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The Experiences of African American Ph.D. students at a Predominantly White Carnegie I - Research Institution

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The Experiences of African American Ph.D. students at a Predominantly White Carnegie I - Research Institution

Abstract

The purpose of this session will be to explore the dynamics and experiences that African American doctoral students in this study faced at a predominately White Doctoral Extensive University in the Rocky Mountain Region. Research was conducted in the qualitative research paradigm using retrospective interviews.

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African-American undergraduate students' experiences on predominantly White campuses have been the focus of many research studies primarily highlighting these students' academic difficulties (Fleming, 1984; Nettles, 1998; Mow & Nettles, 1990; Allen, 1992). Major findings reveal that African-American undergraduate students experience higher attrition rates, lower cumulative grade point averages, and less persistence to graduation than do majority students (Nettles, 1998; Mow & Nettles, 1990; Allen, 1992). Weak academic preparation, limited campus role models, feelings of isolation and helplessness, and unsure how to negotiate their campus' academic and social systems have these students experiencing their undergraduate environment as though they were "uninvited guests in a strange land" (Parker & Scott,985, p. 67; . Brown, 1986). The research is clear that neither persistence nor progress toward identified goals have yet to occur at satisfactory levels for African-American undergraduate students. According to Brown (1986) the factors that lead to high attrition rates for undergraduates hold true for African-American doctoral students as well.

Previous research on retention for African-American undergraduates has focused mainly on identifying factors that aid these students to stay in school. While many non-academic variables appear to be most significant (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984, 1985; Hinton, 1988), the research is clear that neither persistence nor progress toward identified goals is occurring at satisfactory levels for African-American students.

Researchers have applied student success models that illustrate the interaction between doctoral students' background characteristics and institutional social support and their combined effects on measures of doctoral students' success (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Nora, Cabrera, & Shinville, 1992; Hurtado & Carter, 1994). Taking these factors into

consideration, the researchers have focused on the previous life experiences of these students as possible success factors at the doctoral level. These models focus on academic and social integration, peer interaction, and students' background characteristics including goals and commitments as direct moderators of graduate students' success.

Little research, however, has been undertaken directly regarding the African-American student doctoral experiences. Research studies conducted in the area focus on students in a variety of disciplines utilizing survey-type research, generally examining issues like enrollment patterns, factors related to persistence, faculty support, and a variety of other variables associated with academic achievement (Keith, 1996; Lozano, 1991; Smith & Davidson, 1992; King & Chepyator-Thompson, 1996; Crossland, 1968).

A key finding that researchers have identified is that in addition to students' background characteristics, characteristics of different types of institutional social support are related to academic achievement for minority graduate students. These institutional social support systems include supportive social and academic environments on campus, positive relationships with faculty, increased peer interaction, assistance with adjustment issues, social integration, and low perceived individual/institutional racism (Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 1986; Trujillo, 1986; Defour & Hirsch, 1990; Allen, 1992; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Debord & Millner, 1993; Turner, 1993). Therefore, since a supportive environment is described as one where students experience high academic and social integration into programs and activities, then this integration may also exert direct influence on a student's progress. Indeed, in a study of Ph.D. training, Girves and Wemmerus (1988) discussed the importance of academic and social integration of minority graduate students into their departments. These authors noted that financial assistance (receiving assistantships and fellowships) and student's perceptions of faculty-student relationships were the strongest predictors of progress in doctoral programs for minority students. Other variables associated with progress in doctoral programs for minority graduate students included full-time enrollment of students and developing collegial relationships within the department. In a similar study, outlining the importance of faculty mentoring, Blackwell (1987) noted that the most powerful predictor of enrollment and graduation of African-American students at a professional school was the presence of an African-American faculty member serving as the student's mentor.

The findings that have emerged regarding African-American Ph.D. students, therefore, have identified factors predicting or relating to academic success. Significant details about these issues and the overall experience of being an African-American doctoral student are not well understood; this is especially true for those students engaged in doctoral study at predominately white institutions. For this research study, the theoretical work of Beeler (1991) on graduate student adjustment to academic life provide the basis for experiences of African-American Ph.D. students in the field of Education at a predominately white Carnegie Research I institution (now referred to as Doctoral Research University-Extensive in the new Carnegie classification system). Beeler's (1991) four-stage framework focuses on graduate student adjustment to

academic work. These four stages include: a) unconscious incompetence, b) conscious incompetence, c) unconscious competence, and d) conscious competence.

Two main research questions guided this study: What were the lived experiences of African-American Ph.D. students in a doctoral program in Education at a predominately white Carnegie Research I institution? What were the barriers to completion of the doctoral program for African-American Ph.D. students?

Presenters

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102

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