Breaking the Chains: Student Organizations and Social Integration as means to the Development and Academic Emancipation of African American Students

Lakayana Drury
Undergraduate Student, Applied Social Science

Abstract

As far as the United States has come in terms of racially equality, including the advent of the first African American president, African American college students continue to have some of the lowest retention rates in the country and struggle to succeed in college. Researchers look far and wide for resources to bring to campuses to improve success rates of these students. However, student organizations are an overlooked asset on college campuses and have been understudied in regards to African American student success. Data collected through interviews of African American students at a predominantly white institution was analyzed to shed light on the potential of student organizations to facilitate social integration and develop a healthy racial identity. This study has identified networking as a key in achieving social integration and a healthy racial identity among African American college students. These results can be used to inform policies to encourage African American students to become proactively engaged in student organizations and develop skills critical to their success in college and for universities to focus more resources toward these organizations. *Keywords: African American students, student organizations, racial identity, social integration, social solidarity.*

Imagine a college campus where student organizations consisted of students of all races and ethnicities coming together to express and share ideas, helping to construct a polyethnic future from which the whole of society could benefit. Far from an academic utopian dream, this is a tangible undertaking in which our contemporary society is capable of

making great inroads. However, despite great improvements across racial barriers, the idea of a truly diverse college campus remains unfulfilled today. African American college students continue to struggle with social integration, which is the strength of the attachment that we have to society (Goodman & Ritzer, 2004) on college campuses. The lack of social integration results in the alienation of African American students on campuses across the nation, translating to low retention rates. Research that focuses on social integration through student organizations and their effects on student success could lay the groundwork for the development of a new understanding of student organizations on campus. This research would be especially helpful to college administrators seeking to improve minority student social integration levels and success on campus.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how student organizations influence African American students' social integration, racial identity development, and ultimately their overall college experiences at predominantly white institutions (to be referred hereafter as PWIs). Of broader interest is the direct relationship between social integration levels among African American students and diversity on college campuses. Two social theories were used in this study; double consciousness theory is used to examine the concept of self-identity of African American students and how that varies in relation to student organization involvement. Additionally, the theory of solidarity was also used to explore the relationship between African American students and retention, and how student organizations could act as a catalyst to facilitate social solidarity among African American students at PWIs. Exploring the experience of African American college students with student organizations offers original and unique information in improving retention rates within one of the lowest graduating minority groups (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

Literature Review

Previous studies revealed that researchers have sought social integration as a strategy to improve retention and utilized a variety of approaches in an attempt to achieve these ends. Research can be broadly characterized into three categories: the examination of the historical roots of African American student efforts, venues for reconciliation of conflicting self-

identities among African American students, and student organizations as settings of development for African American student leaders.

The activism of African American students in the 1970s' Black Power Movement helped reshape the college experience for African American students and charted a new role for student organizations (Williamson, 1999). These African American student pioneers helped shape the first support networks inside college institutions for other African American students, including Black Student departments, academic support services, and student organizations such as the Black Student Union (Williamson, 1999). The Black Student Union was part of a larger group of ethnic student organizations that emerged in the 20th century American collegiate system. In addition to the emergence of these new organizations, institutions were also encouraged to redevelop and adjust internal structures to better suit the students' needs (Richardson & Skinner, 1990).

Of major concern to modern scholars and researches alike is the issue of self-identity among African American students. Research has identified a relationship between racial identity and race-related stress, specifically in regards to the internalization of racial attitudes (Arbona & Johnson, 2006). Research shows that internalization and development of healthy racial identities allows African Americans students to focus on achievement but that students have difficulty developing such identities (Ford & Grantham, 2003). Racial identity has different impacts depending on the gender of African American students. African American female students are highly influenced by societal definitions of race and gender, and their identity development and self-esteem are closely related to the campus environment. Joining student organizations can add positive effects to their identity development (Watt, 2006). Student organizations are identified as a major originator of leadership development of African American male students, and more development occurred in ethnic student organizations as opposed to mainstream organizations (Harper & Stephen, 2007).

