation. Dr. Tumba has published several peer-reviewed articles in oncology.

Dr Kingsley Nnah is a Surgical Resident at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University Teaching Hospital Nnewi Anambra State Nigeria, with interest in General Surgery/Surgical Oncology. Before joining residency, Dr Nnah, worked with Nigerian Christian Hospital, Aba Abia State Nigeria, with exposures to surgical oncology and still provides part time surgical consultations. His research interest is on medical education, oncology, and antimicrobial stewardship. Dr. Nnah has published several peer-reviewed articles, and has collaborated with different local and international organizations to implement professional development programs. He is a member of the Governing Council of Marjorie Bash College of Health Sciences and Technology, Aba – Nigeria.

Dr. Chukwuemeka Oluoha is an accomplished public health physician and health systems expert, who works with the Department of Public Health, Abia State University. He served as the immediate-past Executive Secretary of Abia State Primary Health Care Development Agency. Dr. Oluoha is highly involved in health promotion and primary care. He also plays a central role in various multidisciplinary research projects. Dr. Oluoha is an experienced and widely recognized health system ‘Change Manager’, whose expertise has been sought by various development partners, including the World Health Organization. In addition to his work on public health, Dr. Oluoha is a leader in the Isuikwuato Community in Abia State – Nigeria.
Mbaraonye

Precious Chimzaram Mbaraonye is nurse educator with special interest in family planning, infectious diseases and cancer control. She is presently an instructor in the Community Health Extension Workers program at Marjorie Bash College of Health Sciences and Technology, Aba – Nigeria. She is also involved with the Abia Cancer Control Group where she coordinates community cancer screening outreach programs. She has researched into the prevalence of Teen pregnancies and the management of its complications; Use of Medical equipment in local health institutions as well as antimicrobial stewardship. She is also interested in the blended learning approach to continuing professional development.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Peace Itohan Egharevba is a Biochemist, Registered Nurse, and Registered Public Health Nurse. She volunteers for community health projects focusing on first aid, cancer awareness and infection prevention. She was a two-time sessional best student and the 2nd best graduating student (class of 2021) of the Department of Nursing Science, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria. In 2019, she was awarded a certificate of recognition by the University of Washington as a Site Coordinator/Clinical Facilitator for the Clinical Management of HIV course. Part of her interests are gynaecological cancers especially among women in low- and medium-income countries. She plans to follow a career path as a nurse educator, being keen on learner-focused interventions for identified educational challenges. Peace already assists in research on cancer care and control, with the research team at the Marjorie Bash College of Health Sciences and Technology, Aba, Nigeria. She also facilitates multidisciplinary continuing professional education programs for healthcare providers using the blended learning approach.

Dr. Kelechi Eguzo is a General Practitioner in Oncology and research scientist. He is affiliated with the Nigerian Christian Hospital and Marjorie Bash Foundation. Since 2015, Dr. Eguzo has led several ASCO training courses on cancer control in Nigeria. His research focuses on capacity building for local health professionals, development of local clinical pathways and patient navigation systems, as well as medical education. Dr. Eguzo seeks to improve cancer control in Nigeria, especially by establishing Marjorie Bash Cancer Center in Aba. Through his work on cancer control, Kelechi has earned awards from the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO), Union for International Cancer Control and Cancer Research UK (CRUK). He is also interested in maternal health, antimicrobial stewardship, and child health.

Enyichukwu Moses Anya is a graduate nurse with special interest in administration and research. Born and raised in Abia State, Enyichukwu graduated from the prestigious University of Benin, where he also served as the President of the local chapter of the Nigerian Universities Nursing Students’ Association (NUNSA). He is a certified trainer and currently works with Eclat, the medical arm of Interswitch (a Financial Technology company) and has trained many health workers both in Nigeria and beyond in the use of Electronic Medical Records. In addition, he is in the team that champions and

A Case Study of Successful Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

Data indicate that out of the thirty-eight percent of the doctoral students who graduated in the United States, 24% are students of color. This case study examined the lived experiences of doctoral educational leadership alumni of a college in New York with an 88% graduation rate, 60% of which were students of color. The graduates of this program were consistently successful educational leaders. This study focused on three areas of the college's graduate program: the process of selection, retention, and post-graduation success. It included document analysis as well as in-depth interviews with alumni, faculty, and administrators. Thirty-two alumni responded to the pre-survey, and eight alumni and three faculty/administrators were interviewed. Selection, retention, and post-graduate success had three significant themes each: a sense of belonging, faculty-administration support, and self-motivation and purpose. The selection was holistic – prospective students were interviewed to evaluate their purpose and ability to work cooperatively, and standardized tests were not a key factor. A list of recommendations to make a graduate program successful is presented.

Keywords

Sense of belonging, Graduate education, Retention, Holistic admissions, Doctoral programs, Faculty-student relationship

INTRODUCTION

As graduate programs seek to diversify and enrich their programs, many administrators have begun to examine their process and objectives regarding selection, retention, and post-graduate experiences. Governments have paid attention to doctoral education due to the fact that knowledge is a critical national resource for economic growth. Doctoral education plays a key role in international competitiveness (Nerad, 2020; Council of Graduate Schools, 2020). In 2020, the Council of Graduate Schools (C.G.S.) presented a detailed analysis on how graduate studies are meeting the economic demands of globalization and discussed the enrollments, retention, and graduation per subject area as well as social-economic racial differences among the graduates (Council of Graduate Schools, 2020). According to a C.G.S. report released in October 2020, students from Latino and Black demographic groups remain substantially underrepresented in graduate schools (Council of Graduate Schools, 2020).

Limited information is available on the aspects associated with the factors contributing to graduation and dropout from a doctoral program (Maki & Borkowski, 2006). In 2016, twenty-one universities were studied by a team of researchers (Okahana, Allum, Felder, and Tull, 2016) and revealed that the completion rate for a doctoral program in 7 years is 42% and in

10 years, 50% (Okahana et al., 2016). This high attrition rate affects doctoral students who suffer an emotional cost of non-graduation (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012).

Considering these factors, the intention of this case study is to learn from a unique doctoral program, Dowling College, located in New York. This doctoral program's completion rate within five years was 85% and within seven years was 88 % (Self Study, Manley & Perry, 2014). It is also important to note that this program "increased its student diversity from 24% in 2008 to 60% in 2016" (Morote, 2016; Morote et al., 2022). This doctoral program was founded in 1996 and closed in 2016 when Dowling College's financial crisis caused the college to cease operations. This crisis was not related to the underlying doctoral program, which was financially healthy during closing and served approximately 100-135 students per academic year.

Dowling College's distinguished alumni are superintendents, college presidents, health-care leaders, professors, and educational leaders, e.g., between 2003-2016, 24 superintendents and three college presidents were graduates of the program (A. Inserra, personal communication, December 12, 2020). This research examines the specific components that made this program successful while focusing on three significant areas: selection, retention, and post-graduation success.

This study will seek to answer one research question:

R.Q.: What themes emerged from key insights of alumni and administrators regarding the doctoral program's selection process, retention, and post-graduation success?

BACKGROUND OF DOCTORAL INFORMATION

National doctoral program enrollment, shared by the Council of Graduate Studies as of 2019, reported 1.8 million students: 41% male, 24% students of color, and 18% international students (Council of Graduate Studies, 2019). In addition, the NCES Bulletin "Conditions of Education" (2017) presented the following data regarding the diversity composition of doctoral programs' student of color graduation rate: 2004-05, 33%, in 2013-2014, 37 % and in 2014-15, 39%. It is important to note that this data includes Ph.D., Ed.D., and comparable degrees at the doctoral level and includes most degrees formerly classified as professional, such as M.D., D.D.S., and law degrees (Morote et al., 2022).

In 2015, the Council of Graduate Studies completed the *Seven-Year URM Doctoral Completion and Attrition Rates by Academic-year Groups and Selected Student Characteristics, DIMAC Project* (Sowell et al., 2015). The report revealed completion and attrition rates as percentages of students who earned doctoral degrees or left their programs within a given set of students and within a defined number of months after starting their programs. Doctoral retention rates were found to vary depending on the field. The seven-year completion rate for social and behavioral sciences (which included Ed.D.) was 38%.

This case study examines a doctoral program at Dowling College. Dowling College was a non-profit private higher education institution on Long Island. Long Island is one of the most segregated suburbs in America, crisscrossed by racial barriers. The doctoral program in education was registered in 1996 in the New York State Office of Higher Education to deliver Ed.D. degrees. At the time of the college closing (in 2016), the doctoral program had three major areas of study/concentration: Higher Education, K-12, and Health Care (Morote et al., 2022)

The doctoral program at Dowling College followed a cohort model. The program also included "an intensive technological infusion process and a single-fee payment plan. Students in the program were mentored and aided in creating a portfolio documenting successful learning outcomes and using field-relevant topics for student dissertations" (Smith & Ruhl-Smith, 2000, p. 15).

While some prospective students were recommended by alumni, others applied without alumni recommendations. Student open houses were hosted by an administrator, chair, professor, dean, and alumnus. During these information sessions, a financial advisor provided tuition information describing a creative payment plan in which students' last payment occurred at the end of the second year when coursework was completed and the dissertation seminars began (D. Impagliazzo, personal communication, December 18, 2020). If a student did not graduate within four years, an additional fee (specifically for dissertation advisement) was paid every semester until completion.

The most crucial decision regarding student admission — to use a holistic selection process — was made after conversations with a group of faculty members. Prospective students were asked to present their college transcripts, Miller Analogy test scores, and letters of recommendation. Students were given access to a computer lab to complete an essay the same day as their interview. The meeting with the faculty provided the opportunity to get to know if prospective candidates had a vision for their future and their comfort level working in a cooperating learning model with others (R. Manley, personal communication, January 4, 2021). Students also provided a same-day essay, with the focus of this evaluation being critical thinking more than grammar and style. Candidate vision, ability to work collaborative and critical thinking were weighted more heavily than previous academic progress and test scores. (R. Manley, personal communication, January 4, 2021).

Once students were selected, they were carefully placed into specific cohorts. The program consisted of two different schedules, the Executive Program (intense periods of as many as ten days consecutively, including weekends) and the Weekend Program (where students attended classes on Friday nights, Saturdays, and Sundays).

Dowling's faculty comprised seven to nine full-time professors, 50 % of whom were retired Superintendents who were mentors

to k-12 future leaders. The remaining faculty came from previous higher education or social agency institutions. They were mentors to students interested in pursuing careers in higher education institutions or other social agencies. All professors were diverse in their skills and race/gender/ethnicity. Health-care experts were often invited as part-time lecturers.

The Ed.D. program was comprised of 66 credit-hour experience requiring a master's degree to matriculate. The core doctoral course experience (48 credits) was taught over a two-year period. At the end of the second year, students underwent a portfolio defense before a faculty committee of at least three full-time professors. A full-time faculty member was assigned to each dissertation design section and each dissertation seminar. Dissertation construction and subsequent dissertation writing were planned for each student during the third year of the program (18 credits). A typical cohort consisted of 9-15 students. The doctoral program typically ran 2-3 cohorts per year. Students were diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, age, gender preference, and disabilities which varied during the 20 years the program existed. The increase in students of color was exponential, from 24% in 2008, to 35% in 2011, and to 60% in 2016 (Morote, 2016), exceeding the national diversity average of 24% in 2019 and even higher for diversity statistics Long Island, NY. The program welcomed Puerto Rico cohorts and a group of students from Pakistan under the USAID scholarship.

The doctoral program held an annual symposium and included a doctoral mentorship program (E-S. Morote, personal communication, March 3, 2021). Under this program, alumni, students, and faculty worked to prepare peer-reviewed papers to be published or presented at a peer-reviewed conference. Students were given the opportunity to collaborate with faculty by writing articles and presenting at national and international conferences prior to graduation and were able to achieve a peer-reviewed publication or conference paper.

Professors and administrators were committed to the enrollment of the program. Often, they created agreements with international organizations and school districts, made phone calls to prospective candidates, attended or prepared open-house events (R. Manley, personal communication, January 4, 2021; D. Impagliazzo, personal communication, December 18, 2020). Alumni engagement was also important for this program; professors-led networking events were consistently held (A. Inserra, personal communication, December 12, 2020; D. Impagliazzo, personal communication, December 18, 2020).

The doctoral program had three major events: the Alumni Networking Event, the July Golf Outing, and an Annual Research Symposium. All of these events were promoted and designed by two doctoral professors (A. Inserra, personal communication, December 12, 2020). In all instances, alumni were very active. Social media was integrated into the process as Facebook groups and LinkedIn groups still exist many years after the closure of the college.

The doctoral program had a consistent five-year completion rate of 85% and a consistent seven-year completion rate of 88% (compared with the 38% national average) during its 20 years of existence (Dowling College Self Study, Manley & Perry, 2014). The success of the program was evident based on the after-graduation results where many of the students were hired as college presidents, superintendents, principals, professors, hospital directors, and leaders in various capacity including social agencies (A. Inserra, personal communication, December 12, 2020).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The emerging literature concerning the graduate admissions process seeks to examine not only the goals of these committees but also understand the methods used to review graduate applicants. Studies have found that there are two main categories when discussing applicant review processes: metrics-based review and holistic-based review. While transcripts and exam scores are used as merit-based measures, there is literature that proposes that a holistic approach to graduate admissions is the best practice (Raghunathan, 2010; Posselt, 2016; Cassuto, 2016; Wilson et al., 2018).

