

2017

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Recommended Citation

McClain, Kevin S. and Perry, April (2017) "Where Did They Go: Retention Rates for Students of Color at Predominantly White Institutions," *College Student Affairs Leadership*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/csal/vol4/iss1/3>

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Where Did They Go: Retention Rates for Students of Color at Predominantly White Institutions

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The United States higher education system is comprised of students from various racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Despite appearing diverse on the surface, many predominantly White institutions (PWIs) encounter impediments in retaining and graduating students of color. Over the past few decades, universities have made tremendous strides to correct past transgressions, which contributed to high dropout and transfer rates amongst students of color. Despite college's efforts to be inclusive, discriminatory acts still occur on college campuses. Research has shown that campus racial climate contributes to the retention of students of color within the college. This literature review will delve into various factors that obstruct retention rates amongst students of color at PWIs and methods in which PWIs can enhance their current retention rates.

Keywords: Attrition, Black, graduation, higher education, matriculation, retention

The United States higher education system prides itself on its progressive approach to diversity at institutions. On countless college campuses throughout the country, a multitude of races, ethnicities, nationalities, and religious affiliations come together to form a microcosm of global society. Despite appearing diverse on the surface, many institutions exhibit covert microaggressions and controlling images that provoke attrition among students of color at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). A report by the National Center for Education Statistics, states that roughly 12.9 percent of Black undergraduate students attend historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Provasnik, Shafer, & Snyder, 2004). Although only obtaining 12.9 percent of the total Black undergraduate population, HBCUs graduated approximately 21.5 percent of all Black undergraduates (Provasnik, Shafer, & Snyder, 2004). The remaining 87.1 percent of Black undergraduates who attend PWIs, graduated at a rate of 78.5 percent. Despite the miniscule populace of Black students attending HBCUs, these institutions advanced a greater percentage of undergraduate students of color than PWIs. Currently in the United States, research has shown that around 41 percent of college students will not complete a degree within six years of enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). At PWIs, a vast number of Black students will not complete their degree. In this paper, the factors that affect and encourage retention among these students will be examined through the lens of campus racial climate.

Factors that Affect Retention

Campus racial climate is described as the current beliefs, judgments, and outlooks within an academic society about race, ethnicity, and diversity (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999). This can affect university retention for all students of color in positive and negative ways. Hurtado et al. (1999) simplified the campus racial climate outline to four crucial components, with the fifth component, later added to the lexicon by Milem, Dey, and White (2004). The five components are:

1. Institutional historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion
2. Compositional diversity
3. Psychological climate
4. Behavioral climate
5. Structural diversity

An institution's history and tradition of inclusion or exclusion can be beneficial or detrimental to matriculation and retention for students of color. Historically, most PWIs have had a longer history of exclusion than that of inclusion (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005). According to Milem et al. (2005), evidence showed the opposition of desegregation in communal and college settings, which in turn caused conduct that hindered interaction across racial and ethnic lines. These predispositions continue to outline racial undercurrents on college campuses and cause discomfort amongst students of color.

In 2010, after seven years of not having a sideline mascot at football games, the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) decided to unveil its new mascot, the Rebel Black Bear. Prior to 2003, the mascot was Colonel Reb, "a white-goateed, cane-toting Southern plantation owner that many have criticized as racist and anachronistic" (Brown, 2010, para. 1). According to Brown (2010), fans of the university divided on the school's mission of adopting a new mascot. Some believed that the university was becoming too socially conscious, whereas others felt that the university was open-minded to changing its checkered racist past.

On October 1, 1962, James Meredith became the first African American to enroll at the University of Mississippi. According to the U.S. Marshals Service (n.d.), prior to his enrollment, Meredith was denied admission to the university several times due to what was deemed as administrative errors. With the assistance of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and President John F. Kennedy, he gained admission to the university. Upon arriving to school, Meredith was met with opposition from students, state troopers, and the Mississippi governor, Ross Barnett. A multitude of U.S. marshals, army troops, and national guard soldiers were sent to protect Meredith and uphold peace, but protests erupted, and 160 federal agents were injured, with twenty-eight of those injured due to gunfire. For the next school year, Meredith was placed under twenty-four hour protection by deputy marshals. Wherever Meredith went, deputy marshals followed and encountered the same harassments and assaults as Meredith. With grit and determination, Meredith graduated with a degree in political science from the University of Mississippi.

