Black Student Engagement:
Resilience & Success Under Duress

by

Serie McDougal, III
mcdougal@sfsu.edu,
Department of Africana Studies at San Francisco State University
Co-Director of Afrometrics Research Institute

Wesley Cox
wcox@mail.sfsu.edu, wesleybleu@gmail.com
San Francisco State University, Department of Africana Studies
School of Design

Tiana Dorley
tdorley@mail.sfsu.edu, tianadorley@gmail.com
San Francisco State University, Department of Africana Studies
Department of Communication Studies

&

Hanna Wodaje
hannawodaje@gmail.com
Department of Africana Studies
San Francisco State University Black Unity Center

Abstract

This study is an investigation of the factors influencing student engagement and success among Black/African American and African identified college students. Nine focus groups were conducted with a total of 41 students focusing on their institutional supports, barriers to success, and their own individual and collective efforts to be successful despite barriers. Several themes were discovered in the analysis, including barriers to Black student success and sources of support.

Authors

Serie McDougal, III is a professor in the Department of Africana Studies, in the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University. He received his B.S. in Sociology from Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa. Additionally, he has an MA in Africana Studies from the State University of New York at Albany, NY, and a Ph.D. in African American Studies from Temple University in Philadelphia, PA. Serie McDougal is also the co-director of the Afrometrics Research Institute.

Wesley Michael Kwame Cox is a current student at San Francisco State University in California pursuing a B.S. in Industrial Design with an emphasis in Product Design and a B.A. in Africana Studies with an emphasis in Humanities. He works on campus as the Afrocentric floor Resident Assistant in the second year community, under the Department of Residential Life. He is the college of Ethnic Studies representative for Associated Students incorporated. During the inaugural year of the Black Unity Center at SF State, Mr. Cox was a student coordinator and continues to work with Black students. He has also worked on executive boards of Black campus organizations such as Black Residents United in Housing and the Black Student Union.

Tiana Ama Isis Dorley attends San Francisco State University in California and pursuing a B.A. in Africana Studies with an emphasis Social Sciences also a B.A. in Communication Studies. She has served her community as president on the executive board of Black Residents United in Housing and Black Student Union. She was the first Resident Assistant for the Department of Residential Life's inaugural Afrocentric Living Learning Community and she played a fundamental role in the development of the first and second-year communities. Additionally, she has been the liaison for the campus and community by partnering up with programs such as Reading Partners at Bret Harte Elementary in the Bayview District in San Francisco to connect the students with the community by volunteering in predominantly Black schools.

Hanna Wodaje currently serves as the Administrative Analyst Specialist at the Black Unity Center at San Francisco State University. She is a recent graduate from San Francisco State University with a major in Africana Studies. She is the daughter of immigrants who migrated from Eritrea and Ethiopia. She served as co-chair for the first Black Student Union at San Francisco State University and as Assistant Director for the Women's Center. She contributed to the creation of the first Black Unity Center at San Francisco State University. She is also a member of the first Black sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated. She continues to play a role as a community activist in the Bay Area and has dedicated her life's purpose to the complete liberation of her community.

Introduction

Positive social and psychological college environments have an influence on students' educational passion and the efforts they put forth (Chen, Ingram, & Davis, 2014; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004). What leads to student engagement may be common for many students, yet it is also likely to differ due to many factors, among them race and ethnicity. Student demographics at higher-education institutions across the United States are shifting in ways that will place new demands on universities to be culturally responsive. Much of the current research on Black student engagement consists of large samples where Black students are underrepresented while others involve comparisons between predominantly Black institutions or predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Black students are attending schools that are demographically diverse; neither predominantly Black nor predominantly White, yet Black student engagement at these schools has seldom been investigated in-depth. Some of these campuses are demographically diverse, yet Black students remain underrepresented. Due to the failure to explore the experiences of Black students on these campuses, potential key factors to stimulate Black student engagement can remain unidentified. Additionally, considering the fact that Black students face unique challenges on such campuses, failure to conduct research on Black student experiences on these campuses may allow Black students to be systematically under-supported and disengaged, behind a veil of *diversity*.