Research has found that using exam scores as part of the decision-making process is often a way of "gatekeeping" and may be an obstacle to diversifying a graduate program. In some cases, using primarily scores could lead to an elitist approach to the process. Faculty on admission committees have been found to make inferences regarding the quality of applicant's work and their ability to succeed in the institution's graduate program (Posselt, 2016). A holistic admissions process allows candidates the ability to showcase their strengths and encourages the admissions committee to look beyond scores. A holistic-based review can help graduate programs support key institutional missions and objectives, such as improving diversity, equity, and inclusion (Kent & McCarthy, 2016; Posselt, 2016).

Additional literature focused on the graduate admissions process indicated that graduate programs are also concerned about recruitment and retention - all considered during the admissions process itself. According to Lawley's (1999) doctoral thesis exploring the problem of attrition in library science graduate programs, prospective doctoral candidates factor in personal decisions when considering a doctoral program. They focus on their ability to work with and form relationships with faculty and to integrate and be part of a community, the clarity in policies and structure of the program, and their ability post-program for career opportunities (Lawley, 1999). In addition, potential students' self-motivation, perseverance, and personal career goals must be considered when seeking and retaining doctoral students (Achterman et al., 2007). These factors and how graduate admission committees tackle them have implications for the recruiting process. Student perceptions of the program rely heavily on faculty,

clear communication and program criteria, and prospects post-graduation (Brown, 2008).

The current literature focused on student retention and attrition mostly examined undergraduate programs with only a limited few exploring doctoral programs (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Bair & Haworth, 2004). Ampaw and Jaegar (2012) formed a conceptual framework to describe and explain the drop-off rate and lack of retention in doctoral programs. This framework focused on three areas supporting doctoral persistence: transition, development, and research (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012). Financial aid was also found to be a significant factor. However, the authors concluded that aid in itself was not enough – it was important to consider the specific type of financial aid received. It was also found that financial aid of all types had an impact on doctoral students' retention.

When focusing on the retention of adult learners, Noel, Levitz, and Saluri (1985) explored the importance of a college's personnel and their interactions with students. It was found that the personnel's caring attitude was a key and potent factor for retention. Not only do personnel attitude contribute to a sense of belonging, but the creation of cohorts and encouraging group learning has also been found to foster a community of learning and increases doctoral students' chance of completion (Nimer, 2009; Bista & Cox, 2014). The cohort is defined as "a group of about 10-25 students who begin a program of study together and end the program approximately at the same time" (Lei et al., 2011, p. 498). The cohort-style system facilitated academic learning, provided student feelings of belonging, amplified students' perspectives and supported learner persistence (Drago-Severson et al., 2001; Bista & Cox, 2014). Financial advisement within the institution is also a key factor, as Ehrenberg and Mavros (1995) found that completion rates and the mean duration of students' times to completion and dropout were all dependent on the types of financial support the students received.

The relationship between a doctoral advisor, a faculty member and the administration has been identified as one of the keys of retention (Holley & Caldwell, 2012; Bullin, 2018). There are many factors involved when considering this relationship. An advisor who is an outstanding instructor may not be a good mentor (Mullen, 2007; Mullen et al., 1999). Graduate students may have a restriction of choosing certain dissertation topics and selecting a methodology depending on the faculty interest and skills. The need of faculty skills diversity for an appropriate mentorship is crucial (Brown, et al., 2022). For example, women and people of color faculty mentors, or faculty practicing innovative ways of research may have diminished mentoring experiences due to other Faculty (Morote et al, 2022).

The attrition of students of color in doctoral programs occurs at higher rates than their counterparts. Students of color and underrepresented may experience marginalization, and their interactions with the faculty may be hindered by not having faculty that look like them (Ellis, 2005; Gay, 2004; Jaeger et al.,

2009; Herder, 2022). Yet it has been noted that developing a collegial relationship with their faculty contributes to the success of doctoral students of color and international students; thus, it is important to establish communication and relationship with their mentors early in the doctoral program (Zeynep Isik-Ercan, 2012; Zhang & Unger, 2022).

The theoretical framework for this study was derived from the works of Andy Nash and Silja (2009), who analyzed adult programs across New England, U.S.A., and identified persistence strategies for adults' affective needs (Nash & Kallenbach, 2009). These needs were: a sense of belonging, community of learners, clarity of purpose, competence, relevance, and stability. Nash and Kallenbach (2009) found that the programs studied were effective due to structure, stability, empowerment feeling confidence about their progress and completion. This stability is enhanced by university services, student's families, and social networks (McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020).

In 2015, another quantitative study analyzed independent variables that correlated to a college's doctoral graduation rate (Bollia et al., 2015). Bollia et al. (2015) considered many variables and evaluated areas such as "entrance tests, assistantships, grants for students, student support activities such as writing support, statistics support, annual review, workspace, on-campus research conferences, and travel support" (Morote et al., 2022, p. 22). The researchers also considered other variables such as faculty and student gender, faculty tenure, and students' ethnic or racial background. Bollia et al. (2015) found that success was due to the size of the university, wherein the small universities tend to have the highest graduation rate. It was also found that being female gender was a quality for success, along with those studying full time, being supported financially, as well as the high quality of the faculty was evident and important in the success of the graduation completion rate (Bollia et al., 2015).

In addition to the doctoral program experience, it is important to consider student post-graduation success and a doctoral program's alumni network. Tuft University is one of the universities mentioned in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. McMurtrie (2009) espoused the benefits of having alumni connections, in that alumni created a powerful networking tool as it helps colleges with their admissions, recruitments, and fundraising efforts. Tufts University increased its alumni chapters (from three to twenty-two within seven years). The institution also saw an increase in its enrollment and fundraising by making connections with alumni who would be able to network and have local events, helping to continue to grow their enrollment as well as fundraising (McMurtrie, 2009).

Morris (2015) explained in an article on faculty responsibility the collaborative nature of education and ways in which deep learning may be affected or inhibited by constrained

relationships or unacknowledged or unrecognized difficult interactions.

Leonard, Becker, and Coate (2004) note that after completing a doctoral program, students realize that having a doctorate in education affords them a multitude of options because it gives much credibility and opens opportunities for employment such as working as an entrepreneur, consultant, not-for-profit, education, administrators, and leaders. Leonard et al. (2004) explained that having the title of 'the Ph.D.' was much more important to some than the opportunity for future advancement. Leonard et al. (2004) asserted that students want to be able to find answers to problems, continue research, complete projects, and 'test their abilities in pursuit of policy changes.

METHODOLOGY

Thirty-two Dowling doctoral alumni participated in a short survey posted on the Dowling alumni group on Facebook. The researchers divided participants among race, ethnicity, gender, and area of work. Random sampling was used once the participants were grouped. Nine people were invited to participate in a deep interview.

After the pre-survey, the researchers created an interview protocol and questions, and minor changes were made to the open-ended questions based on the pre-survey responses. These questions dealt with the interviewee's lived experiences when they enrolled in the doctoral program (selection), during the program (retention), and after the program (post-graduation success).

Between January 30 and June 16, 2021, three researchers conducted semi-structured interviews of twelve individuals: nine alumni and three administrators; two were professors before becoming administrators. Interviews were conducted individually using Zoom, a video-conferencing platform.

Two researchers conducted the alumni interviews, and the professors'/administrators' interview was conducted by a third researcher. Once written consent had been obtained, the interviews were recorded using Zoom. Participants were notified that all answers provided them and the study records would remain confidential and private. The study would not include any information that would reveal their actual identity in the interview documents.

Interviews transcripts were stored in a password-protected Dropbox cloud (dropbox.com). Access to all data was controlled by the researchers. The researchers maintained a comprehensive case-study database to include interviewees' demographics (Yin, 2018). Triangulation was used during the analysis phase and contributed to credibility (aka validity in quantitative studies), dependability (aka reliability in

quantitative studies), and collected data quality (Billups, 2014; Creswell, 2017; Tracy, 2010; Yin, 2018).

Qualitative content analysis using a step model was applied (Mayring, 2008). The first step was to analyze the single cases using thematic analysis and the second step was cross-case analysis. After the transcriptions of the recordings, the documents were immediately subjected to find key themes of the interview. Data were coded using cross-sectional analysis by the three researchers. Then, the researchers proceeded to triangulation by sharing the coding they had done independently, one interview at a time. The categories yielded were validated by three researchers. The interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes (range 35- 60 minutes). Data saturation was obtained on the 10th interview and was confirmed by the 11th and 12th interviews, seeking maximum variation in the participant profiles. Data were validated by sharing thematic findings with the interviewees and asking them for feedback. Based on their input, findings were adjusted.

LIMITATIONS

A limitation of the case study method is that the samples of the studies are often minimal. In this case, transferability (Billups, 2014) should be done with caution:

Two researchers took classes in the doctoral program at Dowling College but transferred their credits to another doctoral program (and subsequently graduated) due to Dowling's closing. One researcher was a former professor/administrator who may inadvertently contribute to bias in the study. Due to the complexity of multiple-case studies, the researchers planned to focus on following the scheduled process of analysis (Stake, 2006).

The case study method limited the transferability of data results to the general population from which the sample of the twelve individuals belonged to the doctoral program (Yin, 2018). The number of cases was recommended in several studies, such as Stake (2006), which suggests four to 10 cases. This study included 12 participants.

Participants' bias should also be considered. Interviewees may unconsciously recall past events through a modified glass. For that reason, the participants were invited to read the thematic findings and provide feedback (Cornell, 1984).

The researchers were intruding in the participants' world (Yin, 2018), and the comfort level of the participants may be questioned regarding if they were able to be truthful and transparent when answering the interview questions asked by the researchers.

FINDINGS

Description of the Participants

The pre-survey was posted to a wide range of alumni from Dowling's doctoral program. Alumni who graduated in the last two decades responded to the survey. 78% were female, and 21% were male; 50% were Caucasian, and 50% were from underrepresented groups; 50% were employed in K-12, 25% in colleges and universities, and 25% in social agencies; 62% were over 50-year-old, and 38 % were between 30-49 years old. The

pre-test included open-ended questions regarding the doctoral experience of the respondents and invited respondents to indicate if they were willing to participate in follow-up interviews. These participants are referred to as P.S. with their corresponding numbers (1-32) throughout the study.

After the pre-test, twelve volunteers were interviewed. Interviews were coded (presented in Table 1). The three faculty/administrators were coded as A1, A2, and A3.

Table 1

Alumni Participants

Code	Admission	Graduation	Agency	Gender	Race
KCF2	1998	2002	K-12	Female	White
KC3	2003	2007	K-12	Male	White
KC2	2005	2008	K-12	Male	White
KCF1	2006	2009	K-12	Female	White
KSCF	2007	2009	K-12	Female	White
SMF2	2008	2010	Social Agency	Female	Black
SMF3	2009	2012	Social Agency	Female	Black
KC1	2014	2017	K-12	Male	White
SMF1	2014	2018	Social Agency	Female	Hispanic

Note. K = working in a k-12 environment, S = working in a social agency (Hospitals, State institutions, or higher education institutions), C = Caucasian, M = Minority, F=Female.

R.Q.: What themes emerged from key insights of alumni, faculty, and administrators regarding the doctoral program's selection process, retention, and post-graduation success?

Sense of Belonging

Alumni recalling their graduate experience stated the need to feel part of the group. Connecting with their classmates, professors, and administrators was crucial for retention. Cohorts organized the doctoral program to ensure diversity in each cohort. In addition, students of color appreciated the ability to interact with a diverse faculty. Another important facet of the alumni connection was coming together at events and being able to help each other in such ways as finding employment. Dowling's motto was "The Personal College," and the students agreed with the college motto. The local aspect of the program also led to a more personal and intimate experience for some students: KSCF: "the personal touch of Dowling - that was the first thing that drew me in." The ability to provide a personal experience even in a graduate program was appealing to many students applying for the Dowling doctoral program. Students were drawn to the concept of a serious program with a small, local, and personal feel: KC2: "that personalized

manner, I think, was the greatest strength of the program." The sense of belonging continued even after graduation, when the

students networked, secured jobs, and emotionally supported each other due to the cohort style of the program. The following areas were highlighted on this theme:

The doctoral program created a community of learners. The following comments support this — KCF2: "...my extended family, I still keep in contact with so many of them"; SMF2: "There was a sense of belonging as we had the largest group of our cohort...[and] we end[ed] up writing a book together"; KSCF: "You know, with the cohort model, we really felt that we belong to each other"; A3: "At the open house, we say, you are going to join a community of scholars... [and] a community of professional leaders."

Based on responses, an interviewee's background affected how the alumni understood diversity. Alumni of color answered this question in terms of the race while white alumni answered this question in terms of gender, sexual preference, or skills diversity. Comments such as SMF2: "...seeing the strength of [African American female professor], seeing their strength and

intelligence, meeting [Latina professor]..we were inspired and motivated. Those two definitely made a difference"; KCF1: "I was drawn to the professors, which was a blend of those who were current practitioners and those who were full-time professors. I did not want a program that was 100% theory or 100% practical. I wanted the combination."