Ironically, since the James Meredith transgression the University of Mississippi continues to find itself in the news for microaggressions that, according to Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin (2007), are intentional or unintentional actions that insult individuals of marginalized communities. In line with Smith (2009), the University of Mississippi had to shorten its unofficial fight song “From Dixie With Love” as a result of fans chanting the phrase “the South will rise again.” Alumni complained that the song was offensive because the phrase originated from a Civil War expression. In addition, the Ku Klux Klan used the phrase “Glory, glory segregation, the South will rise again” as their one time slogan (Upano, 2012). Upano (2012) likewise declares that in 2010 the University of Mississippi, affectionately called “Ole Miss” came under scrutiny from some members of the community when the university president ordered the band to no longer play the fight song melody at football games as a result of student’s refusal to cease chanting the offensive remarks. The Ole Miss community’s refusal to let go of their traditions instigated the Ku Klux Klan to hold an on-campus rally. Student activists and some progressive members of the Ole Miss community peacefully protested and recited the university creed until the Klansmen withdrew. Due to these and various other racial incidents, the University of Mississippi has sought to amend its non-inclusive past. Presently, “Ole Miss” has grown to be among the top three flagship institutions in the country in percentage of African American faculty; additionally, the university’s Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement has executed initiatives like African American Males: Enrolling, Retaining, and Graduating (AAMERG) that seek to connect faculty, staff, and students through mentorships, community outreach, and personal and professional development (University of Mississippi, n.d.) so that African American not only enlist at the university but retain, graduate, and educate.

Compositional Diversity

The second component of campus racial climate, compositional diversity, relates to the numerical and comparative display of various members of color or ethnicity on the college campus (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005). This representation can come from students, staff, and faculty alike. According to Quaye, Griffin, and Museus (2015), compositional diversity comprises any effort to increase the population of students, staff, and faculty from inadequately represented races and ethnicities. In respect to student attrition, compositional diversity can hinder student retention due to faculty composition (Guiffrida, 2005). As students transition to college life, faculty of color at PWIs can serve as mentors and role models. Currently, faculty of color only makeup only 12% of full-time professorships (Harvey, as cited in Quaye, Griffin, & Museus, 2015) therefore it can be challenging to find faculty of color to serve as mentors. Conferring to interviews conducted by Guiffrida (2005), Black students felt that faculty of color were their biggest advocates. Students reported that faculty of color provided them with extra tutorial services, helped them find ways to fund their education, and served as mediums between the student and their families regarding academics and private matters. This same level of involvement was not sensed by students of color in relation to their White faculty. Students of color felt that White faculty were less likely to be empathetic to their plights.

Psychological Climate

Psychological climate, the third component of campus racial climate, is described by Hurtado et al. (1999) as an individuals' opinion about cross-cultural group relationships in an institution. These opinions often determine an academic community's responses to diversity, its vantage point on discrimination, and its posture towards individuals of varying races or ethnic backgrounds. According to Hurtado et al. (1999), studies have been undertaken which show fluctuating views of campus climate coming from students, faculty, and administrators of dissimilar cultural backgrounds. How each member perceives and experiences an institution, its mission, and its racial climate varies based on the individual and their position within the college.

In the article "Presidents in Denial," Gasman (2014) sheds light on differing views about the state of racism in higher education. In her synopsis of a report conducted by Inside Higher Education, she explains that nearly 90 percent of college presidents believe that racial relations on their campus are good. Delving further into the report, it was concluded that about 45 percent of college presidents believe that racial relations overall on college campuses nationwide are fair (Jaschik & Lederman, 2014). Gasman (2014) gives brief examples of acts of racism and discrimination on college campuses, such as how the University of Alabama undeniably condoned the racial segregation of its Greek life system. According to Kingkade (2014), the student senate at the University of Alabama rejected a decision, which would have backed the racial integration of fraternity and sorority organizations. This decision was made in spite of the damning revelation that White sororities denied membership to Black female undergraduates solely due to their racial makeup. Ironically, as noted above, many university presidents still believe racial relations are good on their campus, yet these and other types of microaggressions continue to exist on American campuses.

