

COUNTER-NARRATIVES AND COLLEGIATE SUCCESS OF BLACKS  
AND LATINOS

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### **Introduction**

Today's college student is endowed with enormous pressure to succeed: to graduate within four years, work part-time, be involved in extracurricular activities, curate friendships, pursue internships, and maintain a competitive grade point average. These pressures can wreak havoc on the physical, psychological, and emotional well-being of students. Eurocentric and patriarchal ideals shape American values and standards, and exacerbate the social pressures faced by minoritized groups who are already distanced from the status quo. The university campus is no exception to this disparity. Colleges and universities can be viewed as microcosms of society, which means that the same types of social discrimination, racial privileges, and racial oppression observable in the greater society are also observable on campus and influence peer-to-peer interactions, student self-perception, students' relationships with professors, and students' ability to succeed.

College and university campuses that are comprised of a predominately White student body are often referred to as Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). While some PWIs strive to create a diverse and inclusive campus culture, many university campuses uphold and reinforce traditional social norms, remain neutral in racially inequitable on-campus situations, and create standards of success that reproduce institutional racism (Gomer & White, 2017). These actions are examples of institutional racism and contribute to why many colleges and universities are considered unresponsive to the needs of racial minorities (Gomer & White, 2017). Institutional racism includes but is not limited to equating success with cultural conformity through campus culture, maintaining a racially homogenous faculty, and exclusionary practices which lead minorities to feel excluded, inferior, or forced to assimilate. In these environments, minorities are pressured to meet societal standards, assimilate, and defy stereotypes, which decreases their mental bandwidth and limits their capacity to learn and succeed on a university campus (Verschelden, 2017).

Institutional racism, which reduces the cognitive bandwidth of Black and Latino students, can be noted as a contributing factor to the discrepancies in retention and graduation rates of Black and Latino students compared to White students (Verschelden, 2017). Bandwidth can be reclaimed by decentering Whiteness and empowering marginalized students to define their own identities, name their own challenges, validate their own experiences, find community, and develop strategies to dismantle oppression through rejecting assimilation, cultural expectations, and master-narratives (Verschelden, 2017). These efforts of resisting assimilation and marginalization are collectively referred to as counter-narrative storytelling, a form of self-actualization which validates the identities, experiences, and capabilities of traditionally oppressed groups. Counter-narrative storytelling has historically been used to uplift and encourage minoritized groups through validating their identities, dismantling stereotypes, mitigating stereotype threat, and providing community and creating space for sharing commonalities between individual experiences. Counter-narrative storytelling can help empower marginalized individuals to set and achieve the goals they set for themselves personally, professionally, academically or otherwise.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Counter-narrative storytelling is grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT provides a critical means of evaluating the relationships between the success of Black and their ability to construct a counter-narrative and achieve collegiate success. CRT provides a framework for evaluating what university practices are most effective in promoting the success of Black and Latino students.

This paper will examine the influence of counter-narrative storytelling on the collegiate success of Black and Latino students at PWIs. The phrase “success” shall be operationalized to mean college retention, feeling included and supported within the university, and graduation from college. The referenced articles examine the experiences of Black and students enrolled in colleges and universities across the United States and the influence counter-narrative storytelling had on their experience.

### **Literature search process**

Articles were collected through a search in PsychInfo and Sociological Abstracts. Articles were selected for inclusion by meeting the following criteria: satisfying the final search term “counter narrative AND higher education AND minority”, or “narrative inquiry AND higher education.” The focus of the articles was describing the lived experiences and narratives of Black and students enrolled in higher education institutions. Literature was selected for review if it aligned with the research question: How does counter-narrative storytelling influence the college success of Black and Latino students? The included research will further discuss how Critical Race Theory can be adopted by universities to create a more inclusive campus environment.

### **Results**

CRT is a methodological approach that critiques the standardization of Whiteness, through viewing experiences or practices from a Black perspective. CRT was developed in the 1970s by legal scholars who believed that the slow progress of civil rights legislation and experiences of people affected by the legal justice system could be attributed to racist discourse and other systemic barriers (Espino, 2012). CRT acknowledges that reality is discursive, and the social climate is shaped by the lexicon of those with power. CRT assumes the following: racism is ordinary, the United States is built on “White-over” ascendancy,” race and racism are social

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constructs, and storytelling allows Black and Brown people to recount their own experiences (Espino, 2012).

