

An Analysis of White Student Engagement at Public HBCUs

**By Joelle Davis Carter
& Tiffany Patrice Fountaine**

Joelle Davis Carter is Assistant Vice President for Retention and Student Services at Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky, and Tiffany Patrice Fountaine is a professor in the Community College Leadership Program of the Department of Advanced Studies, Leadership, and Policy at Morgan State University, Baltimore, Maryland.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have recently witnessed an increase in the enrollment of White undergraduates (Adrisan, 2005; Brown, 2002; Burton, 2011; Goggins, 2007; Sims, 1994). Recent reports indicate that between 1980 and 1990, White student enrollments across all HBCUs increased by 10,000 students. In 1995, enrollments peaked, with 35,963 White students matriculating at HBCUs throughout the country (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 2007; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2006). The increase in these enrollments has been most apparent in public, state-supported HBCUs (Brown, 2002). In fact, many of these institutions have larger White undergraduate enrollments than Black undergraduate enrollments. For example, Lincoln University (Missouri) and Kentucky State University have White student enrollments repre-

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sentative of more than 50% of the total student population (Editorial: The Shrinking Number of White Students at Black Colleges, 2001).

Student Engagement

The steady increase of White undergraduates attending public HBCUs compels educators to better understand White students' collegiate experiences at HBCUs. One lens to assess these experiences is through examining their engagement on campus. Student engagement is defined as the amount of time and energy students choose to devote to activities both inside and outside the classroom (Kuh, 2001). As a behavioral construct, it is characterized by students' active involvement rather than passively attending or participating in social and academic activities. The second critical component of student engagement concentrates on how institutions allocate their resources and structure their curricula and other support services to encourage students to participate in activities positively associated with persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation (Kuh, 2001; Kuh, 2009; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005).

Student engagement has become an increasingly important benchmark for institutional quality and measure of student learning (Kuh, 2009). It has been positively linked with various student outcomes such as critical thinking skills (Pike, 2000), leadership development (Posner, 2004), identity development (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004), and persistence (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Although there have been studies on student engagement at HBCUs (Harper, et al., 2004; National Survey on Student Engagement [NSSE], 2004; Nelson Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams, & Holmes, 2007), few are empirical or theoretical studies (Closson & Henry, 2008; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009) that address aspects of engagement for subpopulations such as White undergraduate students. This gap in the literature served as an impetus for the current study which explored the ways in which White students attending HBCUs described their experiences. Primarily, this inquiry sought to determine factors influencing their engagement.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this inquiry is a synthesis of the works of Astin (1982, 1984, 1993), Kuh (1993, 2003, 2009), and the National Survey on Student Engagement (2009) assessment benchmarks. Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement focuses on the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to the academic experience. Astin (1982) also suggested that active or engaged students report more positive educational and social outcomes from their educational experiences. This model was appropriate for this study as it has been widely used in higher education and regarded as a foundation for better understanding and exploring student engagement (Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Kim & Conrad, 2006; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996).

Drawing from Astin's involvement theory, Kuh (2001) characterized the con-

cept of student engagement as a reciprocal exchange between the student and the educational institution. Kuh's (1993) notion of seamless learning environments and engagement supports Astin's theory in that it emphasizes the importance of developing educational structures extending beyond the classroom and enabling students to become more involved. While Kuh (2001) parallels the basic tenets of Astin's model, he extends the paradigm and addresses the critical role institutions should play in providing resources and services that encourage student participation. Although student involvement and student engagement are conceptually similar, researchers have highlighted a key qualitative difference—a student can be involved, but not engaged (Harper & Quaye, 2009). For instance, in the context of this inquiry, a White student could be a member of a university-sponsored organization, but not contribute time and effort to important organizational tasks, or take action to experience deeper learning and commitment.

The National Survey of Student Engagement is a well-known instrument used by more than 1,400 diverse postsecondary institutions since 2000 (NSSE, 2009). Undergraduate students voluntarily complete the survey in order for higher education administrators to assess the extent to which students are engaged in educational practices related to high levels of learning and development (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). The benchmarks outlined by NSSE helped to guide the interview protocol for this exploratory study.

