Transitioning in and Moving Through the Second Year for African American Students at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI): A Case Study

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This study describes the collegiate experience of 11 African American students in their second year at a predominately White institution (PWI). Using Yosso's (2005) forms of cultural capital as a framework, 11 participants described their experience as a process of finding their community, making commitments to organizations and individuals, and searching for balance. Participants found supportive peer networks instrumental in navigating a PWI. Implications for future research and practice are also discussed.

Introduction

Conversations on student retention have mainly focused on improving retention rates between the first and second year of college (Gohn, Swartz, & Donnelly, 2001). Researchers and practitioners have focused solely on the transition from first to second year in college student retention to the point that problems with student attrition have shifted to later years (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005). While first-year retention is an integral part in understanding student departure from higher education, what is less well known is how students experience collegiate environments beyond the first year. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 1.27 million African American students were enrolled in Title IV institutions in fall 2009. The existing literature lacks current studies on how African American students experience the collegiate environment, especially during the second year when students are more at risk

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for leaving postsecondary institutions (Lipka, 2006). The lack of research on how African American students experience their second year at a predominantly White institution (PWI), including understanding relationships that are important during the second-year in college, provided the rationale for this study.

Literature Review

After the second-year in college, Smith (1995) found the overall retention rate for the majority of racial and ethnic groups was lower than the overall retention rate of 71%. Approximately, 59% of African Americans, 62% of Hispanics, and 54% of American Indians persisted into their third year (Smith, 1995). Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) stated that researchers and practitioners tend to view issues of retention and persistence for students of color "similar, if not identical, to those of majority students" (p.130). Existing literature on students of color has outlined a process of transition and integration into the college environment. Typically, this involved a process of separation from one's culture of identification, a transition period, and incorporation into the majority culture (Rendón et al., 2000). Rendón et al. (2000) asserted that the experience of students of color in college cannot be viewed similarly to White students. Along with Tierney (1992), Rendón et al.(2000) questioned the appropriateness of the separation aspect of transition into college, especially for students of color. In Cross's (1991) model of Nigrescence, Cross (1991) outlined African American identity development as a process of moving through stages beginning with an absence of knowledge about one's racial identity. As individuals move through Cross's (1991) model, specifically the immersion stage, they surround themselves with same-race peers to discover more about their own racial identity. Promoting separation from one's culture would ignore a key aspect of racial identity development for African American students. Additional factors that influence African American retention and persistence need to be more acutely studied to address holes in the existing literature that treats all students' experiences the same without regard to race.

Scholars studying the second-year experience from a race-neutral lens have outlined the importance of mentoring relationships during this time period. Mentoring relationships for second-year students can include their relationships with peers, faculty, and staff members at the institution. Through quantitative and qualitative studies with 4,845 traditionally-aged second-year students at 41 four-year institutions in the United States, Schreiner (2012) found that second-year students thrived when they were connected to others, both faculty and peers. Factors contributing to African American students' thriving during the second-year were increased levels of spirituality as compared to other participants and their racial identities (Schreiner, 2012). In a study of 100 ethnic minority first-generation college students, Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) found that peer support, or the lack of needed peer support, were strong predictors of grades and adjustment. For African American students at predominantly White institutions, a sense of belonging was a significant predictor of thriving (Paredes-Collins, 2012). In an earlier study, Gloria, Robinson-Kurpius, Hamilton, and

Wilson (1999) studied the influence of social support, university comfort, and self-beliefs on decisions to persist among 98 Black students at a predominantly White university. Gloria et. al (1999) found all three constructs significantly predicted persistence; however, social support and university comfort were the strongest predictors of persistence among African American students. A sense of belonging to the campus community can lead to increased commitment and persistence for students of color (Schaller, 2010; Paredes-Collins, 2012).