### **Master-Narratives**

Master-narratives are developed from Eurocentric epistemologies, which disregard experiences and knowledge as holding truth or social value (Espino, 2012). Master narratives use Whiteness as a standard, implicitly dismissing the stories, knowledge, culture, and actions of racial minorities as inferior, invalid, and inapplicable. Standardizing success, based on unalterable characteristics of identity, makes success exclusionary and removes the possibility of being successful or perceived as successful for anyone outside of the intersectional ideal. Master narratives imbue the social expectations by implicitly creating the subjective framework through which we view the world and how we experience ourselves and others, using the White middle-class man as a standard (Espino, 2012). Master narratives are constructed from inferiority paradigms that convey middle-class White men as the standard of success by suggesting that people of color are biologically inferior to Whites (Tate, 1997).

### **Counter-Narratives**

Counter-narratives center the experiences of marginalized groups by rejecting master-narratives and the deficit-based paradigms and discourses that constrict their experiences and expressions. Counter-narratives allow traditionally marginalized individuals to define their identities for themselves, build community, and gain empowerment to create their own futures.

Master-narratives “other” individuals who do not fit into the racial paradigm through stereotypes, prejudices, and other differential treatment. Racial minorities are often stereotyped, robbed of their autonomy and considered monolithic. Black men are often stereotyped as athletic and their status as a college student is often presumed to be a result of their athletic ability, negating their intelligence and academic success (Morales, 2014). The intersections of race and gender also influence the stereotypes placed on Black students. Black students of both sexes are also often considered as hypersexual and feel pressured to adjust their behavior in front of their non-Black peers, so as not to appear as a predator or threat (Morales, 2014). Stereotype threat is a phenomenon that happens to a member of a minoritized group when they are aware of a stereotype that is used to describe a characteristic of their group and consciously or subconsciously exert efforts to resist confirming that stereotype. Stereotype threat takes a tremendous toll on the cognitive bandwidth of Black students.

Many Black and Latino/a students feel that their actions are reflective of their entire race, subjecting them to tremendous pressure to successfully represent their race by making good grades and avoiding mistakes (Petty, 2015). Since there are few Black and Latino students in

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STEM, many students of this racial background fear that their actions will not be attributed to them as individuals but will be magnified to reflect the limitations of their entire race, thus perpetuating negative stereotypes (Petty, 2015). Experiencing stereotype threat or feeling a need to appropriately represent an entire race can weigh heavily on students' consciousness. Being able to share these experiences with students of similar identities is an effective coping strategy that can increase a student's self-esteem, making them feel supported and able to build community.

*The importance of community building.* When students can share their stories with others it forms a resistance to the implications of stereotype-threat and feeling as if they do not belong (Petty, 2015). Creating counter-narratives and sharing experiences can help support and increase the success of others (Cook, 2015). Storytelling disrupts the single-story that Black students are monolithic, thus presenting nuance, individual contribution, and value to the discourse of what it means to be Black on the university campus (Petty, 2015).

Students of color create and maintain their own networks of support that help them to cope with and overcome their experiences with racism at the university (Hubain, 2016). Belongingness is integral to success in the university. Minority students who feel that they belong at PWIs have a community who supports them, accepts them, and relates to them. Community support becomes internalized and can be used to facilitate the creation of counter-narratives. Sharing experiences provides a sense of validation from students who may not feel included in the campus culture (Hubain, 2016). Establishing important relationships has shown to increase student persistence and collegiate success (Senegal, 2011). Sharing stories is a transformative experience that gives validation to one's experience, endowing the storyteller and the listener with social and cultural capital (Senegal, 2011). For instance, participants of Sussex Community College's mentorship stated that hearing stories from other students helped them to build community and successfully matriculate (Senegal, 2011).

Sharing experiences provides a sense of validation from students who may not feel included in the campus culture (Hubain, 2016). Supportive networks helped Latino/a students learn the institutional culture and navigate challenges (Cruz, 2010).

*The possibilities of mentorship.* Many minority students whose academic promise leads to their recruitment often perform far below the expectations set for them in their academic ability (Freeman, 1999). The discrepancy between expectation and actual performance can be a result of challenges outside of the classroom such as, finding community, participating in internships, and utilizing available resources. This discrepancy can often be mitigated through mentorships.

Mentorship is key in helping students navigate the college campus (Freeman, 1999). Members of Brothers Empowering African American Males, a mentorship program for African American males program at Sussex Community College, conveyed that their college experiences were positive because they included a supportive network and encouraging surroundings (Senegal, 2011). Collegiate success is not restricted to academic performance. In Cook's study of five African American women who had earned or who were in the process of earning a PhD in science, each mentioned the importance of supportive networks (Cook, 2015). These participants also mentioned professors who served as mentors in the lives of their students and had

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recognized their talent or ability and put their belief in their potential into action by creating additional learning opportunities (Cook, 2015). Potential opportunities for student growth include connecting students to larger network of color through national associations, research projects, and internships (Cook, 2015). These opportunities also help minority students feel valued and connected to campus.