Literature Review

The following review of the literature surveys the currently available research on the factors that influence Black student engagement. Several studies investigating differences between the engagement of Black students based on institutional types are described. The impact of racism on Black student success is summarized. Lastly, Black students' methods of social, psychological, and cultural resistance and resilience are described.

Black Student Engagement

Student engagement is the level of passion and interest students show in their learning experiences. According to Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea (2008), student engagement is "both the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices" (p.542). From this perspective, student engagement includes what institutions can do; such as adjusting teaching practices, developing programs like first-year seminars, service-learning courses, and learning communities (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008). Ultimately, student engagement includes a component which focuses on the energy students put into their educational experiences, while the other includes the resources and efforts that institutions put into creating an environment that promotes student involvement (Chen, Ingram, & Davis, 2014).

According to Shappie & Debb (2017), student engagement is a multidimensional construct which includes three main components: behavioral (academic and social or extracurricular involvement), affective (affective reactions to teachers, peers, and the school), and cognitive (investment and mental effort). According to Harper, Carini, Bridges, and Hayek (2004), active student engagement positively affects cognitive and intellectual skill development, moral and ethical development, psychosocial development, and positive images of self. Research has found that African American students benefit more from educationally purposeful activities including, but not limited to studying, doing the reading for class, asking questions, meeting with professors to discuss grades, and working with other students on projects (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008; Shappie & Debb, 2017). Some argue that student engagement has this differential effect, in part, because it compensates for the lower abilities of students from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008). Based on this logic, institutions should channel students who are from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups and low-income families, educationally unprepared, and/or first-generation college students into educationally effective activities to educationally effective activities (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008; Shappie & Debb, 2017). However, these perspectives ignore the role that racist anti-Black cultural climates play in influencing Black student levels of engagement.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have proven to provide generally positive social and psychological environments that foster enhanced student engagement for Black college students, despite the fact that they are generally financially poorer than PWIs (Chen, Ingram, & Davis, 2014; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004). Compared to PWI's, at HBCUs Black students typically report higher levels of self-concept, self-efficacy, and achievement orientation (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004). According to Harper, Carini, Bridges, and Hayek (2004), at HBCU's, Black students "devote more effort to academic activities; experience more significant gains in intellectual development, critical thinking, and cultural awareness; and enjoy greater personal and social benefits than African Americans at PWIs" (p. 272). Unlike other universities, HBCUs create campus climates which are instructionally inclusive, and sensitive to Black students' cultures of origin and their needs and priorities (Shappie & Debb, 2017). One seldom acknowledged factor, which Shappie & Debb (2017) point out, is the positive impact that HBCUs' common mission of racial-uplift has on Black student engagement.

Predominantly White Campuses

Research continuously demonstrates differences in Black student engagement at PWIs and HBCUs. At PWIs, Black students must endure challenges such as feeling isolated, marginalized, and excluded in their attempts to adjust to campus environments (Patton, Bridges, & Flowers, 2011). Such challenges are primarily due to racist climates, low teacher expectations, being expected to represent all members of their racial/ethnic group, being excluded from study groups, and other racial microaggressions (Patton, Bridges, & Flowers, 2011).

Black students' experiences with racism on college campuses in the form of microaggression, cultural isolation, and avoidance have physiological, psychological, and behavioral consequences, which in-turn can have academic consequences. Moreover, racism is seldom isolated and can be found at many sites within universities, from classrooms and administrative offices to residential housing.

