

The Effects of Racism on Students of Color at Predominately White Institutions

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The Effects of Racism on Students of Color at Predominately White Institutions

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## ABSTRACT

Students of color attending a predominately white institution face many barriers that may include having negative experiences, feelings of isolation, power differences and low retention and graduation rates. Previous literature suggests that factors other than academics have played a role in successfully retaining students of color at Predominately White Institution (PWIs) (Thomas, et. al). The academic climate also plays an integral part in the lives of students, especially underrepresented groups. This research attempts to magnify the racism inside and outside of the classroom, its role in attrition for students of color, as well as other negative encounters that students of color face when enrolled in these institutions, and some effective ways that instructors can decrease the racial tension in the classroom.

**Introduction***Statement of the Problem:*

Historically, students of color have been underrepresented in education. With a large achievement gap in education present between students of color and white students, there are not many students that matriculate through universities and colleges. Barriers such as racism from their white counterparts and within the institution stand in the way of students of color not graduating from higher learning institutions.

*Purpose of the Research:*

The purpose of this qualitative research is to investigate the negative factors that hinder students of color with matriculation at predominately white institutions, and focus on different interventions teachers/instructors can employ to help minimize the racial tension that these students face.

*Significance of the Research:*

The significance of this research is that it will serve as a tool for students, faculty and administration at predominately white institutions to help find different ways to work with students of color in these environments. This will also be a tool to help students of color address some of the microaggressions white students and faculty give off every day, consciously or unconsciously, throughout college campuses.

## Literature Review

Students of color experienced many barriers in education including discrimination and prejudice on college campuses around the country. Prior to the 1960's, segregation prevented blacks and whites from going to school together. Now in the twenty-first century, though schools are not officially segregated anymore, students of color and white students continue to have different schooling experiences. For example, African American males are disproportionately less educated than white students and this presents one of the many forms of racism (institutional and systematic) and discrimination that students of color have to face within the society (Hall and Rowan, 2001). Recruiting and retaining students of color at PWIs will create a balance that is needed for the achievement gap to close.

Along with students of color, faculty and staff of color may have the same negative experiences, making it much more difficult to assist students of color at the institution with retention efforts. Various variables such as “social isolation, lower salaries, lower academic rank, and discrimination” which affects faculty of color were identified (Jayakumar, Howard, Allen, and Han (2009). Faculty of color remain underrepresented in higher education, one of the many reasons why there are few mentors to students of color at PWIs (Jayakumar, Howard, Allen, and Han, 2009). It's hard for students of color on campus to identify with the administration, if no one can culturally identify with them. The climate of the campus and racism inside and outside of the classroom are some of the important factors that determine whether or not students of color will remain at the institution. Although the number has risen for enrollment, retention and graduation for students of color at PWIs, there is still a significant difference between students of color and their white counterparts within with regard to matriculation through higher education.

Students of color attending a PWI face many barriers that may include having negative experiences, feelings of isolation, power differences and low retention and graduation rates. Interventions have been implemented to balance students' negative experiences, such as effective counseling programs (Taylor, 1985), self regulation and psychoeducation to try to decrease internalizing racist attitudes (Brandonlo, Gallo, Myers, 2009), and attacking racism at a macro-level (Guerin, 2005). The purpose of this literature is to investigate the various barriers that students of color face in higher education and to search for practices effective and reliable interventions that will help with their matriculation at a PWI.

A first generation student (FGS) comes from a family where they typically are or will be the first to have completed a college degree program. Many students who are labeled as being first generation also come from homes that are low income. Most of these students have obligations to have a job to provide for themselves and/or their families financially (Prospero and Gupta, 2007).

Historically, students of color have been underrepresented in higher education. Graduation rates for students of color are significantly different from students that are white. In higher education, many students of color are labeled FGS. After de-segregation of the schooling systems, graduation rates for FGS and students of color have risen, but they still are not equal. "Degrees earned by race/ethnicity from 1981 and 2001 are White 86.4%-74.5%; African American, 6.5%- 8.9%; Hispanic, 2.3%- 6.2%; and Asian, 2.0%- 6.3%"( U.S. Census Bureau as cited in Prospero and Gupta, 2007).