### **Types of Counter-Narratives**

There are different methods that can be used to collect counter-narratives. Methods include: composite stories, narrative, inquiry, focus groups, and interviews. Composite stories aggregate collected data, direct quotes, and experiences, and present the data through a fictional conversation or scenario. The goal of composite storytelling is to present a thematic and easily understood grouping of experiences as perceived through data analysis (Hubain, 2016). In Hubain's autobiographical counter-narrative, stories were told through a theoretical conference session happening in a classroom, a poem, and a Skype video call from a participant to an old friend (Hubain, 2016). Using composite storytelling allows the voices and experiences of participants to be center by decentering the Whiteness apparent in master-narratives (Hubain, 2016). Using an autobiographical approach permits researchers to approach data with theoretical sensitivity and draw connections between their personal experiences with racism in HESA graduate programs and the experiences of participants in the study (Hubain, 2016).

Narrative inquiry is a form of data collection which prioritizes depth of data over breadth of data. Narrative inquiry is often likened to a formal interview. Data is typically gathered from people the researcher already knows. Though narrative inquiry can provide a rich portrayal of experience, it is often critiqued for its lack of generalizability. Espino (2012) used an autobiographical counter-narrative approach to address her journey as a Mexican-American/ Chicana, middle-class, first-generation college student.

Focus groups allow participants to informally garner and share their experiences when prompted by certain questions or topics. Focus groups allow for large amounts of data to be collected at one time. For instance, they were used in data collection for Senegal (2011) and Hubain (2016).

Interviews were used by Espino, Petty, Hubain, Morales, Senegal, and Cruz. These researchers used structured interviews to highlight individual stories and center counter-narratives. Using structured interviews creates consistency across which type of questions are asked and what kinds of data are gathered.

### **Black and Latino Student Experiences**

Institutionalized racism influences results in race-related stress that can inhibit the persistence and graduation rates of African Americans (Senegal, 2011). Racism is a systemic form of oppression that overtly and covertly influences the experiences of Black and Latino students which can cause students to feel “unwelcome, invisible, and stigmatized on campuses, leading to experiences of isolation. In turn, isolation causes some students to dropout or transfer,” (Hubain, 2016). Minority students are often the victim of microaggressions, the intentional or unintentional verbal or nonverbal slights, snubs, and insults that convey hostile, derogatory, or negative messages (Hubain, 2016).

In interviews, students conveyed instances in which they wanted to separate themselves from stereotypes without damaging their connection to their cultural communities (Espino, 2012). This desire to remove a negative group association from oneself, while still preserving one’s place in the group can be cognitively taxing and result in extreme feelings of loneliness. This dilemma is also the cause of stereotype threat, which prompts students to exert copious amounts of mental bandwidth in evaluating their perception of themselves and how they may be perceived by others.

Espino relates that throughout her public school and undergraduate education, she constantly strove to exceed instructor expectations to positively represent her Latina heritage (Espino, 2012). When part of a small minority, many Black and Latino students recall being considered a native informant, qualified and willing to speak on all questions or nuances pertaining to their race. During her graduate career, Espino felt pressured to be the spokesperson for Latino/a communities (Espino, 2012). In focus groups, Black male and female students reported that they were often asked questions pertaining to sports, hip-hop, and dance (Morales, 2014). Expecting a student to be a native informant presumes that their culture is monolithic, robbing students of autonomy and opportunity for individual interests or expression.

Students who are a part of an underrepresented racial group are often also subjected to tokenism. Tokenism conveys that their acceptance to the university is a result of interest convergence, or solely attributed to their race, and not their merit or academic potential (Cook, 2010). For example, a Black student in Petty’s (2015) study relayed she was recruited by a lab instructor who admitted that her inclusion would highlight the diversity of the lab and hopefully increase the lab’s.

### **University Practices**

Some PWIs prioritize recruiting a diverse student body but are less invested in supporting minoritized students throughout their educational journey by equipping them to succeed in their programs so they can contribute to their fields (Hubain, 2016). While diversity is a commonly used selling point, inclusion and equity are often overlooked. This results in impressive recruitment numbers, but low matriculation numbers of minority students (Cook, 2012).