Gardner (2000) reported that second-year students had the fewest encounters with faculty outside of the classroom. Second-year students may still be taking general education courses and may not have had the opportunity to take classes with faculty in their major. Schreiner's (2012) study found that student-faculty interaction was not a significant predictor of thriving among African American students during their second year. Strayhorn and Terrell (2007), however, found that mentoring relationships with a faculty member that focused on research activities had a positive relationship with regard to African American students' overall satisfaction with their college experience. While the research on faculty interaction in terms of thriving and satisfaction is mixed, what is less well-known are what relationships contribute to satisfaction and persistence for African American second-year students.

Theoretical Framework

Yosso's (2005) theory of community cultural wealth provided the theoretical framework for this study. By approaching the study of African American second-year students from a community of cultural wealth approach instead of a deficit approach, one can further understand how various forms of cultural capital help African American students navigate the college environment. As students enter colleges and universities, they have various forms of cultural capital that have shaped their understanding of how one should act in college (Bourdieu, 1971, 1973). Yosso (2005) built upon Bourdieu's (1971, 1973) forms of capital to acknowledge the forms of cultural capital from different racial and ethnic groups in society.

Yosso (2005) described six alternative forms of capital that can be used to study the various forms of capital students of color bring to the college environment. These forms of capital were (a) aspirational, (b) linguistic, (c) familial, (d) social, (e) navigational, and (f) resistant (Yosso, 2005). The following definitions of the various forms of capital are derived from Yosso (2005). Aspirational capital refers to individuals' aspirations for themselves and the future and the ability to move toward these aspirations when facing barriers. Linguistic capital is the social, intellectual, and linguistic skills students bring to their college environment. Familial capital includes the cultural knowledge preserved among members of a specific cultural group. Social capital consists of the networks of individuals and organizations that provide sources of emotional support while in college. Navigational capital concerns one's ability to progress through institutions not designed with students of color in mind. Finally, resistant capital is the ability to challenge the status quo and stereotypes about one's culture.

Methods

A case study approach was utilized to study the second-year experience for African American students. Focus groups served as the primary means of collecting data, and secondary sources of data, such as key informant interviews, observations at events, and artifacts, were also utilized during the research (Yin, 2009). Compared to individual interviews, focus groups allowed participants to discuss their experiences at a PWI more freely among a group of peers (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

A single case study site was selected for this research for its ability to illustrate the phenomenon, the second-year experience for African American students, occurring within the context of a PWI (Yin, 2009). The research site is a large, public, residential four-year research institution in the Southeast. The pseudonym given to the institution for this study is Southeast University. During the year data was collected for this study, 16,562 undergraduate students were enrolled at the institution. Approximately 14% of the undergraduate student population was non-White. Undergraduate students who identified as African American comprised 6.4% of the undergraduate student body, according to the institution's records. Out of this percentage, 201 African American students were in their second-year of college.

From this population, 11 African American students volunteered to participate in two focus groups on their second-year experience. Names, email addresses, and other demographic data from the institutional research office were used to verify whether these students were in the second-year cohort before sending the recruitment email. Ten African American females and one African American male participated in the focus groups. Two focus groups were conducted during the fall 2012 and spring 2013 semesters. All 11 participants attended the first set of focus groups in the fall 2012 semester. Nine out of the 11 participants from the first focus group in the fall 2012 semester returned for the spring 2013 focus groups. Attempts were made to contact the two participants who did not return for the focus groups in the spring 2013 semester: however, the two participants did not respond.

Data Analysis

The raw data from the two focus groups were transcribed and analyzed by constructing categories through the constant comparative method of data analysis (Merriam, 1998). The researcher listened to and reviewed the transcripts first in order to understand the participants' understandings and meanings of their second-year experience (Hycner, 1985). As the transcripts were reviewed, the data was coded by making comments next to the data in the focus group transcripts that were relevant to the study (Merriam, 1998). After reviewing the focus group transcripts, key informant interviews, and event data, these comments were grouped into categories and themes were developed (Merriam, 1998). Participants in the study were given the transcripts of the focus groups to review for accuracy

and to validate the initial themes developed from the analyzed data.