Self-motivated and Purposeful

The program's faculty and staff carefully thought out the admission process. The administrators wanted a diverse group of students who would learn from each other and work collaboratively. To do this, the administrators wanted a diverse faculty and staff. A1: "The Faculty was to be the model for the students... so [we] need to set out the example for the students. This is a diverse faculty." Another important factor for administrators during the selection process was determining the internal motivation and perseverance of the students. Once in the program, the purpose of the students, faculty and administration was to assure graduation. After graduation, students felt that their purpose was fulfilled as they felt "hirable." This combination of faculty and administration support and the student's self-motivation and success. They worked on it together. They created a culture of success. Administrators/faculty commented A1: "the culture already said that they will succeed"; A2: "we interview prospective students because we believe that grades are not a predictor of success. We wanted to see in a natural intelligence, the way that person dealt with the world". Student perspectives from KCF1: "The entire aspect of what Dowling offered in their program matched up to what my personal and professional goals were" and SMF3: "I was determined to get my Doctorate." Additionally, the interview process, as a prerequisite to acceptance, allowed both the student and faculty to get to know one another. A1: "When we accept a student, it is because we know you can be successful, but then we also make it our duty." The program was geared for the success of students, giving the support, guidance, opportunity, and confidence to be hireable.

Faculty And Administration Support

Alumni stated that the faculty provided support and mentorship during the program and the dissertation process. Dowling's dissertation mentorship was not only focused on chair-student but a triad of chair-methodologist-student (D. Impagliazzo, personal communication, January 12, 2021). For that reason, students developed close ties with their professors, especially with the methodologist and chair of their dissertation committee, while administrators played the role of academic counselors. They often ended up co-authoring articles and traveling to conferences together. Prospective students learn about this process even before entering the program. Some students were drawn to the program based on the credentials of the faculty, while others wanted to learn from those in the professions they sought to join, KC3: The superintendents... [are] actually teaching in the program so... you're going for a doctorate in education administration being taught by superintendents of schools, who can really give you the ins and outs of the leadership of a school district." KSCF: "It was

obvious throughout the whole program that the professors were there for us. They wanted us to succeed [and] they were very proud of their success rate with their students." KC2: "Watching...these former superintendents and others... teach at that level definitely was part of my inspiration for wanting to do it."; SMF1: "the biggest factor was my referral from my mentor."; SMF2: "...we as far as like being family even...we did seminars together ... writing together"; A3 explained that the student received a creative schedule of payments in which payments concluded before the dissertation process begun, which may have affected the completion rates. A1:" faculty and peers still remain in contact on social media. I have published with at least one faculty member since graduating. And other faculty members have been references and referred me to job postings."

CONCLUSIONS

Dowling College presented an exceptional 88% graduation rate within seven years. This rate is contrary to the national rates of 42% in 7 years and 50% in 10 years (Okahana et al., 2016) or 38% within seven years (G.S.C., 2019). This study interviewed nine alumni of the 32 who answered a pre-survey. The researchers also interviewed three faculty/administrators and collected college documents to support their statements. Three research questions guided this study:

While the feel of a "local college" appealed to potential Dowling students, self-motivation and personal grit were ideal qualities for those chosen for the program, and the strength, personality, and outreach from faculty/administrators helped students make their final decisions about choosing the program. Three major themes were identified regarding the doctoral program's selection, retention, and post-graduate success: faculty/administration support with diversity and quality, a sense of belonging through the feeling of a local college, and self-motivation with a clear purpose. These themes are consistent with the literature. Prospective doctoral candidates factor in personal decisions when considering a doctoral program, such as the ability to work with and form relationships with faculty and to integrate and be part of a community, clarity in policies and structure of the program, and their ability post-program for career opportunities (Lawley, 1999, Zhang, Li, & Unger, 2022).

During Dowling's selection process, the administrators tried to determine the internal motivation and perseverance of the students. Leaning into the personal feel of the program, administrators wanted students who would become leaders in their communities. According to the literature, potential students' self-motivation, perseverance, and personal career goals must be considered when seeking and retaining doctoral students (Achterman et al., 2007). All these factors and how graduate admission committees tackle them have implications for the recruiting process. Student perceptions of the program rely heavily on faculty, clear communication and program criteria, and prospects post-graduation (Brown, 2008; Bollia et al., 2015).

Dowling's selection process was also innovative because it was more holistic than grade-based. While the literature shows that metrics-based admissions reviews have been the norm for graduate programs and focus heavily on G.P.A. and standardized tests such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), Dowling's administrators chose a holistic approach to admissions (Wilson et al., 2018; Goldring & Schuermann, 2009). The literature in admissions processes indicates that a holistic review can help graduate programs support key institutional missions and objectives such as improving diversity, equity, and inclusion (Kent & McCarthy, 2016; Posselt, 2016). The Dowling administrators practiced a holistic admissions process to bring diversity, equity, and inclusion and to select students who would become leaders in their communities.

Nash and Kallenbach (2009) discussed the importance of a sense of belonging when they analyzed the retention of adult students. Dowling's cohort model and professors' mentorship promoted that sense of belonging. This is consistent with several studies (Drago-Severson, 2016; Teitel, 1997; and Nimer, 2009), who found that cohort models supported student learning in preparing educational leaders and created a sense of community. Students were also provided a creative schedule of tuition payment was also a factor as Ehrenberg and Mavros (1995) explained financial advisement support retention.

Finding that diversity was a key factor for retention contradicts some studies that discuss low minority attrition (Okahana et al., 2016). However, some studies found that the presence of females and international students (Bollia et al., 2015) supports retention.

In the case of having a sense of purpose, few studies discuss this directly. One exception was Nash and Kallenbach (2009), who defined purposes as one of their six retention components. In addition, this study found that faculty mentorship and administration support was key theme for graduate students' retention (Spivey-Mooring & Apprey, 2014; Goldring & Schuermann., 2009; McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020).

Leonard (2004) gave credibility to earning a doctorate and how opportunities are open to continuing in academia or any avenue the graduate chooses to pursue. In our findings, it was clear that the graduates had grown, both personally and professionally, and their perception of self was enhanced by the experience of attending Dowling College and the relationship they built with their cohort and faculty members.

RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the key factors in the success of the program in this study was the emphasis on the purpose of the Ed.D. doctoral program – which was dedicated to training and preparing educational and administrative leaders. Focusing on the purpose and mission contributes to confidence and understanding that the skills and aptitude from persevering result in greater self-

perception and additional career opportunities. The following are recommended components for successful graduate programs:

Promise: Sense of Belonging

- Design cohorts based on personalities, skills, and experience
- Connect prospective students with current students and alumni
- Provide engagement activities to support student perseverance
- Create cohorts of diverse students

Promise: Faculty and Administration Support

- Assure faculty and administration diversity and quality
- Provide one-on-one counseling
- Promote research within the institution

Student Self-Motivation and Clear Purpose

- Interview process as a holistic selection
- Consider a personality test or self-efficacy test
- Train administrators and counselors to provide transparent information about the doctoral expectations.

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Evaluating the Relationship Between Ethnicity and Attitude Toward Seeking Mental Health Services

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ABSTRACT

This non-experimental study aimed to see how ethnicity affects an individual's attitude toward seeking mental health services and how ethnicity affects an individual's preference for a counselor of the same ethnicity. A convenience sample of 108 adults, 18 years of age or older, was obtained using social media platforms. The participants completed the Mental Health Service Survey, which included demographic questions and the components of the Attitude Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Scale created by Fischer and Turner (1970). The findings indicated Blacks or African Americans have a similar attitude toward seeking mental health services to non-Blacks or non-African Americans. Additionally, the results indicated Blacks or African Americans preferred a counselor of the same ethnicity significantly more than non-Black or non-African Americans. The difference in counselor ethnicity preference is more likely to account for the difference in mental health service usage among ethnicities than attitudes toward seeking mental health services. Therefore, more should be done to ensure diversity among counselors who provide mental health services.

Keywords

Attitude toward seeking mental health services, Relationship between ethnicities, Ethnicity relationship between counselor preference

INTRODUCTION

The challenges in life have led to an increased need for mental services; however, services are underutilized among many populations. For instance, although there is a need for mental health counseling, African Americans underutilize the services provided by community mental health agencies compared to people of other ethnicities (American Psychiatric Association, 2017). According to the American Psychiatric Association (2017), African Americans are more likely to rely on emergency room and primary care physicians for mental health services, rather than mental health specialists. In 2018, 59.6% of adult Blacks who experienced a major depressive episode received treatment for depression; however, only a reported 9.8% of adult Blacks overall received mental health services that year (U.S. Department of Health, 2021). During this same time, 70.2% of adult Whites who experienced a major depressive episode received treatment for depression; while 19.8% of adult whites received help from mental health services (U.S. Department of Health, 2021). The reason for this disparity is yet to be understood.

RACIAL PREFERENCE AND SEEKING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Racial preferences for a counselor could be one of the reasons that determine whether an individual seeks mental health services. For instance, Ferguson et al. (2008) suggest that Black individuals' willingness to seek mental health services from a White counselor may be due to positive or negative attitudes and feelings toward White people. Nioplias et al. (2018) found the preference for a counselor of the same race was stronger in individuals who reported race to be significant to how they perceive themselves. Racial preference and other factors influencing whether mental health services are sought vary among populations and ethnicities.

RACIAL PREFERENCE IMPLICATIONS AMONG STUDENTS

The desire to see a counselor of the same ethnic/racial background is evident, especially among college students. Kim and Kang (2018) found that the desire for ethnic/racial matching among counselors and counsees played a substantial role in the use of mental health services among college students. Multiple sources also report an influence of ethnic/racial matching among diverse populations and ethnicities (Gildsdorf, 1975; Kenny, 1994; Kim and Kang, 2018; Thompson & Cimboric, 1978). One influence on people seeking counselors of the same race is the individual's presenting concern. According to Gildsdorf (1975), college students seeking counseling for personal concerns were more likely to prefer a counselor of the same ethnicity. Due to the preference for a counselor of the same ethnicity, Thompson and Cimboric (1978) suggest counselor center usage would increase among Black students if more counselors were Black.

Although the use of mental health services by Black students may increase if more Black counselors were available, the counselor's race is not the only factor influencing counselor preference. Atkinson et al. (1986) confirm that Black students preferred Black counselors; however, they also found that the counselor's age and education influenced Black college students' preference for Black counselors. Furthermore, while a counselor's race is important to Black students, expectations of the counseling process are another factor that affects the utilization of counseling services among students.

MINORITY STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

Expectations play a role in using mental health services. Kenney (1994) found that minority students expected less personal commitment and lower levels of counselor expertise than their European American counterparts. These expectations about counselors negatively affect whether minority students use mental health services. The effects of low expectations align with Gildsdorf's (1975) findings which indicated that the underutilization of services was due to the perception that

background differences would cause the counselor to lack understanding.

AFRICENTRIC CULTURAL VALUES AND SERVICES USAGE

Worldviews can also affect the use of mental health services. Jackson and Sears (1992) noted individuals with Eurocentric worldviews (a) value the material over the spiritual, (b) value individualism, (c) promote individual rights and competition, (d) values control over nature, and (e) emphasizes external knowledge. This Eurocentric worldview stands in contrast to those with an Africentric worldview who (a) value the spiritual and material equally, (b) have group orientation, (c) promote collective responsibility and cooperation, (d) values oneness and harmony with nature, and (e) emphasizes self-knowledge (Jackson & Sears, 1992). Wallace and Constantine (2005) found that Black students with Africentric cultural values associated counseling with a stigma compared to Black students who do not have Africentric cultural values. Students with Africentric values were also more likely to withhold information they believed to be private, sensitive, and identified as harmful or upsetting from counselors. Ultimately, the level of Africentrism can also play a role in the acceptability of mental health treatment (Wallace & Constantine, 2005). But a preference for ethnic/racial matching with a counselor and stigma affect not only Black students but also how Black people in the general population seek mental health services.

RACIAL PREFERENCE AND PERCEPTION AMONG GENERAL BLACK POPULATION

Many studies encompass student populations concerning racial preference and perception toward mental health services (Gildsdorf, 1975; Kenny, 1994; Kim and Kang, 2018; Thompson & Cimboric, 1978). Studies using the general population provide more insight into the relationship between racial preference and perceptions about mental health services (Fripp & Carlson, 2017; Parker & McDavis, 1983; Yaites, 2015). Parker and McDavis (1983) found that Black people generally do not believe White counselors to be more competent than Black counselors, or vice versa, yet they still underutilized mental health services. Although a counselor's race may not always be a challenge to seeking assistance, Black females are more likely to believe White counselors will understand their problems. Likewise, Parker and McDavis (1983) suggest a counselor's race is of more importance to males than females. Yaites (2015) noted that Black women preferred counselors who had cultural characteristics similar to their own. However, despite the importance of cultural similarities, African American women may also choose counselors who provide a comfortable therapeutic atmosphere. They also appreciate counselors who are direct, competent, unbiased, personable, experienced, patient and affirming (Yaites, 2015). The perception of a counselor's competence appears to be independent of the counselor's race, which

suggests the use of mental health services is dependent on factors other than the counselor’s race.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of clarity on the factors that affect the general population’s usage of mental health services. Parker and McDavis (1983) indicate that although many Black people are aware of the importance of counseling services, only a few have ever utilized mental health agencies (Parker and McDavis, 1983). Fripp and Carlson (2017) also indicated that this might be due in part to the limited knowledge of the mental health services available to them. Contradictory to Fripp and Carlson (2017), Parker and McDavis (1983) argue that Black people are aware of the locations of mental health agencies and the services they provide but choose not to use them. Despite the low utilization, Parker and McDavis (1983) found that Black people believe counselors are essential alternatives to seeking advice from friends, family, and ministers. Like Parker and McDavis’s findings, Gary (1985) noted that African Americans have a positive or neutral attitude toward community mental health agencies. Although Black people do not have a negative view toward mental health services, they still underutilize mental health providers.