Kuh's (2001) conceptualization of student engagement, undergirded by Astin's (1984) foundational model for student involvement, and the NSSE (2009) benchmarks for assessing student engagement, collectively, provide a practical framework to examine the collegiate experiences of White, undergraduate students on HBCU campuses. A synthesis of all three was the driving force in developing the primary research question for this study—what factors influence the engagement of White undergraduates attending public HBCUs?

Review of Literature

The steady enrollment of White students became most apparent on public HBCU campuses (Carew, 2009; Gibson, 2007; Lawson, 2011) as the pressures from desegregation laws became more arduous (Brown, 2002). Data from an NCES report examining enrollment trends at HBCUs indicated that White student enrollments increased from 181,346 to 260,547 between 1976 and 2001 (Provasnik, Shafer, & Snyder, 2004). Although White student enrollment increases were modest on public, four-year HBCU campuses—17,410 in 1976 to 23,144 in 2001—White student enrollments peaked from 28,000 and 29,000 between 1990 and 1995 (Provasnik, et al., 2004).

Over the past 30 years, the research depicting the characteristics of White students attending HBCUs has been consistent. Brown (1973) found that White students attending HBCUs had limited contact and experiences with Blacks with the exception of school (K-12) and work experiences. Further, students did not report

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any apprehension participating in the classes and voicing their opinions freely. Elam (1978) reported that White students attending HBCUs were older, married, and typically transfer students and former military personnel. The author further asserted that these students were not interested in participating in social aspects of college life and focused on completing requirements for the degree.

Hazzard's (1989) investigation highlighted the characteristics of White students attending HBCUs and emphasized the importance of strategies to increase White student enrollments and establish nurturing campuses for this emerging population. Hazzard (1989) randomly surveyed White students attending five HBCUs in North Carolina to assess their reasons for attending an HBCU. The analysis revealed that the primary reasons were (1) convenience; (2) courses and degrees offered relevant to their goals; (3) low-cost tuition; and (4) location (e.g., proximity to home or work). Similarly, Conrad, Brier, and Braxton (1997) employed a multi-case study design to identify factors contributing to the presence of White students on public HBCU campuses. The findings suggested that the reputation of academic programs followed by financial support and institutional characteristics were key factors in White students choosing an HBCU.

There have also been comparative studies of Black and White students attending both HBCUs and Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). Abraham (1990) assessed the perceptions of White students on Black campuses and Black students on White campuses. Using a similar sample, Wells-Lawson (1994) examined the experiences of Black and White students attending 30 PWIs and HBCUs. The results from both studies varied, but the similarities revolved around issues of (1) comfort level and ability to discuss race issues, and (2) strong relationships with faculty. Both reported the importance of strong faculty relationships and the ability to speak openly about race relations.

Sum, Light, and King (2004) and Closson and Henry (2008b) demonstrate more contemporary studies employing qualitative approaches to analyze factors that may motivate White students to attend an HBCU and examine issues related to Whites' social adjustment and transition on HBCU campuses. Sum, Light, and King (2004) conducted focus groups with White students attending high schools, community colleges, HBCUs, and PWIs in the state of Mississippi to assess their perceptions of and experiences attending HBCUs. The data showed that the perceptions of the White students attending one State HBCU were favorable; students often referred to their instructors positively and described the coursework as challenging. Closson and Henry (2008b) used a mixed methods design employing focus groups and identity racial scales, (Black Racial Identity Attitude Scale [BRIAS] and White Racial Identity Attitude Scale [WRIAS]), to assess the social adjustments of White students on HBCU campuses. The findings indicated that White students expressed feeling different, but they did not share stories of isolation. The students reported faculty members were approachable and supportive in their academic endeavors.

Although the research on White students attending HBCUs is limited, there is an emerging body of knowledge (Hall & Closson, 2005; Peterson & Hamrick,

2008). Mmeje, Newman, Kramer, & Pearson (2008) postulated that it is imperative for HBCUs to respond to the recent influx of White students to ensure students are fully engaged. The current investigation sought to address this need through examining engagement factors of White undergraduates enrolled at public HBCUs.