Trustworthiness in the data was achieved through triangulation, which included a review of transcripts by the participants, and other analysts and data collected from different sources (Patton, 2002). First, participants were asked to review the themes derived from the transcriptions, known as member checking (Creswell, 2009). Second, the clusters of meaning from the transcribed data were discussed and verified with a scholar educated in qualitative research methods and analysis. Third, a peer debriefer also served as an independent reviewer for the research data to ensure the researcher-created meanings were accurate (Creswell, 2009). Finally, key informant interviews, observations at campus events, and a review of key artifacts further served to triangulate the data from the focus groups and interviews (Patton, 2002).

Results

Three of the themes constructed from this study are relevant to student affairs professionals working in transition programs: (a) finding my community, (b) the power of commitments, and (c) quest for balance.

Finding My Community

In both focus groups, participants indicated they sought out peers who were like them in terms of race, values, and aspirations to navigate the initial "culture shock" of adjusting to a PWI. Brian commented on adjusting to the classroom environment of a PWI below:

> My high school was almost like 99.999% African American, and then when I came to Southeast, it was the exact opposite, so I found myself, like, always seeking out other Black people, … and I realized how hard that was, because I'd be in class and it'd be just me.

Kirsten found her circle of friends in band. While band and her roommate served as sources of support, she indicated it was difficult to find others who were similar to her in terms of interests and values:

> I didn't have, like, a ton of friends, which isn't bad, but I had my roommate and some friends in band. I don't know, like, it was definitely interesting because… a lot of the girls were different than I was, I guess.…I was trying to figure out…"Who am I going to eat dinner with today?"

Brian and Thea described a peer mentoring program specifically designed for students of color at Southeast University. Both individuals were members of this peer mentoring program during their first-year and served as mentors for first-year students during their second year. Brian and Thea noted serving as a mentor to first-year students of color helped to hold them accountable to their academics and the community they found in the peer mentoring network. Thea indicated,

> Not only getting to know all these mentors that are trying to help first-year minority students, but we get to know the mentees themselves and seeing how they're dealing with issues and…to watch them go through the same struggle

that I went through and try to tell them…

In an interview with the program coordinator for the peer mentoring program, she described the structure of the program as "a close-knit family" to help students of color navigate the larger campus context. Participants in this study found peer group networks including mentoring, band, and other activities as sources of strength in navigating a PWI.

Power of Commitments

Throughout data collection, nine out of the 11 participants indicated they seriously thought of not returning for a second year at the research institution. Three individuals indicated that finances were a factor in deciding whether or not to return. Two individuals indicated grades as a factor, and one participant noted it was a combination of money and grades. The factors listed by the remaining three participants were family and campus culture.

The three individuals who stated that finances were a consideration in deciding whether to return for the second year were out-of-state students or identified as being from a lower socioeconomic status. From a review of materials provided to incoming students and their families, out-of-state tuition was $16,000 more compared to in-state tuition. When Thea considered leaving Southeast, she thought of the following:

When I got those midterm grades back, I was like, "Whoa." It was a reality shock, like…it was so bad. I was…with school altogether, "Just forget about it. This isn't for me."…So, talking to my mom, I was like, "Alright. Maybe I could do it. Maybe I could finish it." Definitely, over the summer, those finances…in looking at it…"Whoa!"

Nine of the 11 participants indicated that they considered not returning to the research site during the second semester of their first year. The nine participants chose to return to the research site due to commitments they made to themselves, an organization, or a community. Finding a supportive peer group was a commonality among all nine participants' decisions to return for the second year. Sophie, whose parents' had doctorate degrees and are Kenyan, described commitment this way:

Commitments. It's always a commitment to myself to get through and do what I need to do, if I want to. I had a commitment to my mom.…And then my dad, who passed away in '09, and he was a really,… really big on education.…So, to me, it was like, if I'm going to do this for anybody, I have to do this for him.