PWIs around the country appear to have only a small percentage of students of color who are in the process of obtaining a degree, but these students feel out of place, which may be correlated by feelings of isolation. Evidence has been shown that black and Hispanic students are

graduating at a much lower rate, or they are not likely to graduate within five years, than white students (Thomas, et. al, 2007). Historically, students of color have been excluded from education and their culture is not as understood as their white counterparts' culture, which makes it much harder to feel welcomed by the campus community. For students of color, in particular, first generation students, this environment of being away from home can affect them academically, socially, and mentally. As with any other big adjustment in life, the college transition can have a big impact on the lives of students.

According to Olenchak and Herbet (2002), there have been several studies on FGS and it has been found that some students have unclear purposes for being in college, problems adjusting to college, and feelings of isolation, which can and most often does lead to college abandonment (cited in Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Adjustment issues and social stress may also contribute to hard transitioning from high school to college since, historically, black students have spent most of their time in schools that were segregated (Thomas, et.al, 2007).

Typically, when students are exposed to a different environment from which they were raised, it generally is a culture shock, and there are many students of color who cannot properly deal with these uncomfortable situations, and choose to leave the new environment (the institution) to return home where they are much more at ease. In a study by Bodkin-Andrews, O'Rourke, Grant, Denson & Craven (2010), they examined many factors including the impact of perceived discrimination and multiculturalism for indigenous and non-indigenous students in Australia. Their study found that indigenous students were more likely than the non-indigenous students to experience higher levels of perceived discrimination, and academic disengagement. These factors standing in the way of the matriculation of students of color, are consistent with evidence of barriers to graduation. "Smedley, Myers, and Harell's (1993) study, which included

Chicano and other Latino students, reported that students on predominately white campuses face specific stresses associated with their minority status and that minority freshmen exhibit considerable psychological sensitivity to the campus social climate, including interpersonal tension with white students and faculty and actual or perceived experiences of racism and discrimination” (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Racism is deeply rooted in education, especially in higher education.

Racism in the classroom can have the same effect on students of color as racism outside of the classroom, which may cause students of color to clique up when inside a classroom setting together or when hanging out around campus. In education 86 % of teachers are white, and rarely understand the view of racial minorities and are oblivious to some of the things they say or do to affect students of color in the classroom (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). Unconsciously or consciously, instructors may single out the few students of color in the classroom to speak for their entire race, which puts them on the spot and makes them feel very uncomfortable. “Professors who looked to students of color to be the racial or ethnic experts were often viewed as unhelpful because students of color are placed in an educational role at the expense of their own growth” (Sue D. W., Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009).

Students of color are likely to struggle in classroom settings due to the lack of their own culture integrated into their studies as well the general lack of culture insensitivity of their white counterparts. Morgan (2010) stated that students of color schooling experiences are more likely to be negative if the teaching styles constantly differ from those of their own culture.

These negative perceptions that students of color have about the climate on PWIs have a connection to poor academic performance (Chang, 1999; Pfeifer & Schneider, 1974) and lower self-esteem (R. James, 1998 as cited in Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). When in groups for an

assignment, it is typical for students of color to be picked last for groups or not hold enough weight in a group, and non-students of color can make them feel inferior and make them feel as though they are not worthy of contributing sufficient group work. “For instance, Steele has proposed that negative stereotypes about the intellectual ability of minority groups (such as Blacks and to some extent, Hispanics) may result in their academic underperformance through their fear of confirming these negative stereotypes” (Fischer, 2007). When Whites are unaware of these microaggressions, they begin to believe the world they live in is superior to the world of people of color (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009).

According to Reid and Radhakrishnan (2003) students have defined the academic climate as the treatment from the instructor, how they are perceived by students in their class, and academic monitoring from the professor. With the white students and faculty having little to no knowledge about minority students’ learning and communication styles’, this is one specific reason as to why many students of color may experience more problems in school than white students (Morgan, 2010).

Sue and Constantine (2007) hypothesized that many teachers are fearful that (a) racial dialogue in the classroom will create unnecessary antagonisms between students and/or teachers, (b) they may lose control of the classroom situation and (c) they may become paralyzed and unable to facilitate important dialogues on race (Sue, et al. 2010). Teaching about different ethnicities at PWIs can be essential to all students’ education inside and outside of the institution itself. There are several majors, internships, and jobs that now require students to have some experience in dealing with people that come from different backgrounds and to gain other experience with diverse communities outside of the school setting. Although there may be various reasons as to why instructors, faculty, and staff are uncomfortable with discussing the

topic of race, without this conversation, it can be very detrimental to the success of many college students. Sue, et al, (2009) proposed that teachers who cannot handle the difficult dialogue that is associated with racism can make it harmful to students of color in that setting and perpetuate the worldviews of White students. A previous study by Sue, et al, (2010) examined the perceptions and interpretations of 14 white students in a Counseling Psychology graduate program. Some individuals stated they were “unwilling to discuss racial issues and preferred to end such dialogues by disclaiming racial or ethnic differences”. This invisible “elephant in the room” of race is a problem that needs to be address if the plan is to close the achievement gap between students of color and White students.