Black Student Resistance and Resilience

On the campuses of colleges and universities across the country, many Black students find social and academic support in Africana Studies departments and programs. In unique ways, Africana Studies' pedagogical approaches have been found to provide students with social support, racial socialization, cultural pride, and culturally responsive departmental activities and services, and knowledge of their intellectual heritage in various subject areas (Adams, 2014; Carey & Allen, 1977). These pedagogical approaches in Africana Studies are associated with positive racial identity development, increased self-esteem, increased self-efficacy, and increased likelihood of graduating (Marie, 2016). Black students often find support by creating and joining communities and networks such as African/Black Student Unions (BSUs), Black Culture/Student Centers, Black residence communities, and Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs), which have played instrumental roles in Black campus life for over one hundred years. These organizations have generally had positive influences on Black student success and engagement (Patton, Bridges, & Flowers, 2011). More specifically, such unions have bolstered Black students' academic success and satisfaction (Patton, Bridges, & Flowers, 2011).

When Black students come together in ways that support their academic, social, and psychological resilience it is sometimes called *racial cohesion*. Racial cohesion is related to students' levels of engagement and their involvement in culture-based organizations. Black racial cohesion refers to a sense of having a stake in the success of other Black people, while *racial dissonance* is having a sense of ambivalence or disdain towards one's racial/ethnic group (Bentley-Edwards, Chapman-Hilliard, & Worthington, 2015). Bentley-Edwards, Chapman-Hilliard, and Worthington (2015) investigated racial cohesion among 242 Black students at HBCUs and PWI using questionnaires. The authors found that racial cohesion and racial agency at both PWIs and HBCUs was positively related to participation in extracurricular activities and academically oriented activities. Students with more everyday access to other Black people in their youth were more likely to show high levels of racial cohesion in the form of connectedness and interest in the Black community. Experiences with racism and race-related stress were also positively related to racial cohesion. Racial cohesion was positively related to involvement in cultural affinity-based organizations, as those with greater racial cohesion were more likely to be involved in cultural affinity-based organizations. They also found that racial agency was highest at HBCUs. The authors theorized that Black students receive emotional validation and protection from cultural affinity-based organizations, which are especially necessary at PWIs.

The current body of available literature on Black student engagement supports the notion that college environments that are culturally responsive, welcoming, challenging, and egalitarian are positively related to Black student engagement and achievement. Some of the areas in the current body of literature on Black student engagement remain under-investigated. There are institutions where the majority of the student population is made up of underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, predominantly Latinx or Asian American (combined ethnic groupings), etc.

Black students at these institutions remain underrepresented and their experiences need to be added to the corpus of literature. Campus environments do not impact students the same way across race, gender, and other dimensions of students' identities. The current study is an investigation of the relationship between race, culture, and student engagement at a State University on the West Coast of the United States. The current study used focus groups as a tool for data collection to allow students the opportunity to describe their experiences regarding race, culture, and student engagement in-depth and in their own words. Without race/ethnic-specific knowledge about student engagement, educators and administrators of Black students may carry out their duties with incomplete knowledge of how underrepresented groups experience similar environments in unique ways. Moreover, they run the risk of creating policies that benefit some students while under-serving others. The research question guiding the present study is: "What factors diminish and/or enhance student engagement and success among Black/African American and African identified students at a State University on the West Coast of the United States based on focus group interviews?"

Methods

This investigation took place at a minority-serving institution (MSI) of higher education on the West Coast of the United States. The researchers gained certification from the University's Internal Review Board before collecting data. Focus groups were used to interview Black students about their experiences with their peers, the campus faculty, and staff and about the general social and academic environment at their educational institution. Focus group interviews were determined to be best suited to explore dimensions of Black student engagement that might not be covered by quantitative measures. The researchers determined that focus groups might make participants feel more comfortable discussing issues related to being Black students on campus if they were able to discuss these with other Black students. Moreover, focus groups allowed the researchers to understand how Black students co-create and assign meaning to their experiences with student engagement as Black people on campus. The researchers attained a self-selected sample of 41 African/Black/African American students. A total of nine focus groups were formed with between four and five students in each focus group. The researchers found potential participants by recruiting from predominantly Black student organizations, advertising in the main campus student center, and advertising at the Black Unity Center (BUC) (a Black student resource and programming center) on campus.

