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Black Students' Perceptions: A Snapshot of Their Experiences at a Predominantly White Campus

R. Deborah Davis
Syracuse University

“Safe spaces” must be a part of the student’s experience for them to be successful.

Research Questions

1. How do Black/African American students perceive their college experiences at a predominantly White university?
2. What is the importance of a summer pre-freshman program to the decision to persist to graduation, as perceived by the Black students?
3. What are some of the reasons, as perceived by the students, why Black students persist in predominantly White institutions as related to social integration and their commitment to graduation?
4. What are common themes among the students' experiences which would give implications for development of institutional interventions to increase the graduation rate of Black students?

Interview Protocol

- Tell me about your experiences during... (Summer Institute, Freshman...)
- Would you clarify what you mean when you say...
- Tell me about... (social, Adam, family life...)
- Tell me about what you mean by...
- (Restate), is that correct?

Student Participants: 1988-89 to 1993-94

- 15 percent of the 18 students graduated by December 1994 . 68 percent graduated as of December 1993
- 72 percent graduated as of May 1994
- 83 percent graduated as of December 1994

What is the Perception? Race Matters

- A "hurtful" environment because of differential treatment and racist attitudes, ignorance, and disrespect for Black students.
- Campus is a proving ground for life in the "real world."
- Students used the metaphor "putting on your armor just to go to campus every day."
- "Many professors act as if we are invisible," "They don't expect us to succeed."
- Non-academic stressors distracted students from their goals. . Social concerns of identity, belonging.

What is the Importance of a Pre-College Program?

- Academic readiness—getting acclimated to the offices, resources, and services without being overwhelmed.
- Camaraderie - friends, a foundation, lasting friendships, and expectations for their success.
- Esteem, dignity, values—"trust," "belief in me," expectations even "when the going gets tough."

Reasons Why Black Students Persist

- Focus—re-remembering their educational goals and their commitment to themselves, their families, and community.
- Persona; validation—understanding their identity confusion; establishing their "Black Identity" for themselves and peers; getting the grades they feel reflect their ability.
- Support from friends "like me"—an individual or groups who constitute a community for the student - (must be focused on educational attainment, not necessarily discipline-specific).
- Mentors—Having persons in the academic community who believe in the student's ability to succeed (grades do matter).

Implications for Further Research

- Students' perceptions define their reality. Use of qualitative methodologies gives us a better understanding of the experiences of students from differing racial and ethnic backgrounds.
- Further investigation is needed into the perception of, and the effects of, remedial programs for the Black student. This is both a qualitative and quantitative question.
- Based on this study, the salience of personal introspection during the fourth through seventh semesters was crucial to the decision to persist. Black identity theories provide insight and frameworks to explore this period of student decision making among Black students.
- The concept of re-remembering goals, commitments to self, families, and community needs to be further explored among Black students who successfully completed their degrees at predominantly White schools.

Implications for Retention Strategies

- Given that race matters in perceptions and interactions, there must be commitment from the institution to provide an environment and curriculum that embraces racial and ethnic differences and provides opportunities for open dialog.
- Institutions can take responsibility for staff sensitivity to students of color, incorporate training into their professional development requirements at all levels, and provide incentives for active participation.
- Analysis of recruitment efforts regarding the locations (urban, rural, suburban) and environmental factors which may impact campus experiences. "Safe spaces" must be a part of the student's experience to be successful.

PRESENTER

R. Deborah Davis is Davis is a Research Associate MTRC3, an Academic Adviser for the Student Academic Improvement Program, and Manager of the University Events Office, all at Syracuse University. She received a B.A. in Business Administration at Columbia College, Missouri; an M.P.A. from Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University; and a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration from the School of Education, Syracuse University (1996). She has memberships in ASHE, National Forum for Black Public Administrations, NAACP, OCC-Urban Advisory Board, AERA, ABWHE, and NERA.