Researchers identify social integration as the vessel through which African American education should be addressed. Tinto's theory of student departure identifies social integration as one of the primary reasons students leave campus (Draper, 2002). Social integration encompasses all aspects of the college setting, including classrooms,

athletics, and living communities. Research on African American student involvement shows that in-class and out-of-class experiences positively impact student development (Flowers, 2004). In regards to development, studies point to ethnic student organizations as more effective than mainstream student organizations in developing black leadership among males and identified cross-cultural communication, part of social integration, as a key skill these students developed (Harper & Stephen, 2007). Research on African American student organizations and the relationship to social integration finds that they promote networking and cultural connection and help them feel more comfortable (Guiffrida, 2003). Beyond social integration, research has interpreted the connection between student organizations and African Americans holistically (Harper & Stephen, 2007) and identified ethnic student organizations as safe zones for minority students that help facilitate cultural adjustment, cultural expression, and cultural validation (Museus, 2008).

Ultimately, the focus of this study pertains to African American student engagement in student organizations on college campuses. Previous research has shown that African American student social integration can be impacted by involvement in student organizations and that this impacts university diversity and minority retention rates (Flowers 2004; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Stephen 2007; Museus, 2008; Literte, 2010). However, not addressed in previous research is the meaning of a healthy racial identity among African American students, understood here as a recognition of positive identity within a racial group while identifying barriers and opportunities to integrate within other cultural, social environments (O'Connor et al., 2011). This study explores student organizations, social integration, and self-identity among African American college students, specifically targeting a rural Midwestern PWI, to better understand the meaning of a healthy racial identity and how that may be facilitated by student organizations.

Theory

This study takes a grounded theory approach and utilizes the inductive nature of qualitative research to explore the meaning people attach to their social reality, which is marked by a careful process of "reflexive or dialectical interplay between theory and data whereby theory

enters in at every point, shaping not only analysis but how social events come to be perceived and written up as data in the first place" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 167). Two theoretical perspectives frame this study: both the double consciousness theory and the theory of solidarity bring clarity to the results of the research and structure to the analysis.

First, W.E.B. Du Bois (1897) developed a social theory he called "double consciousness" to explain the concept of African Americans viewing themselves simultaneously through their vision of the world and through the white person's view of the world. The dilemma and contradiction of being both of African ancestry and an American at the same time can have profound effects on a person's psyche. In relationship to the collegiate experience, there is confusion in regards to identity for the African American student in the struggle to fit in with the social structure of their campus wherein "he simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 2). Du Bois (1903) stated, "The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line." Double consciousness theory helps to ground this study in understanding students' perceived idea of the contradiction of being African American and being an American student and whether that is reconciled by student organizations.

The second theory utilized by this study is Emile Durkheim's theory of solidarity, stemming from his research in suicides. While suicide is an extreme reaction and far from the norm of African American students' response to their college experience, the idea of social integration that developed from its research is highly relevant to this study. Durkheim's theory involves two components, integration and regulation, but for the purpose of this study the focus is solely on the integration component. Durkheim defined integration as the strength of the attachment that we have to society (Goodman & Ritzer, 2004). It is important to note that social integration does not imply coerced assimilation or forced integration (United Nations, 2005). Two extremes of social integration exist on opposite ends of the spectrum and can be detrimental to the individual. On one hand, a person will feel complete alienation from society, and on the other hand, they will over-identify with their social group and be highly susceptible to rash action and group activities.

African American students must seek social integration, but only to a degree in which they find balance between both ends of the spectrum. Social integration will lead to an increase in the larger concept of Durkheim's studies, social solidarity, or the changed way in which society is held together and its members see themselves as part of a whole (Goodman & Ritzer, 2004). Durkheim identified two types of solidarity, mechanical and organic. Of particular interest here with student organizations and social integration is mechanical solidarity in which people share a set of common activities and similar responsibilities, in this case, going to college and sharing a similar struggle of developing a healthy racial identity at a PWI. Durkheim's theory of solidarity acts as a gauge with which to measure African American progress on campus and gives clarity to non-academic factors that can influence retention.