Methodology

This qualitative inquiry employed a multiple case study research design to investigate factors influencing the engagement of White, undergraduate students attending two public HBCUs. Each institution, identified with pseudonym institutional names, was considered a comprehensive, regional, public institution, and had undergraduate enrollments over 3,000 students. Heritage University (HU) is located in the mid-Atlantic region, while Gulf Coast University (GCU) is located in the southeastern, coastal region of the United States. The Institutional Review Boards for each institution granted approval for this investigation.

Data were collected through document analysis, a demographic survey, individual interviews, and focus group interviews. The primary data collection points were through individual and focus group interviews and thus the discussion in this article will focus on those two aspects of the data collection and analysis procedures. In addition, each research site campus had administered the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) survey for two or more years.

Through the assistance of campus administrators, purposeful and stratified sampling techniques were employed to identify 22 participants—11 from each institution—to participate. The criteria for selecting participants included that students: (1) are classified as a sophomore, junior, or senior; (2) self-identify as White/Caucasian; (3) returned to the institution in fall, 2009 and/or graduated in December 2009; (4) lived on campus or live within a twenty mile radius to campus if they are commuter students; and (5) enrolled as full-time.

Once the stratified, purposeful sampling process was completed, eligible students were invited to participate in an on-campus interview. Students received an email invitation to participate in an on-campus individual interview on campus; a \$25 gift card was offered as an incentive. Upon reviewing and signing of a letter of informed consent, each participant completed a brief demographic survey and then engaged in individual interviews for 60-90 minutes. Each interview was recorded on a digital recorder. The investigator also recorded notes and comments throughout the interview sessions.

Focus group interviews were utilized for triangulation purposes and to further explore themes and concepts revealed in the individual interviews. Five to seven students were purposefully selected and invited to participate in a 60-90 minute focus group interview to inquire more about their experiences and engagement specific to each campus. Students who agreed to participate received an email providing details about the study, purpose, expectations, and incentives—light fare to be served during the focus group session.

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The data analysis for this study was an iterative and rigorous process requiring the reading and rereading of transcripts and notes from the interviews, coding and recoding of emerging and constant themes, and the employment of the constant comparative methodology throughout the process. The raw audio files were transcribed by a professional transcription company. Each transcript was uploaded into NVivo 8, a qualitative research software package, used to organize and manage qualitative data for analysis. Spot checking, peer debriefing, and member checking were also used to ensure trustworthiness, credibility, and validity of the data.

Findings

While several themes emerged from the individual campuses, the findings discussed in this article highlight those themes that were apparent across both campuses. The cross-case analysis revealed five common themes as influential factors on the engagement of White, undergraduate students attending public HBCUs: (1) faculty-student interactions, (2) staff-student interactions, (3) involvement in co-curricular activities and programs, (4) prior college diversity experiences, and (5) first-year experience programs.

Discussion and Implications

Faculty-Student Interactions

A consistent and dominant theme from the data was the role and importance of faculty in students' academic lives and adaptation to the HBCU environment. Specifically, participants described HBCU faculty members as the nexus between their academic experiences and co-curricular involvement. Faculty members were often described as a critical link between students' experiences inside and outside the classroom. Participants articulated that often times their participation in academic organizations or attending programs and lectures outside of class, were a result of a faculty member's announcement during class or faculty individually approaching and suggesting that students attend. Cox and Orehovec (2007) characterized this type of faculty-student interaction as functional interaction, which typically occurs for a "specific, institutionally related purpose" (p. 353). The functional interactions among faculty and students in this inquiry eventually evolved into more meaningful relationships through personal interaction.

Faculty members were also seen as role models and nurturers to students in both personal and professional capacities, and as effective teachers in the classroom setting. These findings are consistent with research studies noting that faculty-student interactions at HBCUs result in positive outcomes such as satisfaction with college (Seidman, 2005; Strayhorn, 2010), persistence and retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and positive mentoring experiences (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007).

Additionally, there was significant discussion involving the role of HBCU faculty who taught mandatory African American studies courses on each campus.