Additionally, Brian best described the level of commitment to an organization or community:

As far as organizations are concerned that made me want to stick around, Southeast Black Student Union was the main one because I realized that in me leaving Southeast and going to another school, I would not only be giving up on Southeast, but I would be…I felt I would be giving up on the people that I had met here, like, more specifically, like, the Black community and then

other incoming Black students.

The executive director of the Student Life Center at Southeast University echoed this sense of commitment in an information interview. She stated, "When students of color make a meaningful connection with someone or a group, their level of commitment to the institution increases, which increases their chance of coming back" (A. Richardson, personal communication, January 17, 2013).

Quest for Balance

The 11 participants in the study indicated their second year was better than their first year at the institutions, but searched for balance among the social and academic demands on their schedules. Carla described the difficulties in balancing her schedule with her on-campus and off-campus work schedules,

> Last semester I took 12 credit hours and this semester I am taking 18 hours to keep my scholarship. So, … I go from 10 to 6 everyday, so it's really stressful. … I have an on-campus job in the student center and I don't work at my off-campus job as much. …

Carla's statement illustrated the pressure participants in both the focus groups and interviews were feeling throughout their second year. When asked about the source of the pressure, two participants, Nadia and Sophie, noted the messages they perceived in the institution's environment. Nadia stated:

> Everything is so competitive leaving college, so you feel like you have to be a part of every academic type of group and hold leadership positions and then you still want to have fun…and get good grades and make yourself competitive.

Sophie followed up on Nadia's statement and said,

> Yeah, there's a lot of pressure, and it's always pushed in your face that you need to be well-rounded, so you try to get in a little bit of everything, but a little bit of everything ends up being so much.

During their second year at Southeast University, participants managed to find supportive networks, but struggled to say "no" to other requests to participate in activities. During their second year, participants sought to find balance between their academic coursework, extracurricular activities, and time for themselves.

Discussion

Three of Yosso's (2005) six forms of cultural capital were depicted in the second-year experience for underrepresented students at the research institution. The three forms of capital that emerged through the focus groups and interviews were aspirational, social, and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005).

Aspirational capital referred to individuals' aspirations for themselves and their future and the ability to move forward when facing barriers (Yosso, 2005). Participants in this study explained the dreams and future aspirations they had when they decided to attend the institution. Nine out of 11 of the participants in the study indicated they seriously considered leaving the institution prior to

the beginning of their second year. Participants still returned despite financial, academic, and campus climate issues.

Social capital included networks of individuals and organizations that provided sources of emotional support (Yosso, 2005). Peer groups, peer mentoring programs, student organizations, and residence hall communities allowed participants in the study to develop support networks that sustained them in their first year and second year. The nine participants who considered leaving after the first year at the research institution indicated that the main reasons they returned were due to commitments to organizations and the supportive networks they created during their first year. These networks facilitated a sense of belonging to the institution, affirming the results found in other studies by Schaller (2010) and Paredes-Collins (2012).

Navigational capital concerned one's ability to progress through institutions (Yosso, 2005). In a quote from a follow-up interview with Brian, he noted, "what I've realized is that it takes a very different kind of person to attend this institution and be really involved in this experience, especially if you're a minority, I will say." Other participants described key ways in which they navigated the environment at the research institution, including asking others in their peer mentoring programs for assistance with classes, joining NPHC groups, and obtaining leadership positions on campus. Connecting with others who shared the same interests and values enabled participants in the study to create peer groups that aided them in navigating a predominantly White institution (Tinto, 1993; Rendón et al., 2000).

While Strayhorn and Terrell (2007) found mentoring relationships with faculty were important to African American students, participants in this study did not mention a faculty member as pivotal to their navigation or satisfaction with the institution. One possibility is participants may not have had the opportunity to engage in research with a faculty member by the end of their second year. Creating activities to engage second-year students with faculty could be beneficial in helping African American students in navigating the environment at a PWI.