Much of the research concerning the relationship between race and mental health services is conducted at colleges and universities. While findings about college students’ preference for counselors and perceptions appear consistent, results in the general population are contradictory to the student population studies. With the gap between studies using college students and the general population, additional studies are needed to fully understand the patterns of mental health services usage among Black Americans.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

This research aimed to identify how ethnicity affects attitudes toward seeking mental health services and how ethnicity affects the preference for a counselor of the same ethnicity.

HYPOTHESES

- HA1 - Ethnicity affects attitudes toward seeking mental health services.
- HA2 - There is an association between ethnicity and preference for same-ethnicity counselors.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The population of interest was adults 18 years of age and older. A convenience sample of responses from 108 adults who had access to social media or the internet was used for the study (Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Ethnicity	Black or African American		Non-Black or Non-African American		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
	52	48	56	52	108	100
Gender						
Female	39	75	50	89	89	82
Male	13	25	5	9	18	17
Prefer not to say	0	0	1	2	1	1
Age						
18-29	6	12	13	23	19	17
30-39	15	29	13	23	28	26
40-49	20	38	21	38	41	38
50-65	7	13	8	14	15	14
66 +	4	8	1	2	5	5
Highest Educational level						
Diploma or GED	2	4	7	13	9	8
Some college	11	21	8	14	19	18
Associate's degree	8	15	6	11	14	13
Bachelor's degree	15	29	12	21	27	25
Graduate degree	14	27	22	39	36	33
Other	2	4	1	2	3	3
Willing to seek counseling/mental health services						
Yes	40	77	40	71	80	74
No	12	23	16	29	28	26
Prefer same-ethnicity counselor						
Yes	37	71	5	9	42	39
No	15	29	51	91	66	61

INSTRUMENTATION

The instrument used in the study was the Mental Health Services Survey (MHSS) created by the researcher. The MHSS included demographic information and the Attitude Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale [ATSPPHS] (Fischer and Turner, 1970). The demographic portion of the survey comprised seven multiple-choice items and one open-ended question. The ATSPPHS consists of 29 items on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”. The ATSPPHS has moderate internal reliability of .83 and has a validity of $p < 0.0001$ for distinguishing between persons who have experienced psychotherapeutic help and those who have not (Fischer and Turner, 1970).

PROCEDURE

After IRB approval, data collection for this nonexperimental study was conducted on Facebook and Instagram through

public messages from the researcher's account. The post explained the nature of the study, assured respondents of the confidentiality of their personal information, and provided a link to fill out the survey through Google forms. Respondents were encouraged to share the link to the Google forms with their contacts via e-mail, text messages, and other social media platforms. No personally identifying information, such as e-mail addresses was collected on the Google forms. However, sign-in was required to prevent multiple responses from the same account. Several follow-up private messages were sent out during the study to increase participation.

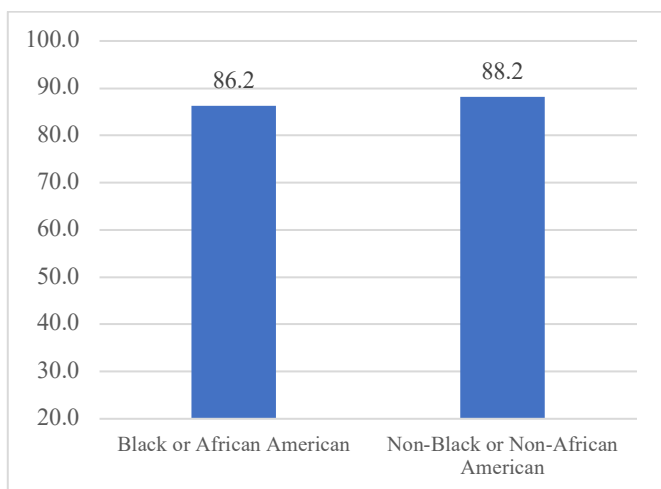
Once the data were collected, analysis of the data to test the hypotheses was conducted using an independent samples t-test to identify the effect ethnicity had on attitude toward seeking mental health services. Similarly, a Chi-square test was used to determine the association between ethnicity and preference for same-ethnicity counselors. An alpha level of 0.05 was set for both analyses.

RESULTS

An independent samples *t*-test was calculated comparing the mean attitude toward seeking professional psychological scale (ATSPPHS) scores and two ethnic groups, Black or African American and Non-Black or Non-African American (Figure 1). No significant difference was found $t(106) = -0.78, p = .437$. The mean ATSPPHS score of those identified as Black or African Americans ($M = 86.23, SD = 12.86$) was not significantly different from the mean ATSPPHS score of those identified as Non-Black or Non-African American ($M = 88.18, SD = 13.04$). Therefore, the null hypothesis was not rejected, and the alternative hypothesis could not be supported.

Figure 1

Ethnicity and mean ATSPPHS score



A chi-square test of independence was calculated to compare the preference for a same-ethnicity counselor among Black or African Americans and Non-Black or Non-African Americans.

A significant association was found between the preference for same-ethnicity counselor and ethnicity $\chi^2(1) = 43.93, p < .0001$, Cramer's $V = .64$. Black or African Americans were more likely to prefer a counselor of the same ethnicity (71%) than Non-Black or Non-African Americans (9%) (Table 2). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis was supported.

Table 2

Association between Ethnicity and Preference for Same-Ethnicity Counselor

	Black or African American	Non-Black or Non-African American
No	$n = 15$ (29%)	$n = 51$ (91%)
Yes	$n = 37$ (71%)	$n = 5$ (9%)

DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

The findings suggest that ethnicity may not influence attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help, as shown in Figure 1. It can be surmised that African Americans' attitude toward seeking mental health services is similar to those of Non-African Americans. This finding is identical to those of Parker and McDavis (1983), suggesting that Black Americans are no less knowledgeable or willing to seek mental health services than other ethnicities. On the contrary, this study's findings indicate a significant association between ethnicity and the preference for a counselor of the same ethnicity. These findings suggest that although African Americans share attitudes toward seeking mental health similar to people of other ethnicities in the United States, they prefer a counselor of their ethnicity. In contrast, most Non-Blacks or Non-African Americans did not show a similar preference for a same-ethnicity counselor. In this regard, the findings in this study are similar to those of Thompson and Cimboric (1978), who also found ethnicity to play a role in the preference for counselors.

IMPLICATIONS

One implication of this study is that the ethnicity of the counselor may play a more critical role in influencing when and how Black Americans seek professional psychological help. This preference for a same-ethnicity counselor would mean that access to Black or African American counselors may affect the help-seeking decisions of people in this population. These findings should inform policy to ensure that Blacks and African Americans are aware of counselors available to them who share their ethnicity. Unfortunately, for many African Americans,

emergency rooms and primary care physicians are their main source of mental health assistance (American Psychiatric Association, 2017). These facilities should therefore be proactive in providing resources that help patients find mental health providers that best fit their needs. It is worth noting that the American Counseling Association website offers a directory of counselors for specific unique communities. This directory includes categories such as Therapy for Black Girls, Therapy for Black Men, and Therapy in Color – Mental Health for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (American Counseling Association, n.d.). Information about these resources should be available in emergency rooms and primary care facilities, so Black and African American community members can be aware of counseling resources available to them.

LIMITATIONS

There are several possible limitations to the findings of this study. One limitation in using a convenience sample from social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram) and word of mouth. A convenience sample typically introduces systemic sampling errors and can create limitations to the external validity of a study. Also, individuals without access to a Google account could not participate in the survey, creating further sampling limitations. This resulted in a small sample size, which may limit these findings' generalizability to the larger population. Additionally, the use of a nonexperimental design and a self-report instrument could have also affected the results of this study. Although participants were informed that their responses would be treated with the highest possible degree of confidentiality, they may still have been reluctant to answer truthfully.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the extant literature suggests that Black and African Americans underutilize mental health services, additional research is always needed to understand why this is the case. Further research into this phenomenon could include appropriate experimental studies to test if mental health service usage would increase if facilities provided additional resources and referrals relevant to Black and African Americans. Research should identify whether the cost of services or stigmas about mental health services has as much of an impact on mental health usage among this ethnic group as the preference for same-ethnicity counselors. Ultimately, understanding the historical and social circumstances that produce this phenomenon of same-ethnicity preference among African Americans regarding seeking mental health services can equip providers and agencies with information to assist members of this population.

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APPENDIX A

Mental Health Services Survey

Dear Respondent,

My name is Victoria Simmons and I am conducting a study about mental health as part of a graduate level research methods class. I would truly appreciate your participation in this study by completing a brief mental health services survey. Your identity and email will not be collected by completing this survey. Furthermore, any information you provide will be treated with the highest level of confidentiality. Your participation and honesty in filling out this survey are greatly appreciated. Should you have any questions or concerns regarding the study please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail.

1. I acknowledge I have read the purpose of this form and give consent for my responses to be used for research purposes.*

- Agree

Section 1

Please select the demographic information that best applies to you

2. Ethnicity

- Black or African American
- White
- Hispanic
- Asian American
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Native American
- Other:

3. Age

- 18-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-65
- 66 +

4. Gender

- Female
- Male
- Choose not to say

5. Highest Level of Education

- did not complete high school
- High School diploma or GED
- Some college
- Associate's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate degree
- Other

6. In what region of the United States do you reside?



- West (includes Hawaii and Alaska)
- Midwest
- South
- Northeast
- Other:

7. If I was experiencing personal difficulties that I could not solve I would seek counseling/mental health services

- Yes
- No

8. If I were experiencing personal difficulties, the main reason I WOULD NOT seek mental health services is

Your answer

9. If I were to receive counseling services, I would prefer a counselor that comes from the same ethnic background as I do.

- No
- Yes

Section 2

Please answer as accurately as possible. Select answers according to the following scale:

1-Strongly Disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Agree, 4-Strongly Agree

1. Although there are clinics for people with mental troubles, I would not have much faith in them.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

2. If a good friend asked my advice about a mental problem, I might recommend that he see a psychiatrist

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

3. I would feel uneasy going to a psychiatrist because of what some people would think.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

4. A person with a strong character can get over mental conflicts by himself, and would have little need of a psychiatrist.

- 1

- 2
- 3
- 4

5. There are times when I have felt completely lost and would have welcomed professional advice for a personal or emotional problem.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

6. Considering the time and expense involved in psychotherapy, it would have doubtful value for a person like me.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

7. I would willingly confide intimate matters to an appropriate person if I thought it might help me or a member of my family.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

8. I would rather live with certain mental conflicts than go through the ordeal of getting psychiatric treatment.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

9. Emotional difficulties, like many things, tend to work out by themselves.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

10. There are certain problems which should not be discussed outside of one's immediate family.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

11. A person with a serious emotional disturbance would probably feel most secure in a good mental hospital.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

12. If I believed I was having a mental breakdown, my first inclination would be to get professional attention.

- 1

- 2
- 3
- 4

13. Keeping one's mind on a job is a good solution for avoiding personal worries and concerns.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

14. Having been a psychiatric patient is a blot on a person's life.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

15. I would rather be advised by a close friend than a psychologist, even for an emotional problem.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

16. A person with an emotional problem is not likely to solve it alone; he is likely to solve it with professional help.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

17. I resent a person - professionally trained or not - who wants to know about my personal difficulties.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

18. I would want to get psychiatric attention if I was worried or upset for a long period of time.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

19. The idea of talking about problems with a psychologist strikes me as a poor way to get rid of emotional conflicts.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

20. Having been mentally ill carries with it a burden of shame.

- 1
- 2

- 3
- 4

21. There are experiences in my life I would not discuss with anyone.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

22. It is probably best not to know everything about oneself.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

23. If I were experiencing a serious emotional crisis at this point my life, I would be confident that I could find relief in psychotherapy.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

24. There is something admirable in the attitude of a person who is willing to cope with his conflicts and fears without resorting to professional help.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

25. At some future time I might want to have psychological counseling.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

26. A person should work out his own problems; getting psychological counseling would be a last resort.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

27. Had I received treatment in a mental hospital, I would not feel that it ought to be "covered up."

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

28. If I thought I needed psychiatric help, I would get it no matter who knew about it.

- 1
- 2
- 3

- 4

29. It is difficult to talk about personal affairs with highly educated people such as doctors, teachers, and clergymen.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Victoria Simmons lives in Jacksonville, Arkansas. She is a first-year graduate student working towards a Master of Science in Marriage and Family Counseling/Therapy at Harding University. Upon completing the program at Harding University, she plans to get a dual license as a Marriage and Family Therapist and a Licensed Professional Counselor. Her desire is to work with underserved populations, specifically the African American and Hispanic communities, those with low socioeconomic status, and those within the Christian community. She aspires to open a non-profit counseling center to reach these desired populations.