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The faculty-student discourse and interactions in these classes specifically, were critical to participants' classroom engagement and understanding of the cultural dynamics within an HBCU environment. Gary, a junior HU student shared that he enjoyed learning from different perspectives.

It's [African American history course] an educational experience to learn something new-a different point of view. I really like getting into class discussions over issues 'cause you definitely learn a different point of view and a different perspective on issues.

Although the comments were positive overall, there were instances where students indicated they felt uncomfortable or engaged in negative discourse. These experiences ranged from students feeling the instructor caused them to stand out during discussions about race to a Black student confronting a White student about sharing a different perspective on racial issues. Cynthia, a senior GCU student shared the discomfort she felt in an African Diaspora course:

It was African American history. I knew that the content of the class was such as "this is what happened in history because of White people." And I'm a White person, and I'm in the class by myself as the only White person, so I really felt like people were looking at me like I was the one who did this kind of thing-you know, that's what I felt like. It was a difficult class for me to take.

Staff-Student Interactions

Staff members and administrators, particularly those employed within student affairs units, also influenced the engagement of students in this study. The students believed staff assisted with their transition and success into the HBCU environment. For example, James, a senior accounting major at GCU, characterized positive student support through his interactions with staff in the business school:

It's like at the business school, there's an office for student services, and there's one particular person who is extremely knowledgeable about the coursework, and she is not officially an advisor, but I will definitely see her to help with my planning process to kind of audit my decisions. And then I'll just go to the professor to get the advisement sheet signed so that I can get placed in the classes.

Most significantly, the data also suggested that staff-student interactions impacted both student engagement and disengagement. This variance was evident from the vast differences reported between HU and GCU students as it related to their interactions and engagement with staff. Positive interactions with staff members enabled students to adjust more seamlessly into the university community and focus on their academic studies. The more negative and challenging interactions contributed to a disconnection between the students and university community as well as negative perceptions of administrators from students.

The staff-student interactions finding is parallel with studies emphasizing the importance of the staff role with student transition and engagement on college campuses (Flowers, 2003; Kuh, 2009). However, this finding is also contradictory

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to certain aspects of research examining the role of HBCU student affairs professionals and their positive influences on students (Hirt, Strayhorn, Amelink, & Bennett, 2006). In the current study, staff members and administrators were critical in linking students and institutional resources. This was definitely the reality for White students on the GCU campus. However, on the HU campus, student affairs professionals did not have a similarly strong presence in the experiences of White students which contradicts some research characterizing HBCUs as havens for “cultivating a culture of affirmation, aspiration, and achievement” (Bridges, Kinzie, Nelson-Laird, & Kuh, 2008, p. 232).

Involvement in Student Organizations

Research has also shown that student involvement and participation in activities such as athletics and Greek life assist with transition and success on campus (Kuh, Hu, & Vesper, 2000; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimlings, 1996). Similarly, in this study, student organizations and university-sponsored programs such as the university band, baseball team, Navy Reserve Officer Training Corps (NROTC), and the student government association also served as a conduit for White student engagement. In fact, at GCU, two participants expressed that the NROTC was an integral component in their successful transition and deeper immersion into the university community. Ted and Larry shared similar sentiments as they reported on the benefits of being a part of the NROTC:

Ted: I mean being in the unit has actually helped me become more open with people on campus because you are dealing with people on a daily basis. They put you in situations where you are doing concessions [during athletic events], you're doing parking for special events where you gotta deal with that kind of thing and make sure you grow up.

Larry: It definitely helped with diversity, not really diversity but to show that a non African American student can really be a part of the university. NROTC helped with that a lot 'cause I was forced to interact with certain individuals and build those connections and a lot of people I guess were kind of stand-offish towards non-African American students, but because I'm required to talk to them they have to get to know me at some level, and I'm a decent guy. I'm real...