Limitations

While the invitation to participate in the research study was sent to all African Americans in their second year at the research site, students who may not have had a positive experience at the institution may have decided not to participate in the study. The lack of African American male participants in the study was another limitation. Additional efforts were made to contact African American male students to participate in the study, but they did not respond to the requests for participation. The research site was one institution and may not be representative of similar populations at other institutions.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study generated several implications for practice. Creating

first-year mentoring groups would help students navigate the college environment and help underrepresented students find a supportive group of peers who would help them form a commitment to the institution. The 11 participants in this study each mentioned connections made during their first year were pivotal in their ability to find a community of support. Connections to student organizations and peer groups are well researched in terms of their ability to facilitate a sense of connection to the collegiate environment (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; and Tinto, 1993). Whether the commitment is to oneself, a peer group, or student organization, the power of making a commitment at the end of the first year at the research site allowed students to continue to grow and thrive during their second year at the institution (Schaller, 2010; Schreiner, 2010; Paredes-Collins, 2012).

First-year mentoring groups can be assigned as a part of college orientation activities or welcome week activities to serve as a source of support during the first year. Topics between the mentors and mentees in the first-year mentoring groups could focus on finding clubs and organizations to join, time management, and other topics that would help African American students strategize for success in college. Such strategies may include how to utilize the social capital created within the African American community to access other forms capital outside the African American network.

All 11 participants described their second year as better than their first year at the research site. Participants were engaged in the university environment and spoke positively of their academic and social experiences during their second year. The positive experiences of the African American students in this study contradict prior literature describing the second year as the "sophomore slump" (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000). Characterizing the second-year experience as marked by reduced motivation and indecisiveness may be inaccurate for different student subpopulations. As discussed previously, the targeted connection opportunities for African Americans could actually serve to ameliorate some of the issues that may occur in the second year if a stable network has already been solidified in the first year.

Colleges and universities should develop ways for students, specifically students from underrepresented backgrounds, to articulate their strengths within a culturally responsive framework (Rendón, Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Implementing strengths-based approaches in current programs would not only take advantage of the existing forms of cultural capital students have, but it would also contribute to their ability to thrive during the second year. For example, academic advisors and student affairs professionals can help students identify and build on areas of strength by helping them articulate their skills and abilities. These skills and abilities can be articulated into long-range goals that will help students strategize for a successful future and contribute to thriving (Schreiner, 2010).

The 11 participants in this study also struggled with balancing the academic, social, and work demands on their schedules. Through the process of participating in the research focus groups, participants mentioned the experience provided them the opportunity to reflect on their experiences at the research site. Participants

further indicated this aspect of reflection and meaning-making was lacking during their second year. One study indicated that critical and reflective thinking skills in today's undergraduate students are lacking (Flores, Matkin, Burbach, Quinn, & Harding, 2012). There is a great need to develop more opportunities for students to engage in critical and reflective thinking in curricular and co-curricular activities. Schaller (2010) indicated, "The sophomore year is a prime time for students to evaluate past choices, examine belief systems, acknowledge personal strengths and weaknesses, and begin to identify values" (p.78). Existing programs and services, such as academic advising, mentoring programs, service learning, and positional and non-positional leadership activities, can be key avenues to support structured reflection (Schaller, 2010). Incorporating structured reflection activities into already existing programs can help students create a vision for who they aspire to be in the future.

Conclusion

African American students in this study described their second-year experience more positively compared to the "sophomore slump" depicted in other literature (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000). While participants indicated that their experience was better than their first year at the research site, the African American students in this study searched for ways to maintain balance among competing interests and priorities. More research needs to be done to contribute to the understanding of the second-year experience for students of color, including understanding how gender influences the second-year experience. Future research should utilize longitudinal approaches to place the second-year experience in context with the entire educational experience at different institutional types.

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