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Recruiting a racially diverse student body portrays a university campus as diverse, increasing the appeal and quality of a university. Focusing on diversity attributes to the comfort and success of the administration and the White student body. However, neglecting equity and inclusion ostracizes the experiences of Black and Latino students. In classrooms, Black and Latino students are often treated as “tokens” valued for their racial capital rather than their academic contributions. Capitalizing from the diversity on campus without investing in measures to promote equity and inclusion becomes a method of interest convergence, in which the dominant group purports to help a marginalized group by means that only ultimately advance the agenda and prestige of the dominant group.

African American students who attend HBCUs have a higher graduation rate than African American students who attend PWIs (Senegal, 2011). The difference in graduation rates is often attributed to organizational differences (Senegal, 2011). HBCUs are considered to provide: an extended family relationship between students and faculty, an environment where investment and interest in student development is expected, a cultural immersion focused on education, self-esteem development through student participation in extracurricular activities, racial inclusion through the unity of a common heritage, and interaction between students and faculty outside of the classroom (Senegal, 2011). Mentorship is an intrinsic part of the HBCU experience, while mentoring at PWIs is more structured and requires the intervention of a third party, which often denotes the institutions’ ambivalence toward the cultural awareness and educational needs of Black students (Senegal, 2011).

No racial group is monolithic. Even within racially marginalized groups, students come from a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and strengths. Mentorship programs should include mentors from a variety of experiences that are able to engage and build relationships with the students they are serving. Studies by Senegal and Cook denote the importance of mentorships in helping Black students navigate the racial nuances of a PWI and succeed socially and academically (Senegal, 2011; Cook, 2015). The mentorship program at Sussex College was found to be successful in exposing students to critical knowledge and social norms, as well as developing methods of overcoming individual, communal, and institutional barriers (Senegal, 2011).

Within the classroom, professors have a responsibility to create environments that are conducive to learning, empowerment, and This is especially true for HESA professors in programs that promote diversity and inclusion as integral to the continuation of education practices in the United States. Professors should strive to create more equitable classrooms in which the experiences and knowledge of minority students are respected and used to challenge master-narratives and the status quo. Hubain’s (2016) research is intended to inform the practices of faculty in higher education who have a responsibility to facilitate and direct discussions about race and racism in the graduate classroom.

Marginalized communities are not privileged to influence the dominant narrative or set the tone for social norms, and therefore are forced to navigate through the university by creating their own meanings from social normalcies or assimilating (Espino, 2012). Allowing students to define and express themselves is instrumental in dismantling systemic and historic oppressions, as it decenters Whiteness and allows for the presence of an often underheard voice. Stories are



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key in building agency and empowerment. Because they are directly oppressed through marginalization, communities of color have knowledge that is essential to uncovering and resolving issues of injustice (Espino, 2012).

Master-narratives and social norms are visible and influence all ecological levels of a university's culture. Cruz's (2012) research focused on the influence of the master narratives associated within science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). The master-narrative within science and engineering is "competitive, isolationist, and limited in social interaction" (p. 288). In this study, Latino and Latina participants acknowledged master-narratives and university norms while maintaining a sense of self-identity in respect for their culture (Cruz, 2012).

Faculty are in integral part in creating and sustaining an equitable campus culture. Racially homogenous faculty can further perpetuate feelings of racial hierarchy and tokenism on a campus, as faculty are also susceptible to feeling like native informants and ostracization. These feelings may impair a faculty member's ability to support the students under their care. Recruiting and maintaining a diverse staff removes the burden of race and racialization from minority staff members who may suffer feelings of not-belonging or incompetence (Cook, 2015).

### Discussion

Espino (2012) utilized a narrative inquiry methodology in which she created composite characters based on data collected on the real experiences of participants. Interviews were conducted to gather information about the self-perception, experiences, and cultural meanings. Phone interviews were conducted with 33 Mexican Americans, eight men and 25 women, who successfully completed their doctorate. Participants were recruited through email and social networks and represented a variety of geographic locations and family income levels. The diversity of Espino's sample adds to the validity of collected data. Using narrative inquiry increases the depth of collected data, which allows for the curation of more accurate counter-narratives.

Petty (2016) utilized a narrative inquiry approach and selected five women ages 25-57 years old with the goal of having a sample that represented a span of decades. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data on the participants' experiences. Though the sample size is small, the array of ages, variety of education, and range of experiences all contribute to research validity. However, the sample did not include any males.

