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Exploring Race, Racism, Racialism, and Empowerment: The Importance of Researching and Documenting the Historical Experiences of People of Color at PWIs

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Exploring Race, Racism, Racialism, and Empowerment: The Importance of Researching and Documenting the Historical Experiences of People of Color at PWIs

Abstract

The presenter discusses his experience with researching African and African American students' experiences in the archival collections of over 20 public and private PWls.

Offers suggestions for research on campuses with little or no such documentation, and discusses the importance of oral history projects and research initiatives to build

collections.

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Objective: This session has three major objectives: 1) to discuss the presenter's efforts to document the experiences of black students at PWIs through archival research; 2) to state the importance of creating collections to preserve these experiences for present and future research; and 3) to suggest how teachers and administrators might use these collections or projects to help students of color empower themselves while making their way through
PWIs in the twenty-first century.

Perspectives: As a black student at a PWI and a liaison between African American students and mostly white administrators, I often talked to students about their feelings of alienation, stress, loneliness, and frustration with being "flies in the buttermilk," one of a few black students in a classroom or in a department. In 1992, I conducted a study titled "Dartmouth Experiences," in which I examined African American students' assumption that racism would not exist among the "more enlightened" college population. Much to these students' chagrin, ". ..it seems that people see your blackness as inferiority before they see Dartmouth green," remarked one student. This reflected a sentiment that other black students shared. African American students discussed their plans to bolster minority representation on campus, while others openly declared that the first chance they got they were going to transfer to a black college. Students lamented the lack of cultural activities on campus, sour relations with white professors and classmates, and expressed the desire to just "get out" or graduate. While this certainly seemed understandable for blacks students in rural New Hampshire, black students at the University of San Francisco, interestingly enough, voiced the same concerns. From that point on I was determined to chronicle or document the historical experiences of blacks at white colleges.

This session explores my attempts to document and preserve the historical experiences of black students at PWls in an effort to empower contemporary students of color in our politically precarious times. It discusses the development of programs at the universities of Illinois, Kansas,

Iowa, and other colleges and universities to preserve the papers of their black alumni and the strengths and weaknesses of these collections. I will also highlight the sources I used to identify early black students, such as the works of Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Charles S. Johnson. This session will also examine ways researchers might uncover sources about black students at colleges and universities that have not engaged in conscious or deliberate efforts to preserve the papers or voices of their black alumni such as the universities of Minnesota, Nebraska, and Wisconsin, and Grinnell, Coe, William Penn colleges. Often such PWIs only preserve information about their black athletes or most prominent and socially acceptable black alumni, which raises the problematic nature of collections that have been limited in their conceptual framework. The professional papers and correspondences of university and colleges presidents, black newspapers, the reports of African American Greek-letter organizations, black alumni associations, and the term papers, theses, and dissertations produced by black students reveals important information about how black students create community and social spaces for themselves, what students' valued culturally and intellectually, and how white and black students constructed their racial identities.

Importance of Session: This presentation is important because it uses primary historical documents to examine how black students at PWls have empowered themselves in the face of white supremacy and protested racism on campus through the community- building process.

Research Method: In this presentation I will use historical research methods such discourse and context analysis; and examinations of primary sources or oral histories to demonstrate how these might be used to empower students of color at PWls and help bridge the cultural gaps between students, faculty, and administrators, across racial lines.

Presenter

Richard M. Breaux is an Assistant Professor of Blacks Studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He received degrees from Dartmouth College and the University of Iowa, in English, African American History, and Education. Richard has worked as a liaison between Dartmouth's Afro-American Society and Admissions Office and the Office of Minority Recruitment and Retention and the Black Student Union at the University of San Francisco. His research has appeared in the *Journal of African American History* and he has contributed to the *History of Education Quarterly,* The *Annals of Iowa,* and the *Encyclopedia of the Midwest.* He has also presented papers at the annual conferences of the American Educational Research Association, the Organization of American Historians, the History of Education Society, and the Mid-America American Studies Association. Richard's master thesis compared the experiences of African American students who desegregated PWls in the nineteenth century to blacks who desegregated white southern flagship schools from the late 1930s through the 1960s. His recently completed dissertation is a history of Africans and African Americans at the universities of Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, and Nebraska from 1870-1940.