Attitudes Toward Participation in Organized Religion: Its Impact on Mental Health and Life Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

This is a non-experimental study that is designed to discover potential relationships between individuals' attitude towards participation in organized religion and their mental health and life satisfaction. The study contained 203 young adults taken from a convenience sample using social media, e-mail, and SMS messages. The research was conducted using a survey form composed of three instruments intended to measure attitudes toward religion, general well-being, and life satisfaction. The study's results indicated a weak positive relationship between one's attitude toward organized religion and mental health. The results also indicated a weak positive relationship between one's attitude towards organized religion and their life satisfaction.

Keywords

Mental health, Life satisfaction, Religion, Spirituality

INTRODUCTION

The role of religion is pervasive in the lives of many people. According to Salsman and Carlson (2005), 93% of Americans identify with a religious group, and over 80% of those reported that religion is *fairly* or *very important* in their lives. Religion can influence several aspects of individuals' life, including mental health. Jauncey and Strodl (2018) stated that religiosity and spirituality are associated with positive mental health outcomes in 61% of studies, along with positive outcomes in 75% of studies on individual well-being. However, they also stated that in 32% of studies, an identified mixed or no relationship with mental health existed, as well as 6% identifying adverse outcomes concerning religiosity and spirituality (Jauncey & Strodl, 2018). Religious experiences often begin at a young age, making the experience a potentially important milestone, whether positive or negative.

EARLY CHILDHOOD RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

Early childhood religious experiences can affect mental health in later years. Hansen (1998) found that adults' psychological functioning was affected by their early religious experiences when these experiences contained rigid expectations or fear. Individuals with a history of high levels of fear in their religious upbringing tended to either remain in the religion of their upbringing without actively participating or separate themselves entirely from the religion of their upbringing, becoming members of a different religion (Hansen, 1998). Higher engagement in the relational aspects of religion and spiritual life can be associated with decreased depression

among adolescent males and females (Paine & Sandage, 2017). These early experiences can affect differing levels of religious participation and feelings toward religious individuals and symbols. McCann et al. (2020) stated that the negative thoughts or experiences of adolescent children in the LGBTQ+ community arise from religious beliefs, attitudes from others, or cultural experience of religious beliefs. These thoughts and experiences can influence youths' self-perception in a negative way which can lead to mental health issues. O'Connor et al. (2002) stated that levels of church involvement are influenced by adult experiences more so than early religious beliefs or practices. Hansen (1998) found that participants with high levels of current religious participation displayed an association with the tendency to conform to familial expectations and display subsequent guilt, while participants with lower levels of religious participation tended to avoid items associated with the religion. However, there may be no association between individuals' histories of religious rigidity and fear with their current religious conformity or independence (Hansen, 1998).

Corona et al. (2017) determined that religion is a cultural value connected to anxiety among college students. Young adults who have integrated faith into their everyday lives and who emphasize the centrality of their relationships with God are likely to experience less overall psychological distress (Salsman & Carlson, 2005). Ultimately, early religious experiences appear to affect mental health in a variety of ways.

RELIGIOUS PARTICIPATION

Potential Benefits to Mental Health

While the relationship between mental health and religion is complex, numerous connections between religious involvement and mental health exist. Involvement in religious activities can be associated with mental health issues like depression and substance abuse (Bonelli & Koenig, 2013). The association between mental health and participation in religious activities can be positive and negative. However, Bonelli and Koenig (2013) found no association between religiosity and psychiatric disorders. Other negative issues, such as problematic coping behaviors, including drug use or risky sex, could be improved by experiences with religion and spiritual activities (McCann et al., 2020). As aforementioned, no direct association between religiosity and psychiatric disorders exists. This includes no association between religiosity and anxiety having been reported, suggesting that interventions aimed at using religion to improve anxious symptoms might not be effective (Shiah et al., 2015). However, even if using faith as a targeted therapeutic intervention for anxiety is not necessarily effective, religious communities can help provide support and practices that generate comfort and peace, particularly in times of stress (Hamblin & Gross, 2013). An important function contributing to this potential atmosphere of peace within the religious community is finding meaning, purpose, or truth.

A greater sense of purpose or meaning contributes to lower anxiety and perceived stress levels, which may contribute to

improved mental health. The idea of meaning bridges the concepts of religiosity and mental health together (Shiah et al., 2015). Creating or discovering meaning can help individuals find purpose in the why and how religion can be important in their lives and their mental health. The presence of meaning and the ability to love God and others can lead to greater satisfaction in life and reduce levels of anxiety and depression (Jauncey & Strodl, 2018). Additionally, Paine and Sandage (2017) found that involvement in religious activity decreased symptoms of depression in graduate students within the helping professions (counselors, psychiatrists, social workers, nurses, etc.). Participating in religious activities can help them focus on a higher meaning or purpose in life, reducing their anxiety and depression levels. However, when individuals have strong beliefs about Biblical texts holding truths that require reflection, a stronger relationship between their psychological distress and their doubts about their faith exist (Kezdy et al., 2011). This conflation again highlights the complexities in the relationship between mental health and religion and demonstrates that some individuals will attach to a given religious belief system and find peace when others find doubt. Clinicians can aid individuals in understanding how they perceive meaning and utilizing meaning as a coping mechanism for mental health problems. Extending beyond what religion offers, meaning can be created in other aspects of life (Shiah et al., 2015). When used as a coping mechanism, spiritual coping can help support healthy living, promote better mental health, motivate positive changes, and increase self-esteem (McCann et al., 2020). Religiosity can create meaning and be highly beneficial but also create a problematic relationship with spirituality, contributing to negative mental health.

Potential Problems for Mental Health

Relational processes surrounding spirituality (doubt, abandonment, disappointment) can harm an individual's mental health. When spiritual beliefs are held firmly, a stronger relationship between religious doubts and negative mental health exists (Kezdy et al., 2011). Firmly held religious beliefs can create rigid dichotomies, which can cause high levels of distress if individuals' beliefs are questioned. Rigidly held religious beliefs commonly emanate from Biblical interpretations. For instance, Biblical interpretations based on symbolic religious context over literal religious context can potentially reduce adverse mental health (Kezdy et al., 2011). Other strict religious beliefs that contribute to poor mental health include attending a more conservative church or rejecting the beliefs of faith communities but still attending services. Strict adherence to these beliefs are associated with higher levels of general anxiety disorder symptoms (Hamblin & Gross, 2013). In addition to external problems, internally, how individuals perceive themselves and their willingness to engage in positive health behaviors (seeking out therapeutic help, mindfulness), can be influenced by negative experiences with religious institutions (McCann et al., 2020). Mental health problems stemming from spiritual issues do not arise solely from rigid or literal understandings, but more broadly can come from individuals' relationships with their deities. Relational

spirituality can be defined as intertwining spirituality with personal relationships and relying on spirituality to guide and transform intimate relationships between individuals.

Relational spirituality is a more significant predictor of depressive symptoms over involvement in religious institutions. Furthermore, a strong association between depression and relational, spiritual struggle exists (Paine & Sandage, 2017). Paine and Sandage (2017) also found that excessive preoccupation with abandonment, punishment, and self-status with the divine is conducive to a higher likelihood of depressive symptoms. Disappointment in God is a more reliable indicator in predicting depression than one's involvement in religious institutions (Paine & Sandage, 2017).

Considering the research presented, religion can influence several aspects of individuals' lives, including their mental health. While early religious experiences may influence mental health, a strong correlation between the two does not exist. The relationship between mental health and religion is complex and has numerous connections between religious involvement and mental health. This association between mental health and an individual's participation in religious activities can be positive and negative; however, based on the research, no correlation is found between religiosity and psychiatric disorders. Despite the lack of a correlation between psychiatric disorders and religiosity, evidence suggests that religious communities can still help provide support and practices that generate comfort and peace, particularly in times of stress. An important function contributing to this potential atmosphere of peace within the religious community is finding meaning, purpose, or truth.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was to determine if attitudes toward participation in organized religion had an effect on the mental health and life satisfaction of young adults.

HYPOTHESES

Attitudes toward participation in organized religion are related to mental health in young adults. Attitudes toward participation in organized religion are related to life satisfaction in young adults.

PROCESS TO ACCOMPLISH

SAMPLE

The participants in this study were a convenience sample of 203 young adults (15-30 years old). The demographic information obtained from the participants in this study were sex, ethnicity, location of home, and highest level of education. Of those 203 participants, 22% were male, 78% were female, and less than one percent were unidentified. There were 88% Caucasian participants, and the other 12% were African-American, Native-American, Latino/Hispanic, or two or more ethnicities. There were 99% participants whose home country was located

in North or Central America, and the other 1% participants were in South America or Europe. Of the 203 participants, 46% of the participants had completed a bachelor's degree, 31% had completed a master's degree, 14% had completed high school, and less than 1% had completed some high school, trade school, a doctorate, or preferred not to answer.

INSTRUMENTATION

The instrument used in this study was the Mental Health Survey. The survey included three different scales: Riverside Life Satisfaction Scale (Margolis et al., 2019), Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (Tennant et al., 2007), and Religiosity Scale (Stanovich, 1989). Each survey section listed instructions on the scale to complete each question.

For the Riverside Life Satisfaction Scale portion of the survey, statements were presented and rated on a 7-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Moderately disagree, 3 = Slightly disagree, 4 = Neither agree nor disagree, 5 = Slightly agree, 6 = Moderately agree, and 7 = Strongly agree (Margolis et al., 2019). The construct validity of this scale correlated with other well-being measures (Margolis et al., 2019). The internal consistency was tested using McDonald's coefficient omega of 0.93 (Margolis et al., 2019). The test-retest indicated a high correlation over 2 weeks with ($r = .90$, 95% CI = [.87, .92]) (Margolis et al., 2019).

For the Edinburgh Mental Well-Being portion of the survey, responses for the 14 items were scored on a 5-point scale: *none of the time, rarely, some of the time, often, and all of the time*, with a minimum score of 14 and maximum score of 70 (Tennant et al., 2007). The internal consistency of Cronbach's alpha was 0.89. Also, the test-retest reliability at 1 week was 0.83 for the sample, which indicated high reliability (Tennant et al., 2007). The content validity was good for this instrument (Tennant et al., 2007).

The Religiosity Scale portion of the instrument consisted of four items rated on a 6-point scale: *more than once a week, once a week, a couple of times a month, a couple of times a year, hardly ever, never and extremely strong, very strong, strong, moderately strong, somewhat weak, nonexistent*; a 7-point scale; and a 5-point scale (*extremely important, very important, somewhat important, not very important, completely unimportant*). All the statements were scored so that higher numbers indicated stronger religious commitment (Stanovich, 1989). The scale's validity is unknown; however, internal consistency reliability indicated that the four items were moderately correlated with each other (Stanovich, 1989). Item 1 correlated with the other three items of .52, .37, and .56, and Item 2 displayed a correlation of .48 and .70 with Items 3 and 4, while the latter two items displayed a correlation of .53 (Stanovich, 1989).

The survey also comprised demographic information. The five demographic questions were multiple choice including sex, age,

ethnicity, home country, and education level. A copy of the Mental Health Survey is included as an Appendix.

PROCEDURE

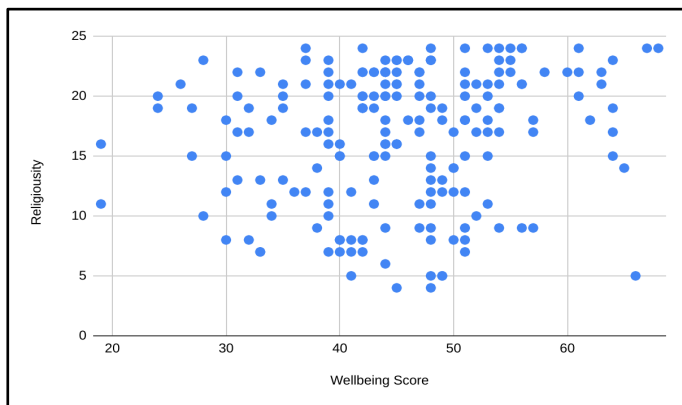
Once the Internal Review Board (IRB) approved this nonexperimental study, the survey link to a Google form was posted on Facebook. The link was also shared digitally via text message with friends. Clear instructions were given to all participants, informing them that they were not compelled to answer any questions and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. If they chose to participate, they were providing their informed consent. After a period of time, the survey was closed, and the data was collected and scored by the researchers. To analyze the data and test the hypotheses, a Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to examine the strength of the linear relationship between participants' attitudes toward participation in organized religion with mental health and life satisfaction. Both hypotheses were tested using an alpha level of 0.05.

RESULTS

A Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to examine the strength of the linear relationship between participants' attitudes toward participation in organized religion with mental health (Table 1). The hypothesis was tested using an alpha level of 0.05. A weak positive relationship was found $r(201) = 0.16$, $P < .01$; the null hypothesis was rejected.

Table 1

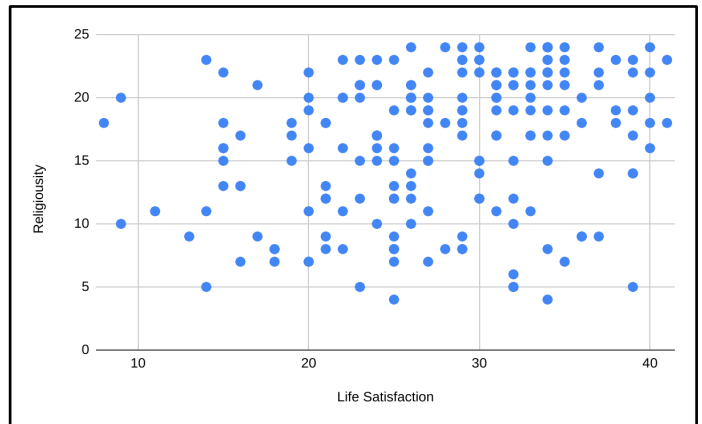
Religiosity and Wellbeing



A Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to examine the strength of the linear relationship between participants' attitudes toward participation in organized religion with life satisfaction (Table 2). The hypothesis was tested using an alpha level of 0.05. For this relationship, a weak positive relationship was found, $r(201) = 0.28$, $P < .0001$; the null hypothesis was rejected.