All focus groups were video recorded to facilitate the transcription process. Students who were interested in participating were provided with consent forms. Only students who completed consent forms were allowed to participate in the focus groups. Ultimately, the population of participants consisted of 16 males and 25 females. There were 7 freshmen, 6 sophomores, 11 juniors, and 17 seniors. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 45 years. The average age was 21. Participants were asked questions such as: "Can you describe your best source of support at _____ ?"; "In your opinion, what are the greatest challenges that you personally face as a student at _____?"; "In your opinion, what are the greatest challenges Black students face in general at _____?"; "Are there any things that you do that help you to be successful despite these challenges?"; "How would you describe the quality of your interactions with the faculty at_____?"; "How would you describe the quality of the classes that you have taken at _____?"; "How would you describe the quality of your interactions with your peers at _____?"; and "What steps can be taken to improve your experience at _____?" Participants' responses were subjected to content analysis and coded into several themes or patterns of responses to each question. Themes representing the attitudes and opinions of less than 20% of the participants were discarded. Preliminary themes were reanalyzed and ultimately the strongest themes remained, while the least represented themes were eliminated. All participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms. Coding of students' responses to these questions revealed several key themes, presented in the following section. All of the names that appear are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Results: Financial Challenges as Barriers to Success and Health

Thirty-four percent (14/41) of the participants indicated that some of the biggest challenges they faced at the university were financial challenges. They described the effects these challenges had on them personally, professionally, and academically. They identified financial concerns as major distractions from their student lives in several ways. Their responses, for example, included the following:

> "Financial instability. So, I work like 25 to 29 hours a week and I volunteer 9 hours a week and I take 18 units. And so, every day I'm jam-packed with things to do and I can't let one fall without the other falling as well. And it's like, 'Well I really don't want to go to work because I have to study for a statistics test. But if I don't go to work, I can't pay for my $1050 rent bill.' … I need to finish this in four years because I don't have money to stay here for another year semester. So, it's really frustrating. " (Faith, a 21-year-old, female, senior, Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Major)

Students who mentioned financial challenges as some of the biggest issues they faced explained how these challenges affected their security, stability, and performance in other areas of their lives. Part of the impact of their financial challenges was psychological. Some students explained how their lack of financial resources and the cost of housing on and off campus caused them a great deal of insecurity and anxiety which diminished their academic focus and performance. Some explained how they felt burned-out, demoralized, and/or disappointed upon hearing about new tuition increases or seeing the high prices of school materials like their textbooks. To pay tuition, cover their living expenses, and/or pay for housing students explained that they had to work hours at their jobs that make it difficult for them to take the classes they need and meet other academic responsibilities. Moreover, if they did not work enough hours, their housing might be in jeopardy. Some reference student loans while others describe not having the credit or opportunity to access them. Students who have kids, families, full-time jobs and other non-negotiable commitments have to find ways to balance them with their academic commitments. One of the things mentioned by students who identified financial concerns as one of the major challenges they face is how distracted they are from academics. These students have to contend with not having enough money for necessities such as food, housing, and transportation. These concerns make it difficult for them to focus on their academic goals and responsibilities.

Equitable/Responsive Pedagogy

Fifty-six percent (23/41) of the participants mentioned the importance of having more equitable and responsive pedagogy. Some mentioned their desire to experience different teaching styles. Students described effective teaching styles as passionate approaches from engaging professors, who are involved in ensuring that students understand the information and who are sensitive to diverse learners. Some students expressed their desire to have more hands-on learning assignments, more community engaging assignments, and the opportunity for discussion. Others mentioned the importance of having a curriculum that was relevant to them. These students explained that when they are learning in a class where the curriculum includes the experiences, perspectives, and/or contributions of their racial/ethnic groups they are more interested and it is easier for them to stay engaged. For example, one of their responses was:

> "Well, one thing I think, what I've thought about, is a lot of classes go way too fast and they'll spend time making sure everyone gets the concepts. And after two weeks or after a day I go home and there's [inaudible] and I'm already behind. I also think it also places an unnecessary competitive environment on [inaudible]." (Demarkiz, a 19-year-old, male, sophomore, Computer Science Major)

Some students expressed their desire to move away from teaching styles that are mainly based on them being talked at by teachers. They expressed a desire to have project-based assignments, hands-on assignments, and emancipatory work that helps communities. Several students described their experiences in Africana Studies courses as equitable. They described them as courses in which professors make use of diverse teaching styles and make an effort to ensure that everyone is at the same level and understands the material. Some described being in courses where the pace of the classes was too fast and it seemed to them that their professors were trying to cover a lot of material instead of ensuring that students understood the material. Several students explained that they were motivated to learn when they were learning from professors who were passionate and energetic about what they were teaching. Others mentioned being dismayed by teaching approaches which involved a great deal of memorization and regurgitation of information. These students explained that learning about themselves contributes to their academic success. One student said to have received this kind of relevant curriculum mainly in Africana Studies courses, and those courses helped her better understand and engage with the curriculum in her non-Africana Studies courses. Several students mentioned how, when they are taking Africana Studies classes, they feel more welcome and comfortable while they are learning. They explained feeling left out due to the lack of representation of Black people in the course material. Yet, they explained being more interested and engaged when they could see the contributions of Black people in the curriculum.

Self-Reliance

Thirty-nine percent (16/41) of the participants mentioned that they relied on taking individual initiative to be successful in spite of barriers to success on campus. They explained that they engage in self-discipline and take it upon themselves to overcome challenges on campus. They also identified engaging in self-care as a strategy to deal with stressors on campus. They discussed different methods they use to maintain focus and peace of mind. For example, one of their responses was:

> "I think it's just my own will. I don't want to be – I want to graduate in four years. I want to be able to have money because I like nice things. I'm not going to let things stop me from getting to the goals, [where] I want to be." (Julessah, a 19-year-old, female, freshman, Criminal Justice Major)

These students explained that they take the initiative to seek out resources on campus, by speaking out on issues related to people of African descent in classes where these issues are not included in the curriculum or are misrepresented. Others explained that they take the initiative to seek out tutoring and visit faculty even during office hours when they feel only non-Black students are invited.

Others mentioned organizing and prioritizing so that they do not become overwhelmed by various and sometimes competing responsibilities. Some students mentioned experiencing stress and depression due to social and academic challenges on campus. Some mentioned responding to this anxiety by reminding themselves of their purpose. They mentioned being motivated by a sense of responsibility for the uplift and advancement of their families, their communities, and their ethnic/racial groups. However, some also identified this sense of responsibility as a source of stress. Students who mentioned the importance of self-care explained how they engage in activities such as praying, meditating, relaxing, and having fun. They use these activities as strategies to maintain focus, positive thinking, and peace. They also mentioned using self-care strategies to de-stress and ensure that they don't become overwhelmed by the pressure.

The Importance of Like-minded Peers

Thirty-four percent (14/41) of the participants identified their peers as one of their biggest sources of support at the university. These students explained that their roommates, classmates, same-race/ethnicity peers, and friends supported them in several ways. They discussed how they find support in people who share common outlooks, goals, and/or experiences. According to these respondents, their peers help them achieve success. For example, one of their responses was:

> "I would say other Black peers on campus, but mainly around the BSU, around the BUC, and stuff like that because a lot of people got a lot of connections there. We just talk to each other. We figure out, oh, we can get a job. We can get help with a tutor. We can get this. We can get this." (Kristopher, a 21-year-old, male, senior, Sociology Major)

Students who identified their peers as their biggest sources of support described having friends who followed the same Major(s) as them, their roommates, peers who are members of common student organizations, fellow students they meet in classes, and same-race peers. Their peers provide them with emotional support and understanding, financial support, educational and academic advice, tutoring, and many other functions. These students also explain that students who share their struggles and their goals are a source of affirmation and motivation to them, personally and academically. These students felt a sense of relief from being able to share their thoughts and frustrations with other students who are able to understand and relate to them. They explained that like-minded students can also help one another with academic assignments and with learning how to navigate successfully through their academic programs.