The impact of student organizations and university-sponsored programs is a compelling finding and it demonstrates how White undergraduate students connected with an academic or department organization as a means to connect with faculty, peers within the department, and develop their networking skills through professional committees and boards. Further, students affiliated with university-sponsored programs appeared to develop strong relationships with their peers within programs such as the band and athletics. These relationships often times resulted in the creation of a community or subculture for student participants and as an effective means for them to navigate through the campus.

Prior Diversity Experiences

Participants' experiences prior to entering college was also a salient theme in this investigation. Essentially, the level of past experiences within diverse environments and interaction with students from diverse populations influenced participants' ability to engage. When asked to rate the diversity in their high school on a scale from no diversity to highly diverse, more than half of the participants indicated that their high school populations were somewhat to highly diverse. Researchers (Hall, 2009; Hurtado, Engberg, Ponjuan, & Landreman, 2002) found that the more students are engaged with diverse peers prior to entering college, the more likely they are to be open to and to hold diverse viewpoints. In this investigation, participants from both institutions described examples of how their childhood neighborhoods or co-curricular activities such as little league sports and girl scouts groups, enabled them to adjust and to transition into the public HBCU environment. Consistently, participants made statements such as "I get along with everyone 'cause I grew up with Black people" or "My neighborhood was diverse and the community was very receptive to people from different environments" and especially, "I grew up in a place where I was the only White so I am used to this [environment]."

This finding also bears significance because it revealed the level of diversity that exists within White undergraduate students as a subpopulation. Within this study, White undergraduates possessed multiple identities and assumed various roles in their personal lives. Some students were parents, veterans, student athletes, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) students. Other student participants indicated they were from low socioeconomic backgrounds and grew up in predominately African American neighborhoods as children. Essentially, all of these various experiences influenced how students became involved and engaged on campus.

First-Year Experience Programs

First-year programs on the HU and GCU campuses played a significant role in the engagement and transition of White students. In some form, both GCU and HU have first-year experience programs with the primary goal of introducing students to the campus community and providing support for students to successfully navigate the campuses. The GCU students, in particular, referred to their experiences in the new student orientation program and first-year experience seminar as vital components in their adjustment to campus and introduction to opportunities for engagement. In particular, one participant, Larry a senior electrical engineering major attending GCU, reported appreciating and learning from the African rituals and familial values incorporated into the new student orientation program. He stated:

One of my first impressions when I first got here during new student orientation was there was a ceremony and a lot of faculty were there. Everybody was there and it was an African ritual where you become part of the family. You do this dance, you sing a song, you walk through the arch, you shake everybody's hands, and

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for some parts in there it was like it did not matter what race or religion you are. You're part of the family now. For some reason that stands out [for me].

HU students described new student orientation as informative, but in contrast to GCU participants, HU students often times felt the program to be overwhelming due in part to their perceived lack of organization and coordination. In fact, none of the HU participants alluded to the existence of a first-year experience seminar. Subsequently, HU students did not discuss their involvement in high impact activities derived from the first-year seminar. It is not clear from this inquiry if the HU first-year seminar was an influential factor to the engagement or disengagement of White students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Student engagement occurred on both the HU and GCU campuses. Based upon factors identified in the literature and the findings from this study, the researcher drew three primary conclusions related to the engagement of White undergraduates attending public HBCUs.

First, student interactions with faculty and staff are critical to the engagement of White undergraduate students. Second, race matters. Although, there were no reported overt acts of racism, participants suggested they were at times reminded of their Whiteness. Third, in this study student engagement was a reciprocal relationship that was driven by participants' awareness and utilization of available resources and opportunities.

Student Interactions with Faculty and Staff

In this study, the commitment of HBCU faculty and staff to students both inside and outside the classroom was consistent with the depictions of faculty and staff in previous studies as effective teachers, role models and nurturers, and mentors (Nelson Laird et al., 2007; Strayhorn & Terrell, 2007). Participants consistently mentioned the benefits of faculty approachability and emphasized their ability to explore their support and advice on career guidance and personal issues. As a result, it could be assumed that the role of HBCU faculty is just as significant for White students as it is for African American students.