Table 2

Religiosity and Life Satisfaction



DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

This study's results indicated that a connection between participant's attitudes towards organized religion and their mental health existed, although a weak one. Similarly, a weak connection was also found between participants' attitudes toward organized religion and their life satisfaction. These findings were corroborated by Paine and Sandage's (2017) findings that involvement in religious activity decreased symptoms of depression in graduate students and in Hamblin and Gross's (2013) findings that religious communities can help provide support and create peace in times of stress. Other research noted conflicting information about the possible effects of this relationship. This conflict could be due to more specification in what constitutes mental health, differing religious faiths, or inclusion of variables outside of the ones used in this study.

LIMITATIONS

There were several limitations found in this study. The sample size was relatively small and could limit the generalizability of the results. Also, the sample was a convenience sample so the participants were limited by the accessibility of the researchers. The means of distributing the survey were limited by access to social media and other forms of technology. Using a Google survey limited access to individuals with a Google account. Another limiting factor of this study was the demographics of the participants, which were primarily Christian, White, American, and female. The results found are not an accurate representation of the population. Additionally, the survey's self-reporting nature indicated that the authenticity of the responses may not be completely reliable, especially considering a religious institution hosted the survey.

IMPLICATIONS

From the results of this study, relationships do exist between how one views organized religion and internal regulation, framed in this study as mental health and life satisfaction. While the findings may be relatively minor, there is more research that can be completed on this topic. This subject, where participants expressed interest and passion with many wanting more information and results, implies the importance of this topic. Due to the existing relationship discovered, incorporating faith into treatment for mental health or the pursuit of life satisfaction could be helpful for many individuals.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research needs to be conducted on religion and the relationship with mental health and life satisfaction, preferably with a larger, more diverse sample of participants. A larger and more diverse sample would help more accurately represent the overall population. Another consideration for future research would be to use more specific variables to produce more specific results. Some specific areas to address might be the construction of meaning, locus of control, perceived rigidity, and flexibility of religion. These facets would narrow and provide more specificity within mental health, life satisfaction, and religion. Additional research in these areas may help minimize the extreme responses.

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APPENDIX

Mental Health Survey

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. You are not compelled to answer these questions. You are free to withdraw from the survey at any time.

Please rate your agreement with each of the statements below, using the 7-point scale provided. 1. Strongly disagree 2. Moderately disagree 3. Slightly disagree 4. Neither agree nor disagree 5. Slightly agree 6. Moderately agree 7. Strongly agree

1. I like how my life is going.
2. If I could live my life over, I would change many things.
3. I am content with my life.
4. Those around me seem to be living better lives than my own.
5. I am satisfied with where I am in life right now.

6. I want to change the path my life is on.

Below are some statements about feelings and thoughts. Please select the number that best

describes your experience over the last 2 weeks. 1. None of the time 2. Rarely 3. Some of the time 4. Often 5. All of the time

7. I've been feeling optimistic about the future.

8. I've been feeling useful.

9. I've been feeling relaxed.

10. I've been feeling interested in other people.

11. I've had energy to spare.

12. I've been dealing with problems well.

13. I've been thinking clearly.

14. I've been feeling good about myself.

15. I've been feeling close to other people.

16. I've been feeling confident.

17. I've been able to make up my own mind about things.

18. I've been feeling loved.

19. I've been interested in new things.

20. I've been feeling cheerful.

In this part of the questionnaire, please select the number of the response that is most appropriate. 1. Never 2. Hardly ever 3. A couple of times a year 4. A couple of times a month 5. Once a week 6. More than once a week

21. I attend religious services.

In this part of the questionnaire, please select the number of the response that is most appropriate. 1. Nonexistent 2. Somewhat weak 3. Moderately strong 4. Strong 5. Very strong 6. Extremely strong

22. I consider my religious beliefs to be _____

In this part of the questionnaire, please select the number of the response that is most appropriate. 1. I am certain that God does not exist 2. I think that there probably is not a God 3. I am not sure whether God exists or not 4. I think that there probably is a God 5. I am pretty sure that God exists 6. I am certain that God exists

23. My feelings concerning the existence of God are _____

In this part of the questionnaire, please select the number of the response that is most appropriate. 1. Completely unimportant 2. Not very important 3. Somewhat unimportant 4. Somewhat important 5. Very important 6. Extremely important

24. How important is religion in your everyday life?

25. What is your sex?

A. Male, B. Female

26. What is your age?

A. 0 - 15 years old, B. 15 - 30 years old, C. 30 - 45 years old, D. 45+

27. Please specify your ethnicity

A. Caucasian, B. African-American, C. Latino or Hispanic, D. Asian, E. Native American, F. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, G. Two or More, H. Other/Unknown

28. Where is your home located?

A. North America/Central America, B. South America, C. Europe, D. Africa, E. Asia, F. Australia, G. Caribbean Islands, H. Pacific Islands, I. Other: _____

29. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?

A. Some High School, B. High School, C. Bachelor's Degree, D. Master's Degree, E. Doctorate Degree or higher, F. Trade School, G. Prefer not to say

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kayla Riley is a recent graduate of Harding University. She completed her EdS and MS degrees in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. She is now a Licensed Associate Counselor (LAC) in Arkansas. She currently works at Harding University in the Mental Health and Wellness Department. While continuing her work at the University, Kayla is also searching for a counseling job that would be a good fit for her. Kayla is married to Jonathan Riley, who was the co-author on this article. They have been married for 6 1/2 years. They have 2 cute cats at home to keep them company. Kayla loves reading, writing, and listening to music.

Jonathan Riley is a recent graduate of Harding University. He completed his EdS and MS degrees in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. Jon is currently undergoing the licensing process for Arkansas to become a Licensed Associate Counselor (LAC). Jon works at Capstone Treatment Center in Judsonia, AR as a therapist. He wants to focus his counseling work on addiction and trauma. Jon is married to Kayla Riley, who co-authored this article with him. Jon loves consuming film, music, and books.

Enhancing Emotional Safety in a Graduate School Setting

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, racial disparities in education can be seen in rates of graduation from high school through doctoral programs, with People of Color reporting rates that are significantly lower than their White peers. Academic success has been significantly predicted in prior research by the support of teaching staff. Our Safety in the Classroom (SITC) program was developed to close the support gap for several different often-marginalized groups within graduate school classes in psychology at a university in southern California. Students within racial, religious, and sexual orientation minority groups reported greater perceptions of prejudice when compared to their White peers. These results were achieved without undermining the students' belief in their own ability to negotiate over or confront problems in the classroom. Expanded use and evaluation of the SITC program could contribute to the growing literature on academic success and achievement among minority group members, which provides one possible tool for helping to close the support gap.

Keywords

Graduate psychology safety, Microaggression, Classroom

INTRODUCTION

Although Critical Race Theory has become a political flash point (Ladson-Billings, 2021), the overarching idea that race, racism, and power of predominantly White institutions shape African American students' abilities to pursue graduate level education is widely accepted in academia (Allen et al., 2018; Gildersleeve et al., 2011). People of color continue to encounter systemic barriers that limit their access to and success in higher education. Anti-affirmative action legal challenges, state referendums, and societal constructs such as attitudes and perceptions toward minority cultures are seen by many to perpetuate limits on access to graduate education (Allen et al., 2018; Posselt et al., 2012). Legislation such as California's Proposition 209 and Michigan's Proposal 2 forbade race-conscious admission policies in universities, while judicial decisions such as *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, *Hopwood v. The University of Texas Law School*, *Gratz v. Bollinger*, and *Grutter v. Bollinger* set complicated limits for universities in other states regarding the use of race as an admission factor.

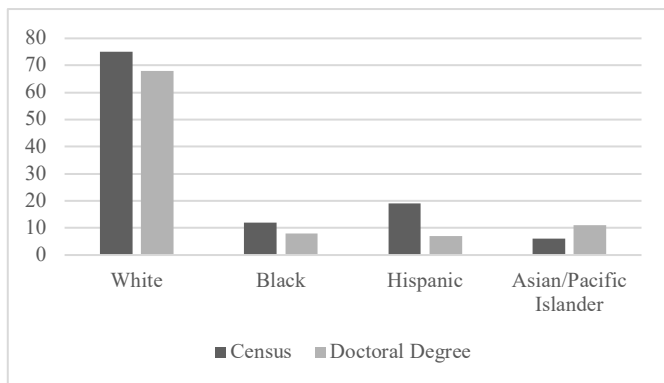
To better understand this issue, it is helpful to consider how minority students are being left behind in terms of graduation rates. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (de Brey et al., 2019), in comparison to their White peers, people of color were at a substantially higher risk of not receiving their high school diplomas. State graduation rates for Black students ranged from 66% (Wyoming) to 88%

(Alabama), with a national rate of 81.1%. High school graduation rates for White students ranged from 81% (Arizona) to 94% (Wisconsin), with an overall rate of 90.2%. Six-year college graduation rates were 64% for White students and 40% for Black students.

There are signs of some limited positive change. Over the course of a decade (2005-2015), the relative percentage of all master's degrees earned by Black and Hispanic students increased by 3%, while the relative rate of master's degrees earned by White students over this period decreased by 8% (McFarland et al., 2017). During the same period, doctoral degrees that Black and Hispanic students earned increased by 2% while the percentage earned by White students decreased by 7% (McFarland et al.). Although the disparity has decreased, a significant gap remains in advanced degree completion rates for doctoral students (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Percentage Distribution of Doctoral Degrees by Race



Note. Frequency data of doctoral degrees and racial data within the census data of United States citizens. U.S. Census Bureau (2019). Quick Facts: Race and Hispanic Origin. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/dashboard/US/PST045219>.

Compared to their white peers, college students of color face additional challenges. For example, students of color reported more negative race-related experiences and issues regarding a sense of belongingness (Clark et al., 2012; Williams, 2000; Williams, 2002), an experience echoed by other (sexual, religious) marginalized groups. In a study exploring sexual minority students' overall perceptions of campus climate, sexual minority students were more likely to perceive the campus climate as "chilly," were less likely to feel comfortable with the classroom climate, and were more likely to consider leaving the institution (Rankin et al., 2010). Research has also found sexual minority students to be more likely to perceive the campus climate as poorer due to unfair treatment by heterosexual students and faculty (Tetreault et al., 2013; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). Sexual minority students reported more harassment on campus than did their heterosexual peers, with some students reporting experiences of clear statements of hostility and prejudice towards sexual minorities (Yost & Gilmore, 2011). Religion-based discrimination is less

frequently studied, but it is notable that the large probability-based panel recruited by Gallup in 2019 found that 17.6% of Jewish students and 30.7% of Muslim students (as compared to 6.5% of Christian students) reported having an experience of "being treated unfairly because of your religion" (Scheitle et al., 2020).

Students of color also consistently reported experiences in academic settings of harassment (Rankin & Reason, 2005), discrimination (Stevens et al., 2018), and racial microaggressions (Clark et al., 2012; Mills, 2020). Students of color exposed to more negative race-related experiences were less likely to perceive a sense of social support in the academic environment (Clark et al., 2012; Williams, 2002). Black students were four times more likely to report a negative race-related experience than were their peers from other ethnic backgrounds (Stevens et al., 2018), and they endorsed fewer positive perceptions of the academic and social environment (Williams, 2002). Black students also reported more administrative concerns, such as registration and funding issues (Williams, 2000). Some results again were promising, such as equal ratings across racial groups for support by faculty advisors. Still, differences remained for the students' ratings of the social and academic environment in which they functioned daily. In a recent publication, Woods et al. (2021) analyzed the graduate students' concerns as "racial battle fatigue," noting that Black students experienced these stressors more often in the classroom than in direct advisee or supervisee roles. This is one of the only publications on the topic, and it is limited in generalizability due to nonrandom snowball sampling.

Differences in the experience of social environments by marginalized and nonmarginalized groups are not without cost. Research has highlighted a significant and positive correlation between the experience of microaggressions and traumatic stress, with the accumulation of microaggressions (or covert discrimination) being equal to or even more distressing than overt discrimination (Nadal et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2018). Students of color further indicate that these experiences of microaggressions are associated with poorer overall mental health, including increased anxiety, suicidal ideation, depression, and binge drinking (Blume et al., 2012; Nadal et al., 2019; O'Keefe et al., 2015; Torres-Harding et al., 2020). Additionally, ongoing negative race-related experiences or microaggressions can increase posttraumatic stress disorder symptomology, as individuals may become more hypervigilant or engage in avoidance behaviors in an attempt to reduce the occurrence of these negative experiences (Williams et al., 2018). In surveys of undergraduate and doctoral programs, students of color reported that these negative experiences in academic environments led to decreased academic performance (Stevens et al., 2018; Williams, 2000). Such experiences thus present institutional challenges for the retention and recruitment of students of color.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SAFETY IN THE CLASSROOM PROGRAM

It is widely believed that felt support from a mentor can predict academic success (D'Amico & Fruiht, 2020; Carpenter et al., 2015; DeCastro et al., 2013). D'Amico and Fruiht (2020) showed that on-campus support, particularly from instructors, significantly predicted academic outcomes and perceived ability to succeed in college. The researchers also found indications of a "support gap," in which students from underrepresented ethnic minorities were more likely to report a lack of support from educators on campus. Such reports may stem from an actual lack of support or from perceptions of lack of support generated by a history of exposure to systematic racism (Kennedy et al., 2007). If we assume that professors typically do value productive learning experiences for their students, it is useful to consider ways in which changes in the learning environment might alter the power dynamics between mentor and mentee, or teacher and student.