Methods

Social integration, self-identity, and student organizations are the primary variables of interest in this study. The goals of this study include exploring diversity and giving a voice to marginalized groups (Ragin & Amoroso,2011).Qualitativemethodswereusedtoaddresstwokeyquestions:

1. What social issues prevent African American students from identifying with and participating in student organizations?
2. What is the meaning of college and racial identity to African American students?

Using previous literature, double consciousness theory, and the theory of solidarity, this study was informed by two guiding propositions that are linked to the above research questions:

1. Student organizations, specifically ethnic student organizations, help mediate the effect of double consciousness on confusion and contradictions in social norms for African American college students.
2. Social integration on campus improves the healthy racial identity among African American students, and facilitates a more comfortable and educational experience.

Methodology

Data in this qualitative study was collected through informal, structured interviews at the college campus which these African American students attended. This study used an emergent, grounded theory design which allowed the research to adapt or change after data collection. The research location of this study was a PWI, specifically a medium-sized public university. This study included student participants because African American undergraduate students were the target population at the research location. The participants featured a balanced gender selection, two female and two male subjects. Another important characteristic was variation in years of study, providing a simple cross-section of the African American student body. The small sample size speaks to the overall size of the African American student population at this PWI, which was under 100 students. The criteria for participation in this study included students' involvement in student organizations, class (year in school), sex, availability, willingness to participate, and variation in perceived degree of success, which narrowed the participant field substantially. The four students that were selected included Nefertiti, a freshman, Amina, a sophomore, Mansa, a sophomore, and Shaka, a junior. Each participant has been given a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

The methodology used for the qualitative portion of this study was face-to-face interviews, using a voice recording device and fieldnotes recorded in a notebook. It is important to highlight the role of the primary researcher in this study, specifically to identify the researcher's background, values, and biases. Identifying and recognizing potential bias can add real-life experience to the study and enhance validity. There are many similarities in terms of background between the researcher, the participants, and the target population. These include: sharing the same racial identity, attending the same university, attending some of the same classes, and participating in the same student organizations with some of the participants during the research process. During this study, the researcher was active in multiple student organizations, serving as president of one organization, and as an officer of two others. This type of research has been referred to as "backyard research," studying one's friends, organization, or immediate work setting (Creswell, 2009).

Results

After conducting interviews and transcribing the results, the text and fieldnotes were coded and organized into themes and patterns. The dominant themes that were identified included "networking," defined as a "supportive system of exchange of information or services among individuals, groups or institutions" (Merriam-Webster, 2011), to develop and facilitate social integration. Next, "social pressure," or the tension and/or stress caused by the presence of social contours and/or lack of a self-identity in a particular social environment that creates urgency or pressure to find belonging, was the second theme. "Social contours" are defined as barriers, bubbles, lines, or zones around people and/or opportunities created by societal norms that restrict social movement and or social integration (e.g., racial barrier, personal space bubble, the color line, friendship zone). Third was "adaptation," which is the process of adjusting to environmental conditions and/or a change in behavior of a person or group in response to new or modified surroundings make an individual more receptive to social integration (The Free Dictionary, 2009). "Acceptance" was the final theme, defined as the act of accepting or agreeing with one's identity. The relationships among these themes suggested that a developed social network in a particular social environment helped to navigate social contours and negate the effects of social pressure, ultimately helping the students socially integrate while developing a healthy racial identity and successful college experience.

Networking was directly or indirectly referred to by all interview participants. Nefertiti referred to networking as a "tool" that can be utilized to "meet people and put your name out there," while Amina referred to it as "a safety net." These two statements refer to networking in opposing contexts: one as a proactive tool in an assertive context and the other as a safety mechanism in a passive context. Using networking in an assertive manner suggests the student seeks social integration in his or her social environment, making the student inclined to feel more comfortable with his or her college experience. As a passive strategy, networking suggests that the student seeks safety and is less inclined to pursue social integration. Ultimately, the way in which networking as a tool is used by students can impact how social forces affect them and their social integration in college.