This finding also has implications for the influence of interracial interactions between faculty and students and raises equally important questions regarding the impact of race on faculty-student interactions at HBCUs. For example, the investigation's findings do not reveal if either the race or ethnic background of the faculty member or if the frequency of interaction influenced the engagement of White undergraduate students. Information related to the race and ethnicity of faculty members was only ascertained if the participants voluntarily shared it through the interviews. In a few cases, students discussed their discomfort discussing race or controversial topics in classes taught by White professors. These particular incidents provided some insight into the role same-race as well as different-race dynamics play in the experiences of White students in an HBCU environment.

Race Matters

Race matters on HBCU campuses. Participants in this study clearly recognized that their experiences did not occur in a vacuum and that their race, whether perceived positively or negatively, influenced the manner in which they engaged and experienced the HBCU environment. In this investigation, the impact of race was more poignantly demonstrated in participants' diverse experiences prior to coming to college, through the manner in which participants interacted with diverse peers, how participants contextualized their White identity, and through participants' hypervisibility (Peterson & Hamrick, 2009) in the classroom.

Those participants that indicated their transitions into an HBCU environment were seamless, more often than not credited their prior diverse experiences. For example, Brett, a GCU student, believed his diverse childhood community and his previous military experience contributed to his adapting in an HBCU setting. Jeremy, for instance, originally did not even know HU was a predominantly Black institution. Jeremy perceived some incoming first-year HU students saw him as a threat and wondered why he was there. Although he had been challenged by other students' perceptions of him, Jeremy continued to build relationships and engaged with students at HU. He believed that his interaction with others was natural for him and he felt much more comfortable on campus as a White student in an HBCU setting.

White identity development offered a third example of the complexity of race in the context of this inquiry. For example, Larry shared that his experiences at GCU helped him understand racial inequity in a different manner. He witnessed first-hand Black students being treated differently when attempting to gain entry into social clubs in the community or even in instances when Black students were racially profiled and stopped by police. However, Larry contended that even with the overt acts of racism he witnessed, he should not have to bear the responsibility to be apologetic or make accommodations to the Black race. Essentially, Larry was able to see and even appreciate the impact of discrimination and racial inequity. However, Larry had not internalized his White privilege and the advantages his Whiteness afforded him (McIntosh, 1998).

The relevance and significance of race within the HBCU setting creates opportunities for innovation and presents challenges with regards to sustaining institutional traditions and norms. The pronouncement of race has a direct impact on the manner which White students perceive themselves and others, including non-White faculty, staff, and students on campus. If there is a degree of comfort felt by White students, both socially and academically, they may find themselves more eager and apt to participate in difficult class discussions and explore further ways to become optimally engaged. Conversely, if the HBCU environment is not perceived as inviting through its institutional factors such as faculty and staff, or even its facilities, White students may elect to be more limited in their engagement by focusing solely on their academics and engaging with faculty who are pertinent to their academic success.

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Student Engagement, A Reciprocal Relationship

This investigation provided evidence that student engagement occurs differently on different campuses for different students. In this inquiry, the researcher characterized and defined engagement as two distinct conditions—limited or extended. These modes of engagement were predicated on the level of intentionality and effort of both the institution and the students. Extended engagement was a condition where the effort and energy of both the individual and the institution were mutual and students tended to have multiple engagement experiences. Such behavior was apparent on both campuses but among more students on the GCU campus. As extended engagers, there were more examples and instances of students interacting with faculty members, actively participating in group projects with diverse peers, joining student organizations (academic and social), attending campus-wide events, and pursuing internships and research opportunities.

Limited engagement was a condition where the intentionality and effort to engage more heavily relied on one party, either the institution or the student. Under this condition, students tended to experience engagement unilaterally. The HU campus is an example of where this was the level of student engagement for most participants. For instance, if a student made a strong connection with a faculty member through a history class, he or she tended to talk or interact with this particular faculty member more frequently. The interaction with faculty may have even resulted in the student's joining a departmental history club or attending a departmental lecture. Essentially, the student's engagement was relegated to interaction with one specific faculty member, in one specific department, and participating in activities in one particular area.