Behavioral Climate

Behavioral climate, the fourth component of campus racial climate, constitutes interaction amongst individuals of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds on a college campus and the quality of their intercultural relationships (Hurtado et al., 1999). From a study conducted by Jones, Castellano, and Cole (2002), students were cognizant of racial separation on their college campus amongst students of color and their White counterparts. This segregation was self-imposed among the students. It was noted that minority groups at this institution did not seek avenues to unite due to their fear of rejection. Some Black students admittedly stated that they limited their interaction with other ethnic groups on campus. Black students, who had the luxury to participate in non-ethnic campus organizations, did not do so because of their inherent feeling of being disconnected. For the few students of color who did participate in non-ethnic organizations, some discontinued their participation due to such facets as the lack of representation of their values.

Structural Diversity

Structural diversity, the fifth component of campus racial climate, in accordance to Milem et al. (2005), is the way in which institutions represent administrative and operational aspects throughout the college. This facet of the institution is revealed through the way the university distributes its budget, creates curriculum, hires faculty and staff, admits students, and goes about its daily practices. According to Pike and Kuh (2006), structural diversity was a view heavily endorsed by Supreme Court Justice, Lewis Powell, who believed it was acceptable to use race as a factor in admittance practices if diversifying the university was thought to improve the value of the academic experience. This thought process of Justice Powell later morphed into affirmative action. Overall, structural diversity is key to retaining students of color in higher education. Lacking diversity in the student body, curriculum, faculty and staff, or having miniscule budgets for diversity initiatives are certain ways to intensify campus racial climate and deepen the attrition of students of color. Through the lens of campus racial climate, unpacked auxiliary examination should be used to expand outlooks on retaining students of color.

Factors that Encourage Retention

Campus racial climate influences student attrition in higher education, but it similarly plays a major role in the matriculation, persistence, and graduation of students of color at PWIs (Hurtado et al., 1999). Despite there being a plethora of ways to encourage retention on college campuses, this discussion focuses on the following factors:

1. The inclusion of students, faculty, and staff of color
2. Updated curriculum that displays current and historic experiences of individuals of color
3. Programming/initiatives that support the enlistment, preservation, and commencement of students of color
4. Cultural spaces

In accordance with Guiffrida (2005), African American students intentionally seek out faculty of color due to initial comfort and to students' inherent belief that faculty and staff of color are more likely to satisfy their desire for student centeredness. Many of these relationships develop informally and evolve into mentorships that aid in the retention of students of color at PWIs. Through this mentorship process, faculty of color can share life experiences and reassure self-efficacy amongst students of color. Hunn (2014) reveals that many African American students primarily grow up in African American neighborhoods, attend African American institutions of worship, and are associated with African American social circles. When African American students attend PWIs, they often become withdrawn and isolated due to the overwhelming nature of leaving an environment of color to attend a White institution of higher learning. By affording African American students with mentors of color, those students who are interested in professional careers in academia can realize these goals are achievable

therefore they can in the future help end the cycle of limited representation of faculty of color who can supply student's desire for student centeredness.

Secondly, an assorted curriculum exposes all students to enriching cultural legacies of misrepresented societal figures. Quaye et al. (2015), state that coursework that is culturally inclusive and well developed increases the likelihood of engagement amongst students of color in the classroom. Hurtado et al. (1999) explain that institutions can increase multicultural competency amongst all students by influencing them to take courses that are diverse and non-Eurocentric. These classes in turn show them how and what it means to live in a diverse society. According to Quaye et al. (2015), undergraduate students of color examine their syllabus on the first day of class to get a sense of the significance or lack of significance of their cultural communities in regards to their professor. This contributes to the need for professors to deliberately integrate readings and curriculum that reflect experiences that pertain to students of color. Through infusing culturally relative information in classroom curriculum, professors and the institution are promoting positive campus climate.