Social pressure was expressed in several forms throughout the interview process. How students reacted to this pressure was the difference between utilizing networking in an assertive or passive manner when confronted with social integration. The following comment from Mansa illustrates one example of how African American students experience the concept of social pressure:

> *When I'm new to the school or any environment you feel a little intimidated. Because of the environment you came into you feel isolated because you don't know anybody from that community, and you have this fear; will these people accept me or reject me? (Mansa, personal communication, April 14, 2011)*

Mansa's statement was reiterated among other participants. Some participants called it pressure, others referred to it as tension. The pressure, as Nefertiti referred to it, was a direct reflection of the alienation on campus in which she felt "pressured to find other minority students instead of being in the general population with everyone else." Shaka said the tension he felt made him lose focus. These statements suggest that less social integration increased the amount of social pressure students felt. Much of the social pressure participants experienced was described by them as the effects of social contours they encountered in their social environments.

Social contours were a subtle theme in this study that explained the barrier between proactive networking and perceptions of pressure. The participants explained them as "social bubbles," zones, or invisible lines, that generate pressure and tension. "[African Americans can excel] if they're willing to get outside their bubble," explained Amina, "I've been living outside my bubble since I was born. My mom's Black and my dad is white" (personal communication, April 11, 2011). Other participants experienced the contours as a "zone," as was the case with Shaka who described his particular experience: "I'm not going to have minorities to connect with, so I had to get out of my comfort zone (Shaka, personal communication, April 10, 2011)." In these two statements, engaging in social integration was used as a channel to overcome social contours, which was reflected in language such as "living outside" or "getting out [of their natural social environment]." The social contours remained when

attempts of social integration were not successful. Nefertiti mentioned "[something] almost like a . . . dividing line" that she felt separates her from fellow, white students. Du Bois (1903) defined this as the "color line" in describing a barrier preventing blacks from participating in various activities with whites (p. 3). The color line is traditionally used in reference to the Jim Crow laws of segregation in the American South in the early 20th century, but it can apply to any barrier—real or perceived—of difference of opportunities separating whites and racial minorities. The presence of the color line speaks to the immense task African Americans feel exists in overcoming social contours present at PWIs. However, Amina and Shaka discussed how African American students must take initiative if they are to surmount these barriers through adaptation.

Before moving further into how integration was established through developing a healthy racial identity, it is important to distinguish between adapting and adjusting. Adapting involves a major change in environment, while adjusting involves only minor changes. African American students have to adapt to the environment of PWIs, which are often very different in terms of culture and diversity from their home environment. "[I have] adjusted, not adapted, to the situation that it is; this is not what I am used to" Nefertiti explained (Nefertiti, personal communication, April 9, 2011). Her statement suggests that adjustment is a strategy used by African Americans like a Band-Aid; it covers the issue but does not fully address the challenges they experience. In other words, adjustment alleviates social pressure but does not facilitate social integration. When Shaka discussed adaptation, he suggested that adapting leads to developing a healthy racial identity: "When I first got to college I didn't feel comfortable, but I adapted; just learned to deal with it. I'm only here for my education . . . . Adapting for me was just like, accepting the campus, accepting that I'm a minority" (Shaka, personal communication, April 10, 2011)

Acceptance then was another theme which explains the link to adaption, being comfortable, and remaining in college for African American students. Amina expressed accepting her African American identity and using it to excel in school:

I didn't know I was Black until I was in 5th grade . . . . Interacting with other kids, I wanted to be the best example they could see. I didn't want them to be closed-minded to the images they saw on T.V. I saw it as a challenge." (Amina, personal communication, April 11, 2011)

Accepting a healthy racial identity was linked to participants feeling comfortable in their social environment and seeing networking as an assertive tool developed through social integration; they felt less tension and pressure from the social environment to be something they are not when they develop a healthy racial identity. For the three participants who expressed feeling comfortable on campus, or felt they were succeeding, acceptance of a healthy racial identity as a means to success was identified as the point in which their learning began to produce positive results. Taken as a whole, this research illustrates that acceptance dialectically builds upon assertive networking to increase social integration and overcome constraints surrounding social pressure and social contours for African American college students at a PWI.