Recommendations for Practice and Research

Recommendations for Practice

Future practices and implementation strategies to enhance White student engagement can be guided by research further examining the influence of student interactions with faculty and staff, race, and the reciprocity of student engagement. Specifically, strategies to strengthen engagement in the classroom and increase opportunities for extended engagement could be particularly effective. Practice and programs can also be shaped by expanding the examination of faculty-student interactions as well as faculty's direct involvement in activities internal and external to the classroom setting. HBCUs should identify meaningful ways to involve faculty in recruitment as well as first-year initiatives, such as first-year seminar and mentoring programs. HBCUs might also consider creative and intentional ways to encourage faculty participation, and even leadership, in college activities such as departmental organizations, orientation, and receptions to establish an even stronger presence in the university community.

As a teaching practice, faculty can increase students' capacity to learn from

diverse perspectives through interactive teaching methods and intentional efforts to meet with students individually or in dyads to discuss complex issues outside of class. Emphasizing and utilizing active and collaborative-learning strategies could be highly effective in classes concentrating on diversity topics or in mandatory courses such as African-American studies.

Finally, it was evident that the process of raising the awareness of staff and administrators can result in positive experiences for both the students and personnel. Closson and Henry (2008a) argued that “it could be worthwhile for HBCU personnel to explore and enhance their own multicultural consciousness so that they can model effective racial discourse, authentic multicultural relationships and social justice values” (p. 532). With this in mind, White students at HBCUs should be encouraged to participate in existing organizations or invited to create their own around social and academic interests. White students should also be recruited and encouraged to participate in key university-wide programs, such as new student orientation and hold key leadership positions in clubs and organizations.

Recommendations for Future Research

The researchers note the small sample size and convenience sampling technique are limitations to this investigation. In general, samples for qualitative studies are generally much smaller than those used in quantitative studies (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003). This study is concerned with meaning and not making generalized hypothesis statements. In addition, because qualitative research is very labor intensive, analyzing a large sample is very time consuming and often simply impractical. Future research should consider examining this topic from a mixed methods or quantitative approach. A larger sample size, along with the inclusion of additional demographic variables (e.g., income, parent’s ethnicity) may yield an improved understanding of the five themes raised in this study or identify additional salient themes.

Future research may also advance this topic by utilizing different research designs and methodological approaches such as an ethnographic study. An ethnographic approach would provide an opportunity to examine White student engagement on HBCU campuses over time. Future researchers may consider living or working directly with a small cohort of diverse students over a semester or academic year to examine how race influences the identity development.

The research can also be broadened by examining the frequency and quality of student interactions with faculty and staff, how the study of students’ Whiteness and White identity development (Helms, 1994) can be used to shape their meaning of race and those of other students. An investigation that offers an examination of student engagement of both Black and White students within an HBCU setting may yield data to determine any significant differences and similarities in student experiences. Such an analysis may also provide results to inform perceptions students have of each other and how these perceptions shape interactions between diverse peers and their overall college experiences. Other possibilities for future research could include comparative studies of White and non-White students, such as Latino/a students.

Conclusions

Students are drawn to and succeed in environments where they see themselves reflected in powerful ways and perceive themselves as key members of the educational community (Tatum, 2005). The participants in this study elected to attend HU and GCU for various reasons and their engagement experiences varied as well. Collectively, these students felt they learned more about themselves and their Whiteness, and the diverse perspectives of other students. As the landscape of public HBCUs transforms as a result of increasing diversity, so do the lives of the students enrolled in them. This transformation includes various experiences and, for White students, it can be facilitated through interactions with faculty and staff, prior college diversity experiences, involvement in co-curricular programs, and first-year experience programs.

The 22 participants in this study join a growing population of White undergraduate students attending HBCUs that report not only quality educational opportunities but, in some instances, life-changing experiences. Specifically, experiences provide more insight into how students such as Joshua Packwood, the first White valedictorian from Morehouse College, and Elisabeth Martin, the first White university queen at Kentucky State University, decided to attend an HBCU and, more importantly, identify ways to become engaged and integral members of the university community. The increasing diversity on HBCU campuses and academic success of all students within these environments place HBCUs in a unique and favorable position to respond.

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