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Earl Wright II
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Kee-Sha Adams-Parks
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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Why Black People Tend to Shout!: The Experience of Being An African American Graduate Student In A Predominantly White Institution

Earl Wright II
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Kee-Sha Adams-Parks
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

"Very often the professional and emotional needs of African American graduate students are not and cannot be met through existing avenues open to white graduate students. Consequently, there is a need for an understanding of the emotional strain that African American graduate students operate under."

Being an African American graduate student in a predominantly white institution can cause frustration, anxiety and sometimes depression. The origin of these feelings may be a confrontation with the affirmative action questions, experiencing racism in the community and/or the classroom, and/or the ardent task of trying not to lose ones self and/or their personal identity while pursuing an advanced degree. Very often the professional and emotional needs of African American graduate students are not and cannot be met through existing avenues open to white graduate students. Consequently, there is a need for an understanding of the emotional strain that African American graduate students operate under. The authors believe that an understanding of this dilemma will lead to increased enrollment and retention of African American graduate students in predominantly white institutions.

What's The Problem?
After being accepted into a predominantly white institution, African American graduate students are often confronted, albeit very covertly, with the affirmative action question. "So, what was your score on (the standardized test)? How were your grades as an undergraduate?" This line of inquiry, on the part of his/her white cohort mainly, may lead the African American graduate student to question the reasons behind their acceptance. "Was I accepted due to affirmative action requirements or simply because I was a qualified candidate?" These questions, however unfounded and asinine, often compel the most academically and emotionally sound student to question, if only briefly, the reasons for their admittance into their chosen program of study. Unfortunately, this is not the only realm that African American graduate students may have problems.

Completing the duties of a graduate student can be very difficult for African American graduate teaching assistants. Very often the knowledge and intelligence of African American instructors is questioned and/or undermined by classes that are comprised of 95-100 percent white students. Both of the authors have experienced racial epithets during lectures. Neither instructor chose to confront the students or question why the slurs were spewed. The main reason that no action was taken by the instructors was because neither saw the person make the comment. The remarks were made while the

instructor's backs were turned. Showing superior group solidarity, no one in either class was willing to come forward and implicate the offending party. Additionally, the instructors did not inform administrators of the incident because they did not believe that their grievances would not be taken seriously.

Feelings of anxiety are common to all first year graduate students. However, African American graduate students tend to experience greater levels because their physical appearance (being a person of color) and their perceived lack of intelligence by members of their cohort, students in their classes and sometimes by tenured faculty. This assault on their intelligence, through the questioning of their acceptance into the program and/ or repeated inquiry into the rigor of their course work, makes most African American graduate students feel as if they have to be "twice as good as the white man" to prove to others and to themselves that they are qualified to be in their program of study. Although it is common sense to recognize the fact that no one has to prove anything to anyone but himself/ herself, it should be noted that these outside stimuli do exist. Consequently, the persistent desire to "belong" can eventually cause frustration, depression, anxiety and possibly resentment of the entire graduate school process and the chosen university.

What Black People Should Do Now

There is no one answer to the many problems associated with being an African American graduate student in a predominantly white institution. Additionally, it is recognized by the authors that many of the problems cited in this article are not exclusive concerns of African American graduate students.

The authors strongly believe that the establishment of a Black Graduate Student Association on this campus will be a starting point in solving some of the problems associated with being an African American graduate student in a predominantly white institution. A Black Graduate Student Association will provide: (1) a forum to meet other African American graduate students, (2) a place to discuss issues and situations common to African American graduate students, (3) create a sense of community and (4) perform as an outlet for African American graduate students to address their grievances, as a collective, to the administrators of the university. As cited earlier, the establishment of a BGSA will not alleviate all of the problems associated with being an African American graduate student in a predominantly white institution. But, it is a crucial first step in the long and arduous process of determining why black people tend to shout in predominantly white institutions.

PRESENTERS

Earl Wright II is a Doctoral Student in the Sociology Department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He received his Bachelor of Arts in History and Master's degree in Sociology from the University of Memphis where he completed a thesis entitled, "More Than Just A Haircut: An Ethnographic Study of an Urban African American Barbershop." His primary areas of interests are the scholarship of W.E.B. DuBois and Race, Class and Gender.

Kee-Sha Adams-Parks is a graduate student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She is currently working toward a master's degree in Sociology. Her academic interests consist of studies in Social Movements, Crime/Deviance and Inequalities.