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Surviving the "Diverse" (White) University

Sharon Elise
Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, California State University, San Marcos, CA

Garry Rolison
Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, California State University, San Marcos, CA

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Surviving the "Diverse" (White) University

Abstract
This paper reports findings from a study of Black student retention at a predominantly white state university. Race, class, age, and gender mediate Black student experience while middle-class status, experience in predominantly white school settings, a pragmatic view of college, parental expectations, and residence in a Black community affect retention.

Sharon Elise
Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, California State University, San Marcos, CA

Garry Rolison
Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, California State University, San Marcos, CA

This study arose from concerns that originated in the African American Advisory Council with respect to perceived declining numbers of African American students on campus. In particular, two faculty members that serve on the council developed a research proposal to study the Black student experience at the university. The proposal was successful and a grant was awarded from the President's office to carry out the study.

We used a qualitative design for this study. We did so primarily for two reasons. First, we did not have immediate knowledge of the factors that contributed to the particular loss of Black students from 1st year enrollment to graduation 5 years later. Second, and more importantly, we wanted to gather student perceptions of their experiences and survival strategies.

Guided by the theory of Tinto (1987) and Sydow and Sandel (1998), we were particularly interested in how well students felt integrated in the campus environment both academically and socially. In this context, questions of faculty-student and peer relations were of special importance. Since many Black students are first generation college students and are likely to come from low-income families (Blackwell 1991), we also questioned students about work and family issues and how they impact their collegiate life.

Following the lead of Allen (1992), Loo and Rolison (1986) we probed whether students '" perceived discrimination and/or alienation on campus. Finally, during the focus groups we asked about social relations among Black students on campus, especially as it concerns issues of acknowledgement, interracial dating and Black male-female relationships.

To facilitate discussion, we kept the numbers in each focus group small and we separated groups by gender. Additionally, we did a separate focus group of students identified as student activists in the Black student organization on campus. In total, we interviewed about 10 to 15% of all Black students on campus during the Spring Semester of 2003.

We find race, class, age, and gender mediate Black student experiences on the campus. For example, there is a different orientation in terms of overall comfort for Black students who come from the middle class. These students remark that they are more likely than not to have attended a predominantly white high school and that this attendance may have actually prepared them for a college campus that is predominantly white. Additionally, many of these students also report living in a white community before coming to college. Non-middle class students were more likely to express a work ethic that sees college as a vocational arena where they can better themselves by attaining a professional job after graduation.

The above pragmatic view of college also tends to characterize the older Black student on campus. Their main concern is that the university provides them with the tools to get through their education as quickly as possible. They also express a strong work ethic that they on occasion see as lacking among younger students. Moreover, the importance of balancing work, family and school is of special concern to them. This is particularly the case for single mothers in this category.

Black women on campus often feel more alienated than are Black men. To them, social relationships, including friendship and conjugal relations, are part of their expectations *for* college life. Some Black women complain that there is a paucity of dating partners available. This is principally the case with respect to interracial dating that involves Black men. There is an expressed sense of loneliness and isolation for these women especially if there is no on-going tie with a Black community. That is, the ability to attend church, go to the beauty shop or cultural events in an accessible Black community, and to have a network of Black friends and neighbors is elusive for students who reside in the campus community.

Finally, the factors that appear to place all Black students at the most risk of not completing their degree at this university include a general lack of social integration and mentoring, a disjuncture between family/community background and the white campus environment, and the twin problems of Black hyper-visibility and white student ignorance of racial issues. Black students identify the campus as not reflecting Black American culture and presence from the cafeteria to the curriculum. The effect this has for many is to remind them that they are "outsiders" on campus. For Black students who come from a predominantly Black community and schooling environment, these perceptions of not belonging become exacerbated and the perceived disjuncture more salient on average. Almost all students report instances in which they are "the only one" in class and how that can sometimes lead to their discomfort. Along the same vein, Black students often find themselves appalled at the lack of racial sensitivity and awareness displayed by the average white student in their classes.

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Presenters

Dr. Sharon Elise is Associate Professor of Sociology and Coordinator for the Ethnic Studies Program. Her research includes race and gender, teenaged motherhood, race and ethnicity, and social inequality. Recent research projects include a study (on-going) of Black identity and community, the struggle over curriculum, race and power in the university, and shifting racial politics and demographics in California.

Dr. Garry Rolison is Associate Professor of Sociology at California State University, San Marcos. His research interests and publications span the areas of racial construction, multicultural education, Black women in prison, and social class among Black Americans. He is currently researching race and sexuality.