The Safety in the Classroom (SITC) program was created to reduce the power differential between students and educators within the graduate school setting. This program was first developed through an alliance between the campus (student-run) Association of Black Psychologists and the Trauma Research Institute, receiving support from the university's leadership. In the initial brainstorming sessions, students of color reported that they were often averse to reporting concerns that they felt might alter the dynamic between students and instructors. For example, an instructor may have used language that the student found offensive, or perhaps the student felt pressured to conform to particular views expressed in the classroom. The comments were not complaints about the general tenor of the institution. Students frequently note the presence of microaggressions in otherwise healthy institutions committed to inclusion and diversity (Harwood et al., 2015); however, they are often uncomfortable sharing their concerns directly with an instructor, even if they feel that the instructor's motives are benign. In addition, due to the process by which course evaluations are conducted in most institutions, faculty do not receive feedback about the students' perceptions until after the term is over.

Given these considerations, the extant system is largely the worst of both worlds. Faculty do not receive critiques until it is too late to change the course, and these critiques may be confusing or even uninterpretable without access to their authors. Further, feedback provided at the end of the term might not be seen as personally useful for the student evaluator; therefore, motivation may shift from a desire to offer a useful critique to the wish to anonymously punish the authority figure who made a careless remark. One of the authors (CD), as head of a faculty evaluation and promotion committee for many years, has often sat with instructors as they tried to take in confusing, anonymous student statements that they had been somehow offensive, unclear, or unsupportive in their classrooms. Other authors have been student leaders or leaders

of the minority coalitions within the school (JA, RJ, and TG) who have listened to their colleagues express their distress about an upsetting faculty comment that was never disclosed to or discussed with the offending instructor.

Students in the present system thus may be left feeling unmotivated to provide helpful feedback, and faculty cannot receive information in time to make necessary changes. Additionally, students may get no practice providing constructive feedback, as the risk of being identified may be too high. The SITC program was developed to remedy these issues by (a) allowing faculty to receive feedback in a more useful, understandable, and time-relevant manner and (b) establishing a reasonable balance between encouraging student responsibility and protecting student vulnerabilities.

SITC PROGRAM OUTLINE

The central feature of the SITC program was the designation of a student liaison within each course who was responsible for facilitating communication between students and the instructor for that particular course. A registrar or program assistant randomly chose these liaisons from each class. Prospective liaisons could refuse the role, in which case another student would be selected. Once selected, the name of the student was provided to the professor. Twice per semester, the liaisons were tasked with emailing their classmates to solicit feedback on how the students perceived the class and the instructor. Feedback was freeform and could be structural (e.g., "I didn't understand the grading process for the last paper") or procedural (e.g., "The teacher's discussion of topic x made me uncomfortable for reason y"). Students could choose to provide feedback to the liaison or directly to the instructor. Liaisons were tasked with confidentially reporting to the instructor any substantive issues and/or issues reported by multiple students. This simple process provided students the option of a middle path between silence and direct interaction with the instructor. Further, the liaisons could provide the feedback from a neutral stance, if they chose, simply reporting the concern of another student. To collect feedback on how students perceived the program, students were asked to fill out a brief evaluation of their experience at the end of the semester.

INITIAL RESISTANCE TO THE SITC PROGRAM

Although there was strong support for the program from several internal diversity-centered or trauma-centered groups, there were also sources of resistance to the project. Some of the objections were said to be in service of protecting minority groups, although they were voiced only by individuals outside those groups. Generally, the argument was that, despite the university's diverse community, students who raised classroom concerns could potentially be identified by the study's research staff (and, thus, confidentiality could not be guaranteed). To meet this criticism, the collected demographics were changed to allow individuals to identify only if they were or were not Caucasian or were or were not a member of a

minority religious/sexual community. This procedure permitted fuller de-identification of the data.

A concern voiced by several faculty in two initial faculty forums was that the information gathered by the liaisons would be available to the SITC project's faculty supervisor; this instructor (CD) was also a member of the faculty evaluation panel of the school. Thus, some faculty members were apprehensive that data from the project potentially could be used in assessing faculty performance. To allay this concern, instructions for the liaison were modified so that the SITC supervisor was copied only if the liaison felt that the concern was grave and/or that the initial meeting between the liaison and instructor had been unsuccessful. For instance, accusations of harassment or grade tampering were elevated by the liaisons and directly managed by the SITC supervisor, who referred them to the correct university procedures.

Two additional linked concerns stemmed from a general resistance to the concept of "safe space." Several instructors cited recent research outlining the perceived negative effects of creating processes or places that produce "safety" for people of color (e.g., Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018), arguing that the role of the university is to give free expression to all voices, regardless of social acceptability. These faculty argued that the program's existence infantilized students by suggesting that they were too fragile to face the faculty themselves, noting that microaggressions, if any, were not or should not typically be harmful or distressing.

A set of more specific objections arose from "trigger warning" research, i.e., studies of the effect of warning students of potentially upsetting class content. Some faculty argued that trigger warning research has shown that few students experience the distress undergirding the supposed need for such warnings (Boysen et al., 2018). Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that such statements increase students' beliefs in the need for trigger warnings (Boysen et al., 2018, 2019). Similarly, some faculty were concerned that the SITC program might foster a belief that communication with instructors had to go through the liaisons, thus undermining existing communication. In response to these concerns, a question was added to the end-of-term evaluation to assess whether students would feel comfortable in the future discussing an instructor's perceived insensitive remark directly with that instructor, testing the critics' prediction that the liaison group (compared to the control) would be less likely to agree.

In 2018, the program was tested in 24 classrooms. Eight of the 24 courses were taught by faculty of color, which is in keeping with University norms. The authors hypothesized that the liaison group would report greater comfort in the classroom than the control group. The hypothesis of concerned faculty that the program would undermine future willingness to speak directly to faculty was also tested. Effect sizes were expected to be larger among under-represented racial minorities. Data were collected regarding gender and marginalized sexual minorities; however, *n*'s were not expected to be large enough for subgroup

analyses. Given the cohort respect for the program's leaders, representatives of the Student Division of the Association of Black Psychologists, a high cooperation rate was expected for the survey. Original procedures called for three reminders over a two week period or until 55% or more of the students had responded. This would yield a minimum sample size of 76, equivalent to a power of .8 with a moderate eta square equal to .10.

METHODS

The present study aimed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from graduate students on the prevalence of microaggressions and the effectiveness of the SITC program. Quantitative data concerned the prevalence of microaggressions in the classroom and perception as to comfort in discussing controversial viewpoints in the classroom, and qualitative data concerned suggestions regarding improving the effectiveness of the program. The study was judged to be in the exempt category for IRB purposes, given that it was an evaluation of a standard educational process in place for all students with protections against any adverse outcome on any student's ability to learn.

PARTICIPANTS

Twenty-four classes were randomly chosen from more than 200 available in the Spring 2018 semester. Ten courses were foundational psychology courses (e.g., Research Methods, Developmental, History and Systems, Social Psychology), eight courses were clinical electives (e.g., Group or Child Psychotherapy, Introduction to Psychotherapy), and six courses were multicultural or trauma electives (e.g., Multicultural Psychology, Trauma and Diversity). One faculty member randomized into the program was excluded, as the instructor was one of two who strongly objected to the SITC program (which was not then an official part of the curriculum procedures). The classes were randomly assigned to a liaison group and a comparison group without a liaison. The types of classes randomly chosen are representative of the courses taken by our students, with the exception of oversampling of the multicultural and trauma courses. The choice of courses was left to chance, but the oversampling of courses that might be seen as "triggering" was thought to be a strength of the sampling method. The current scientific literature does not support concerns that students should be protected from upsetting material covered in our trauma and multicultural courses in the form of discussions of, for instance, the long term effects of slavery and antisemitism (see the recent series of experiments and meta-analysis by Sanson et al., 2019). However, such courses certainly would provide a greater number of opportunities for discussion of controversial topics.

One hundred thirty-eight students (all enrolled students in any of the 24 classes) were asked to assess the program as part of a schoolwide evaluation, yielding a response rate of 67% ($n = 93$), significantly above Wu et al.'s (2022) report of average response rates in unfunded studies (43%; $\chi^2 = 16.93$, $p = .001$).

Data were therefore collected from a total of 93 graduate students attending doctoral programs at the university (43 PhD and 49 PsyD students and one student who failed to state program). Of the respondents, 31 students had no liaison classes, 32 had one such class, 19 had two classes and 12 had three classes. Chi square tests revealed that students from liaison and non-liaison groups were equally likely to respond to the survey.

PROCEDURE

At the beginning of the semester, one student in each class was randomly selected as the liaison for the class. The student was sent an email describing liaison duties (see supplemental materials for sample emails). The student was free to decline, in which case another student was randomly chosen. The stated objective of the liaison was to provide a buffer between the instructor and class to facilitate the discussion and amelioration of student concerns.

At weeks three and nine, the liaisons were asked to email students within their classes. (An example of this email is provided at Open Science Foundation's website, <https://osf.io/s5g4w>.) Students in the classes were not required to respond to the email. The liaison was asked to make a brief report to the class instructor at weeks four and 10, either by email or in person, detailing any concerns that students identified. The liaison was asked to report widespread concerns (e.g., "many students are confused about the paper requirements") and to represent students who believed minority positions were being misrepresented or obscured or that discriminatory behavior was taking place. The liaison did not need to defend the positions put forth by other students; the task of the liaison was to make the instructor aware so that the instructor could change behavior or provide students additional context. Complaints that alleged hate speech, exploitation of students, or other serious behaviors were to be escalated by the liaison to the Program Director. The liaison process was designed as a method to facilitate communication between students and instructors, with the understanding that both groups had benign motives and wished classes to function well. Templates for the letters explaining duties to the liaison and sample letters that may be used for liaisons to solicit student input are available at <https://osf.io/s5g4w>.

EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM

At the end of the term, students were asked questions in the following areas: the perceived frequency of offensive statements from program faculty in varying areas (disparaging comments about race, religion, and/or sexual orientation, rated as absent, heard once or twice, or heard more often in their graduate school careers); feedback on how the program functioned practically (receipt of emails, contact with liaison, whether the issue was resolved, rated yes/no); and self-report of overall satisfaction with the program, comfort at the institution, and comfort with future discussions with university professors (all rated on 5 point scales). Offensive statements were defined

subjectively, taking the following form: "During your time at the University, have you ever heard your professor say something in your opinion that would be offensive to members of ethnic/racial minorities?" Students also were asked to self-identify as members of religious minorities (defined as members of marginalized religious groups), sexual minorities (defined as those other than cisgender heterosexuals), or racial minorities (defined as students of color). The language ("minorities") and definitions (e.g., "marginalized or cisgender") were developed by the identified groups both as members of the research team and in small group forums of 8 to 12 minority group members in conjunction with the student committee of the Association of Black Psychologists. A free response evaluation of the program also was solicited from those students in the liaison courses; students in other courses were provided a description of the program and also gave their recommendations as to its implementation. Although faculty were assured that their survey responses were confidential, an option of placing anonymous feedback in the program director's mailbox was provided for those who were less trusting in this assurance (in order to encourage critical comments from faculty, if any).

RESULTS

SAMPLE

The participants included 19 (20.4%) men and 74 (79.6%) women. Thirty-five students (37.6%) were in their first year of graduate school in clinical psychology PsyD or PhD programs, 27 (29%) were in their second year, and 31 (33.3%) were in their third year or higher. (Most coursework at this institution is completed in the first three years.) In the institution's diverse student body, 35.8% ($n = 34$) identified as a student of color, 8.4% ($n = 8$) as a religious minority, and 10.5% ($n = 10$) as a sexual minority. Forty-seven students (50.5% of the sample) identified as White heterosexuals who were religiously unaffiliated or members of a Christian faith (defined as a majority). Majority members, students of color, and sexual minorities were equally likely to be in a class with or without a liaison. In contrast, the small number of religious minorities were more likely to be in a liaison class (Chi square = 4.38, $p < .05$). Religious and sexual minority status were not used as separate predictors, given low sample sizes for these groups, but comparisons between students of color and White groups were conducted.

PREVALENCE OF CONCERNING STATEMENTS

Despite the strong focus on diversity and inclusion in the institution, a majority of students (50.5%; $n = 47$) reported at least one instance in which they had heard a comment that they felt might be offensive to members of a racial, religious, or sexual minority. Specific results are given in Table 1. The greatest number of statements perceived as offensive referred to racial minorities (45.6%, $n = 42$, heard such a statement), with lower prevalence rates for statements regarding religious

or sexual minorities (25.8% and 38.6%, n 's = 24 and 35, respectively).