Conclusion

This study identified networking as the link between social integration and a healthy racial identity for African Americans students. These results relate to previous literature that suggests student organizations build leadership and also reaffirmed the relationship between student organizations and social integration. It also builds off previous research, suggesting that healthy racial identities among African American and prospective student retention rates may increase when African American students link self-acceptance with networking. Networking is effective through assertive engagement in student organizations as opposed to passive engagement. However, both assertive and passive approaches have the same starting point, joining student organizations; therefore, careful attention must be paid to distinguish types of student behavior. Generally speaking, student organizations are a positive influence on African American college students.

The overall question in studies such as this is the direction in which the causation runs: Are African Americans more successful

and comfortable in college if they join student organizations, or do they join student organizations because they are more successful and comfortable in school? There is truth in both statements as both successful and less successful African American students are inclined to join student organizations, especially ethnic student organizations. Nefertiti, who felt less successful, joined a student organization because of lack of social interaction, while Amina, who felt more successful, joined in order to challenge racial attitudes. Nefertiti spoke of the pressure African Americans students feel regarding social integration, which suggests students may join student organizations because of social pressure, but this does not necessarily guarantee a successful development of a healthy racial identity. Additionally, Shaka, who now feels successful in college, confessed he did not feel comfortable when he first came to college. For him, student organizations appear to be a factor in linking social integration and success through assertive networking and developing a healthy racial identity. In general, student organizations appear to be an important first step towards social integration, especially for those who feel less comfortable and successful in college. However, other factors also play an important role in social integration, developing a healthy racial identity, and being successful in college. While some social contours and double consciousness may always exist in society for racial minorities, African Americans can use proactive networking to surmount some of these barriers.

In addressing the first research question regarding social issues that prevent African American students from identifying with and participating in student organizations, this study suggests that joining student organizations is less of a problem than how students participate in them. Being a member of a student organization is not in and of itself enough to facilitate meaningful and effective social integration as Nefertiti's experience demonstrates; students likely need to be assertively engaged in the organization to make their membership successful. Being proactively engaged in student organizations appears to help develop a healthy racial identity and may lead to retention. This revelation addresses the second question regarding the meaning of college for African American students. The focus of African American students in college, according to the results of this study, should be the development of a

healthy racial identity which will not only lead to a comfortable, successful college experience but would likely also be useful beyond college.

Student organizations already exist on college campuses, with little to no financial startup costs, but are not considered key to students' success. By understanding the importance of these organizations and utilizing them more effectively, colleges will save money, time, and other resources. African Americans and their student organizations could be supported by complementing services of university offices such as a Black Studies Department or Student Services offices specializing in racial minority needs. Offices also provide stability to student organizations because they are rooted in the college system, with a higher degree of longevity. The absence of such offices on university campuses may hinder the success of student organizations.

A greater amount of interviews, focus groups, and survey research that is informed by the findings here would offer a more holistic and generalizable picture of the challenges African American students face in college. Further research to investigate how other minority groups (e.g., in terms of gender, social class, sexual orientation, and other ethnicities) are affected by student organizations could also add breadth and depth to findings here.

Student organizations encourage student activism and help facilitate social integration and solidarity with other students on campus. Most importantly, student organizations can encourage African American students to take a more active role in their own experience, giving them a sense of responsibility and control over their futures. The results of this study serve as a call to action to African American students to engage in student activism and involvement. We see historical examples of this with the students of the Black Power Movement who created the first African American student organizations and used student organizations as a vessel to ultimately control the conditions of their academic success. African American struggles for freedom and equality in the United States have always embodied the ideas of proactive networking and healthy racial identities. This study adds further empirical verification of such patterns, and it specifically shows how student organizations serve as an avenue to academic emancipation.

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