Racism, prejudice, and discrimination against students of color play an integral part in the campus climate and communities within PWIs. Although different students have different college experiences because of their differing backgrounds, their cultural background can make an even bigger difference. Previous literature shows that there is a 20% gap in graduation rates between black and white students (Douglas, K, 1998). Another study presented by Reid and Radhakrishnan (2003) has found that white students have a much more positive view of the campus than students of color. When racial conflicts arise on a campus and they are not dealt with properly, students of color begin to wonder if speaking against racism is a high priority.

Reid and Radhakrishnan (2003) defined racial climate as “the composition of students’ observations of their experience as racial minorities on campus.” When students of color first step foot on a PWI, the climate of the campus is imperative because first impressions are everything. Students of color should know that the institution promotes and supports the initiative of diversity for them to feel welcomed, which makes students more open to becoming involved in and out of the campus community, whether in sports, campus organizations, or social

events. “Students who become more involved in various aspects of campus life not only are more likely to stay in college but also may perform better academically” (Fischer, 2007).

Adding to these hostile factors, not seeing many faculty of color at PWIs can affect the campus climate for students. Feelings of isolation can occur when students feel as though they do not have a support system that potentially looks like them. Faculty of color are essential to PWIs because they provide students with mentors that look like them, and positive role models that they can relate to. Often at PWIs, faculty of color will act as advocates for students of color, because most of the time, no one else will. With lack of mentoring by African American faculty, students may feel alone, and discouraged with the academic and campus setting (as cited in Jayakumar, Howard, Allen, Han, 2009). In a culturally insensitive environment, students of color will gravitate to what they are most familiar and comfortable with.

Addressing microaggressions and understanding how white teachers and instructors dominant racial ideologies’ affect the classroom dynamic will potentially help with students of color college experience.

Microaggressions have been defined by Sue, Capodilupo, et. al (2007), as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group”. Students of color on predominately white institutions are faced with these everyday and it can affect them socially and academically, and could potentially be one main factor that causes them to leave the institution. Popular phrases within our society, “I don’t see color at all” and “everyone is equal”, are hidden messages and forms of microaggressions that people of color see every day.

Reports of microaggressions by students of color are prominent on a PWI, but are often unnoticed by white students and faculty because of their unconscious (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawami, & Hodson, 2002; Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008) as cited in (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). Although the topic of racism evokes negative tension, instructors of all subjects desperately need to facilitate racial dialogues in the classroom to reassure students of color. Failing to address the issue of race in the classroom creates a problematic environment for both the students and teachers (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009).

A study presented by Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, and Rivera (2009) revealed some unhelpful strategies that participants (14 persons of color) reported from the dialogues teachers facilitated about race. The participants revealed that when a teacher is passive (letting the class take over the discussion) disengaged, and becomes emotional (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009), about the discussion make the student (of color) feel uncomfortable. Some helpful ways were to validate feelings, and comfort when addressing race to the class. In another study by Sue, Rivera, Capodilupo, Lin and Rivera (2010) participants reported that they believe certain dialogues on race were more comfortable when instructors' validated their feelings and experiences, along with instructor's admitting to their own biases and feelings.

The results in both studies show that students of color feel much more comfortable when teachers/instructors address racial matters in a manner that will allow students to have an honest conversation. There are different perspectives about how difficult dialogues on race should be handled. According to a study by Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, and Rivera (2009), participants believe that the racial awareness of the instructor helped or hindered which route the dialogue would take.

The literature review highlights several important factors that stand in the way of matriculation for students of color attending PWIs. It is imperative for the administration to have a balance of interventions and programs in place for students that encounter negative barriers while attending. The role of the administration on campuses around the country is to build trust with students and to make them feel like they matter on campus. Diversity awareness on campus is an initiative that must be put forth by everyone on campus; not just the student. Equal education requires that everyone has the same opportunity to obtain and receive the education of their desire, and have academic support that they need (Mudge & Higgins, 2011).

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