Academically, there should not be a divide between United States history and African American history. Both courses are in actuality American history. One course should not be mandatory whereas the other an elective. The same argument can be made for American literature courses and African American literature courses. By updating curriculum and making it inclusive, institutions are not only promoting retention amongst students of color, but they are fostering multicultural competency amongst the overall student body (Quaye et al., 2015). They are no longer requiring one entity to explore outside the standard curriculum to gain knowledge and culture that the masses should obtain.

Programming, the third initiative, is not only an important factor for the retention of students of color, but also with their persistence to graduation. Programming should be well thought out and planned appropriately. Brooks, Jones, and Burt (2012), state that all students of color face adversity that the traditional college student never faces. The contentions can be cultural, academic, societal, or lifestyle based. Quaye et al. (2015) argue that colleges should implement summer bridge programs, which would aid in the transition process for students of color. In this transition, they can develop peer networks and obtain skills that will prepare them for the academic school year. Quaye et al. (2015) also argue that upperclassmen, who were once a part of this program, should be invited back as mentors. With former students coming back and participating as mentors, they are showing current summer bridge participants that they, too, can succeed at the institution despite their lack of racial/ethnic representation on the campus.

LaVant, Anderson, and Tiggs (1997), divulges that there are numerous mentoring programs on college campuses for the retention and matriculation of Black students. A handful of these initiatives are aimed at exclusively mentoring Black males. Programs such as The Black Man's Think Tank, The Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB), and The Black Male Initiative were created because the issues affecting the matriculation and retention of Black males were vastly different from those affecting Black women. Other projects such as The Meyerhoff Program, Project BEAM, and The Bridge were created for the mentoring of all African American students on college campuses.

LaVant et al. (1997) reported that The Bridge was created at Georgia State University in the mid-1980s. The initiative served as a mentoring program as well as a medium for first-year students of color to get acclimated to the university. Several faculty and staff who participated in the program and served as mentors were White. Those that created the program believed that the bonds created during the program helped students feel accepted, supported, and greatly increased students' chance of graduation. The Bridge program is reportedly offered at four other campuses in the Georgia region.

Lastly, Project BEAM was created at West Virginia University (WVU) as a program that helps students of color gain admissions into college. Once students are accepted at WVU, the program provides services such as academic support to help with student retention. Unlike other programs geared towards the recruitment of students of color at WVU, Project BEAM matches students with Black faculty, staff, and individuals in the surrounding community to serve as mentors (LaVant et al., 1997). Programs such as these function in multiple roles that not only aid in student retention but provide personal and professional development for collegiate students.

Cultural spaces on college campuses often serve as safe havens for students of color. According to Milem et al. (2005), these cultural hubs can be ethnic community centers or ethnic-themed housing. These places allow students of color to no longer feel culturally secluded or unsubstantiated in their exploration of their cultural identity. With the addition of cultural spaces, institutions are exhibiting the importance of acceptance to students who wish to matriculate into higher education, as well as to students who are already enrolled. These cultural havens also form familial kinships amongst individuals in their smaller subpopulations.

Summary

In this article, five critical components in analyzing campus racial climate in higher education were discussed. Each component, no matter how trivial they seem on the surface, plays an intricate part in marginalizing students of color. Because of these mechanisms, initiatives were set in place by institutions and students to counteract campus-wide subjugation. Intentional programming, cultural spaces, along with hiring faculty and staff of color have made a tremendous difference in student retention and attrition. In addition, the development of social clubs helped create life long bonds as students navigate college. Without these proverbial safety nets in place, there is no telling where minority commencement rates would be higher education.

In conclusion, over the past few decades, campus racial climate has taken tremendous steps forward to help make students of color feel welcomed in their new environment. In spite of many efforts, there are still a select few who wish to continue the marred legacy of past generations. It is our role then, as educators, to continue to challenge these systemic societal views and create initiatives that aid in the retention of students of color. Hopefully, campus racial climate is only an afterthought in future decades, as our communities become more inclusive.

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