Table 1

Number of Students Reporting Problematic Comments, Crossed with Gender and Racial Status

Remark content	Gender		Chi ²	SOC	Racial Status	
	Male	Female			Caucasian	Chi ²
Religion	9 (47.4%)	44 (59.5%)	.34	21 (61.8%)	32 (54.2%)	.48
Sexuality	5 (26.3%)	19 (25.7%)	.96	9 (26.5%)	15 (25.4%)	.01
Race	2 (10.5%)	33 (44.6%)	7.48**	13 (38.2%)	22 (37.3%)	.01
Any remark	7 (36.8%)	35 (47.3%)	.67	19 (55.9%)	23 (29.0%)	2.48
Frequent remarks	1 (5.3%)	20 (27.0%)	4.10*	10 (29.4%)	11 (18.6%)	1.43

Note. SOC = students of color. ** $p < .01$. Frequent remarks = more than once or twice.

Report of having heard at least one statement correlated with the length of time in the program ($r = .34, p < .01$). Therefore, time in the program was controlled in subsequent analyses. Approximately one fifth of the sample (22.6%; $n = 21$) reported hearing problematic statements more than once or twice. Using a stepwise logistic regression, gender and student of color status (controlling for time in program) predicted whether a student belonged to this more sensitive subsample, with more problematic statements reported by students of color and by women (Chi Square = 10.59, Nagelkerke R Square = .16, $p = .02$). Splitting by gender, potentially offensive statements of any type were noted by 47.4% of males ($n = 9$) and 59.5% of females ($n = 44$). Racially insensitive statements were reported by 54.5% ($n = 18$) of students of color and 39% ($n = 23$) of White students. Female students were also significantly more likely to report statements thought to be problematic regarding sexual minorities ($\chi^2 = 7.48, p = .01$).

EFFECTS OF THE LIAISON PROCESS

Of the 62 students in the liaison classes, two students provided feedback that they were unaware of the program and had not participated. Of the 60 remaining students, 16 (27%) stated that they used the program at least once to pass on a comment to the instructor. In 11 of the 16 situations (68.75%), students reported that the liaison resolved the situation to their satisfaction. When asked about their comfort with the support of the university for their achievement (and controlling for years in the program), students in the liaison group gave a higher rating ($M = 4.25, SD = 0.82$) than did those in non-liaison groups ($M = 3.81, SD = 1.30; F[1, 88] = 3.98, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$). Although the n was smaller, rendering the effect marginal ($F[1, 30] = 3.18, p = .08$), the effect size for the students of color group alone was twice as large ($\eta^2 = .096$). Of note, none of the 19 students of color in the liaison program gave one of the two lowest ratings (indicating lack of comfort with the overall

support by the University), while 5 of the 14 students of color in the no liaison group gave such ratings ($\chi^2 = 7.62, p < .01$). The sexual and religious minority groups were too small to be separately analyzed.

Contrary to critics' fears, the program did not undermine the students' belief that they could approach an instructor independently if a problematic situation arose. In fact, 43.3% of students in the liaison program ($n = 26$) and 34.5% ($n = 11$) in the non-liaison group stated that if they heard a questionable or offensive remark in the future from an instructor (in a class without a liaison), they would attempt to discuss it directly. Again, the effect was larger for the minority students. Here, 57.9% ($n = 11$) of the students of color in the liaison group stated that they would approach an instructor in the future, compared to only 28.6% ($n = 4$) of the students of color in the non-liaison group. These effects are not only nonsignificant but are in the opposite direction of the critics' hypotheses. Overall, 66% of the total student sample stated that they would prefer to speak to a liaison about a sensitive matter if one were available to facilitate discussion with the instructor.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Most students (85%) reported support for the program. When specifically asked if the program was infantilizing, only one of the 93 students agreed. Twenty-six students overall made optional positive comments in the free response, while thirteen made negative or neutral comments. Themes within positive statements and all negative comments are provided in Table 2. Themes were consensually developed by three raters and independently coded into categories (with a .92 generalized kappa) by three additional raters. Negative comments tended to suggest changes in the structure of the process or question whether the liaison had sufficient

power. Only one student participant was overtly hostile to the program itself. The most common positive comments were praise of the program as a stepping stone to professionalism and praise for the institution itself in turning words (mission statements, diversity value statements) into action. As noted by some of the project’s promoters among the students, the latter comments echo the recent commitment of the American Psychological Association, which, in addition to publishing an apology for past racist actions (APA, 2021), has promised self-examination and action.

Faculty comments were solicited by email with the additional option of anonymous feedback by a note in the project director’s mailbox. Nine faculty responded positively, with one faculty noting that although he or she had been initially negative, the program’s success had elicited a change in attitude through the process.

Table 2

Themes of Positive and Negative Student Comments about the SITC Program

	Positive comments
General praise	10
Acknowledgment of personal help	2
Urging administration to implement soon or praise for turning words into action	9
Acknowledgement of aid with power differential	5
	Negative comments
No need	3
Student concern not resolved	2
Concern about confidentiality	3
Concern about inappropriate complaints	2
General administrative concerns	1
Infantilizing of students	1
Perceived overconcern with minority and gender issues by administration	1

Note. Comments may include more than one theme.

DISCUSSION

In recent years, there has been much debate—but relatively few studies—about efforts to promote emotional safety in the classroom. The bulk of the literature on the topic questions the idea that such efforts are helpful, with arguments along the lines of “if students succeeded in creating bubbles of intellectual safety in college, they would set themselves up for even greater anxiety and conflict after graduation, when they will certainly encounter many more people with more extreme views” (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018, p. 9). Critics of safe spaces warn that avoidance of reminders maintains rather than ameliorates symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (e.g., McNally, 2016). Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) introduce Taleb’s (2012) concept of *anti-fragility* in this context, arguing

that “muscles, bones, and children” are anti-fragile, meaning that “they require stressors and challenges in order to learn to adapt and grow” (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018, p. 23).

While recognizing that it is certainly possible to overdo provisions designed to provide greater safety, there are positive aspects to a safe space process. Those who favor such processes emphasize the wish to “scaffold and support” (Harless, 2018) students rather than protect them from challenging information. To use Lukianoff and Haidt’s muscle analogy, the use of weights does build muscle by stressing the system, but it is still widely regarded as useful to begin a weight-lifting regimen with a spotter, a gradual plan to increase weights over time, and effective coaching. Several of the students in the initial program evaluation mentioned that they were not yet professionals but professionals-in-training, and they appreciated the guidance and support in learning a method for discussing inappropriate behavior in a process with built-in buffers.

The use of a purposive sampling method with support of the University in evaluating this program allowed collection of data with increased ecological validity and somewhat larger samples than prior studies of graduate psychology students (Koch et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2021). The inclusion of multiple minority group members on our development and recruitment team also likely contributed to our high response rate within both minority and majority students. To our knowledge, this is also the first experimental study of an intervention aimed at increasing the classroom comfort of diverse graduate students. This program also comes at a critical time for discussing American approaches to discrimination and stereotyping. Several federal and state statutes have forbidden or restricted training that puts forth evidence for systemic racism, considering the argument that Whites benefit from racism against Blacks, for instance, to be a divisive and anti-American idea. Graduate schools are now even more central in providing a space to discuss racism and sexism, along with their causes and consequences.

PRIMARY FINDINGS

The most important finding of the study was that the liaison procedure *did* increase comfort and willingness to engage for the students who went through the experience. Students, and in particular minority students, were more likely to state that they would now be more comfortable participating in a discussion with an instructor who initially appeared to have been making a racist, homophobic, or otherwise unacceptable statement. It is important to note that 68.75% of these incidents were resolved completely through the liaison process, suggesting that some portion of them were indeed minor (or even misunderstandings). Yet these incidents did appear to be microaggressions to the students, at least initially. The evidence here supports the conclusion that students were using the SITC program to enhance the likelihood of resolution, not to avoid disagreement entirely.

Although overall numbers of perceived offensive statements were low—arguing against an oversensitivity in our sample—

women reported higher rates of perceived problem statements. Similarly, in a study exploring negative race-related experiences of graduate students, Clarke et al. (2012) reported overall low levels of microaggressions. Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) cite instances in which legitimate disagreements could occur over whether a statement should be deemed problematic in an academic setting. This may indeed be true for a subgroup of our microaggression examples. Other inappropriate remarks, however, were likely not noticed by our male (and particularly our White male) students, perhaps because they were less attuned to the issues of race or orientation, having fewer experiences of demeaning references to their identities. This is in keeping with the large body of data showing lower recognition of racism and sexism by White males compared to other groups (Kirkman et al., 2020; Rasmussen et al., 2022). Arguably, the remaining levels of disagreement on the prevalence of concerning statements demonstrate the need for instructors to increase their awareness of their role in perpetrating microaggressions, as well as the provision of skills training for them to learn to facilitate useful discussion in classroom settings (Wong & Jones, 2018).

The qualitative findings reinforce the findings of survey studies on the experiences of students of color within graduate schools. Evans et al. (2017) were struck by the “substantial proportion” of their 21 graduate students of color who provided “consistent reports of lip service to diversity [and] surface level discourse” (p. 27). The participants in this study frequently echoed the same values in praising the university for “turning words into action,” that is, thinking deeply about the structural changes that might shore up the leaky pipeline of Black and Hispanic achievement. Further, the SITC was designed with the recognition that confrontation of traumagenic authority—the harassing supervisor, the demeaning advisor, the misguided instructor—is a skill set that is not automatically available to most individuals (see the seminal work of Darley and Latané, 1968). Most individuals who did use the liaison system had a successful experience of making a positive difference through intervention, an experience that may serve them well professionally.

In general, the student liaison program appeared to provide a valuable mechanism that allowed faculty to receive feedback from students regarding the classroom climate. In a setting where minority students may feel isolated from their peers or uncomfortable directly addressing racial negativity or heterosexual bias in a classroom, the student liaison program potentially increases student autonomy in addressing discomfort issues while advising faculty of problems in the classroom as they occur.

LIMITATIONS

To protect confidentiality, students were not asked specifics about their racial identity, sexual identity, or religious subgroup. Some limitations did exist in our ability to create ideal conditions of confidentiality for students within the classroom, however, given the relatively small size of graduate

classrooms. When providing feedback within a small community, there is a potential risk that the individual providing feedback may be identifiable based on the nature of their reported concerns. For example, a sole African American student in a class of ten students might be assumed responsible for reporting the occurrence of a microaggression toward a person of color. As a result, future research utilizing this protocol within larger and more diverse classrooms might be important. Furthermore, the study findings were generated from a total of 93 PhD and PsyD students from a single university. It could be argued that the generalizability of our findings may be limited, given the less traditional and more diverse nature of Southern California. That said, it should be noted that the diversity of this particular graduate school goes beyond race, religion, and orientation; most students entering the school at any given year are not Southern California natives. Further, the support for the program by students of color was clear, both in the statistical analyses and through their later development of presentations to faculty to encourage acceptance of the procedure as a permanent part of the university processes.

While the SITC study collected data on the frequency of disparaging comments, data were not collected on the negative effect these comments may have had on students. Again, this limitation was a result of efforts to preserve anonymity. The few comments that reached more official channels (perhaps because the student repeated the comment in the final course evaluation) varied in the degree of offense reported. These comments included a reference to an adjunct instructor who publicly informed a gay student that she was going to hell, a faculty member who devoted one week of the semester to the writings of female psychologists (implying, in the students’ opinion, the rarity of high-quality female writing), and a faculty member who made assumptions about the political affiliation of a student based on race. Future research could include information about the intensity of emotions experienced by students after problematic comments in the classroom. Within graduate programs in psychology, where students work more closely with peers and faculty than may be true for undergraduate programs, it would be important to explore how these comments impact student likelihood of achieving graduation, publication, and other measures of success.

The SITC program examined the occurrence of racially, sexually, and religiously disparaging comments by instructors within courses at a university campus in California. The study did not include an analysis of comments regarding other underrepresented subgroups (e.g., those with visual or hearing impairments) to which students may have been exposed. To continue to promote inclusivity among all students, it is important to broaden the focus of our efforts.

CONCLUSIONS AND RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The findings in this pilot project broadly highlight that graduate students from racial, religious, and sexual minority backgrounds reported increased perceptions of prejudice in classroom settings when compared to their White heterosexual

peers. However, through structural interventions using the SITC program, students were empowered to negotiate and address issues that arose in the classroom. The results demonstrate that, through the program's implementation, underrepresented students could experience enhanced comfort in the classroom. Such programs may decrease the institutional support gap, potentially affecting attrition and other measures of graduate success. Replications of the study might also be expanded to include more in-depth analysis of the collegiate and graduate experiences of sexual and religious minorities, as well as the experience of disabled students (whom we did not query in this investigation). The definition of religious minorities also could be expanded to include the growing conservative Christian community, who often vary in their beliefs about racial and sexual discrimination (Brown, 2009; Yancey & Kim, 2008) and may find themselves confronting attitudes among their college classmates or professors that they find offensive (Hyer & Hyer, 2008). Further, analysis of methods of resolving differences in perspectives on the role of race, religion, and gender in the presentation of academic material is increasingly important in an age of divisive rhetoric and expanding reach of hate groups through digital networks (Dunbar, 2022). The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in these analysis will aid researchers in integrating the voices and thoughts of others in our increasingly global community.

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