Hubain (2016) also used narrative inquiry to inform their research, recruiting 29 students from 21 Higher Education Student Affairs Master's degree programs. The study included 21 women and eight men---since most student affairs practitioners are women, the gender discrepancy of participants is acceptable. The racial demographics are as follows: ten Black students, ten Latino/a students, six Asian students, and three students who identified as multiracial. Participants were recruited who had been in their programs for at least one year. Hubain conducted interviews lasting 45-90 minutes, and later facilitated a focus group which

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included 11 participants. The focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and then coded according to prevalent theme. The diversity of participants increases the external validity of the data. It is also important to note that the gender ratio of the sample also reflects the population being studied.

Morales (2014) studied counter-narratives by recruiting participants through snowball sampling. Questionnaires were issued to 32 Black men and 30 Black women. Questionnaires collected information regarding demographics and socio-economic status. Participants had to have been enrolled for at least one year at the university to comment on their experience. Follow-up interviews were conducted to acquire additional details about socio-economic class and lived experiences. Most participants were between 18 and 20 years old. Interviews ranged from one and a half to three hours, were semi-structured, included open-ended questions, and were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy before being coded and grouped into themes. Snowball sampling can result in creating a sample of participants with similar experiences. Using interviews and questionnaires increases the data's validity.

Senegal (2011) used a mixed method sampling strategy, recruiting participants who self-identified as African American, were at least 18 years old, had participated in the mentoring program for at least one previous semester, and were still active participants of the program. Two focus groups of three to six students were conducted. Students were selected for in-depth interviews based on the number of semesters they had participated in the program, age, academic program, statements made during the focus group that denoted a certain level of cultural awareness, and their current enrollment status. Interviews were conducted and recorded. Participants also created narrative poetic biographies using expressive photos. A comparative case study method was used to examine the research questions from the perspectives of the students of the two focus groups. Since community building and storytelling are key components in the creation of counter-narratives, it is fitting that focus groups were used to gather data. The criterion of student past and present participation in mentorship program was an effective means of measuring the longitudinal impact of the mentorship program on student success.

Cruz (2012) recruited participants via an email sent out to a listserv of students registered to a National Hispanic science and engineering program. The sample included 12 females and nine males across ten institutions. Cruz used a quantitative survey that included 255 open-ended and multiple-choice questions, and later conducted interviews using a qualitative inquiry method. Interviewing using qualitative inquiry is a key attribute of narrative inquiry methodology, the data generated is often deep but does not necessarily produce generalizable results.

### **Conclusion**

If universities do not invest in the inclusion, retention, and graduation of minority students, the marketplace of ideas is at risk of becoming depleted. Furthermore, if higher education chooses to only invest in the advancement of students who think similarly and

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assimilate then the American university---the crucible of societal advancement---has become a source of social stagnation rather than an instrument of change.

Universities that make space for minority students to develop counter-narratives, support the college retention and success of historically marginalized student populations; and subsequently help students prepare for a life of success after graduation. Cruz's research asserts that increases in Latinos/as in STEM would result in more Latino/a STEM ambassadors that could increase public awareness and trust of science in their communities (2012). It is critical that minoritized communities are inspired by individuals who can relate to their experiences, values, and perspectives. Cruz writes that Latino/a science and engineering workers are essential to engaging their communities in increasing awareness and knowledge of STEM policies that will directly affect their communities (2012). Universities are crucibles of learning and represent what the American ideology of research, community, and self-actualization can be. In a nation that asserts that all people are created equally, it is imperative that our most ideologized space for self-actualization, the university, ensures that the opportunity for growth is equitably accessible to all students.

Until institutional racism ceases to impede the success of Black and Latino/a students, resilience, the ability to overcome challenge, shall be key component of the success of racial minorities. Resilience is based on hope for one's future, and helps minoritized students endure institutional racism (Cruz, 2012). It is the obligation of the university to do all in their power to inspire and nurture the resilience of Black and Latino/a students.

As the United States becomes increasingly racially diverse, so will the university campus, making an inclusive and equitable campus culture more paramount. Equity requires empowering all students to meet their potential. There is a large collection of research that suggests that the creation of counter-narratives is essential to helping traditionally marginalized populations overcome challenges and systemic oppression, including the institutional racism on college and university campuses. Counter-narratives must be allowed to be formed without the influence of those in positions of power, to allow students to develop authentic self-perceptions, share their experiences, and find community.

If higher education is to be lauded as potential conduit of social equity, capable of mitigating the errs of economic, cultural, or social disparity, college students must be given the resources and platform needed to reach their potential and that begins with the telling of their stories. Counter-narrative storytelling has been used for centuries to assist marginalized populations in finding voice in majority spaces, reimagining current situations, and overcoming adversity. Within a collegiate setting, storytelling is a useful mechanism in helping marginalized student groups create community, access channels of self-advocacy, question systemic barriers, and work for change.

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