

Identity of Black Women Attending a Predominantly White Institution

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Introduction

Abstract

Although much research and data have been collected for undergraduate students of color, little to no research has been done for graduate students of color, creating a gap in research. Additionally, much of the research done on undergraduate students of color focuses on the male experience. Learning about female graduate students of color, particular black females, would not only open a new realm for research to come, but also may potentially increase retention of students of color at Predominantly White Institutions. In having the ability to understand their experience, institutions can create programs to support them. The purpose of this study is to examine the identity of black female graduate students attending a Predominantly White Institution. The study will focus on their experience in the environment of white academia..

Aims of the Research

This research aims to explore the intersectional experience of black women attending a PWI. By exploring their black experience, future researchers may be able to determine factors of academic success and create targeted retention initiatives for this population. Additionally, this research will provide a voice to a typically marginalized and silenced group.

Research Question

Given the specific histories, institutional structures, and cultural norms of Predominantly White Institutions, what are the experiences of black female graduate students at Florida State University in terms of the identity context?

Method

Research Design

Data sources for this collective case study were individual interviews of each participant. The chosen interview questions for the study were as follows:

1. Do you identify racially/ethnically as a black woman?
2. Would you like to identify any of your other identities (i.e. gender, sexuality, etc.)? What do they mean to you?
3. What does it mean to you to be a black woman?
4. What does it mean and feel like to be a black women at FSU?
5. What brought you to Florida State University?
6. Do you feel supported as a black student at Florida State University? A woman? Both?
7. In what ways do you feel supported as black woman in academia?
8. In what ways do you feel you could be more supported?
9. How do you think your peers perceive you at school?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience?

Participants

This collective case study included five graduate students, of any age, who met the following criteria:

- Must identify as female and black or of African descent (not exclusively African American),
- Must currently be enrolled at Florida State University

Data Collection and Analysis

Individual interviews were conducted with a series of questions over the time span of one month. Each participant was interviewed once. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and then coded. To ensure trustworthiness of coding, a computer system was used to ensure systematic analysis of data and recording the interviews objectively through audio recording devices. After the interview process was complete, transcripts and audio were used to conduct a cross-case analysis to identify similarities and differences across the interviews.

Preliminary Results

Conclusion

Data analysis is ongoing. Based on the analysis thus far, participants all shared a feeling of isolation at some point. Most participants discussed experiencing the imposter syndrome in their programs. Participants also feel as though they are not supported enough from the university and their own departments due to lack of representation in black faculty. Due to this, there are often cultural miscommunications between black female students and their non-black faculty and peers. Finally, one reoccurring experience was one in which participants described how their peers may see them as angry or aggressive, when in reality they are merely passionate about the issues at hand.

Discussion

Due to the rapidly increasing population of black women obtaining degrees from all types of institutions, it is the institutions' responsibility to support this community as they do others. In doing so, representation is a key component in allowing black women to feel more accepted in white academia. One can conclude that black women excel in community environments with other black women they can relate to and black students at PWIs suffer from feelings of isolation and anxiety but still manage to excel. Therefore, this study adds to the limited research available on this population.

Institutions of higher education should aim to hire more black faculty with which these students will be able to form meaningful relationships without the awkwardness of cultural disconnect (Craemer & Orey, 2017).

Key References

Craemer, T., & Orey, D. (2017). Implicit Black identification and stereotype threat among African American students. *Social Science Research*, 65163-180. doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2017.02.003



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The research reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305B170017 to Florida State University. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.