The Importance of Black Student Community

Fifty-one percent (21/41) of the participants explained that they only feel comfortable around Black peers. These students explained they feel a special sense of family and community in their relationships with other Black students that they do not find in their relationships with non-Black peers. Many of them identify the low numbers of Black students on campus as a challenge for them. These students mentioned this underrepresentation as a source of discouragement for them. They explained that constantly being underrepresented makes them feel uncomfortable and anxious on campus in a number of ways. Others talked about the need for a greater spirit of Black student unity on campus. They explained that a greater spirit of Black unity would cause Black students to feel more welcome and to have more self-determination on campus. For example, one of their responses was:

> "Outside of probably the BSU, Black Unity Center, anything with Black people, my relationship with peers is non-existent. It's really hard to talk to people, even when it comes to academics if you can't really relate to them on a personal level. So I don't know. I don't have an interest in talking because you know in classes you see what people are about. You hear what they're talking about and even though we're on a campus where you're supposed to know a lot when it comes to cultural sensitivity, a lot of people are not knowledgeable on it, and it prevents me from having an interest to talk to them." (Ruby, a 22-year-old, female, senior, International Relations, Africana Studies, and Cinema Major)

Several interviewees described their interactions with their Black peers as more positive compared to those with their non-Black peers. In their descriptions, they explain their appreciation for organizations and spaces that allow them to meet more Black students. Being around Black students makes these participants feel better and more comfortable. There are several reasons why they feel better around other Black students. They express comfort and relief in being around other students who can relate to their unique beliefs, attitudes, and experiences as Black people, Black men, Black women, etc. Many students explained that their non-Black friends may be able to listen to them and appreciate them but cannot genuinely relate to them on some deeper levels. Other Black students, however, can provide them with a unique sense of family and/or community. Several students also commented on their frustration with non-Black peers using racial epithets, stereotyping them, or making other problematic comments. Students who identified the low numbers of Black students on campus also mentioned that this underrepresentation made them feel discouraged, unrepresented, and disempowered on campus. They expressed their desire to make connections with same-race peers in their Majors but found it difficult to find them. Ultimately, they mentioned that, because of the underrepresentation of Black students on campus, they lack a sense of community.

Students who identified the low population of Black students on campus as a major issue explained that one related challenge is the spotlight that is frequently placed on them when issues related to race emerge in class. They explained that many of the perspectives and experiences they bring up are issues their teachers and/or classmates do not understand. Other times, because there are so few other Black/African American students their courses, they are often expected to give the "Black/African American perspective," while they do not feel comfortable doing so and feel reluctant to speak for all African people. The underrepresentation of Black students in classes also makes some of the participants feel the pressure to bring up perspectives related to African American/Black experiences because they are the only Black student in class. Moreover, without their voice class discussions tend to be biased or one-sided. Some participants mention feeling that they should not have to constantly bring up Black/African American cultural/intellectual perspectives because they should already be in the curriculum, and doing so is an added burden that they do not share with their peers because their heritage is already in the pedagogy of their classes. Lastly, the low number of Black students on campus makes it more difficult for Black students to find peers whom they can relate to based on common racial/ethnic identities, experiences, and understandings. Several of these students explained that there was a need for a greater spirit of unity for several reasons on campus, i.e., their own racial pride, their sense of community, the limited number of Black students on campus, and the need to struggle against common forces of oppression. Because of these factors, students explained that Black students need to create more of a warm feeling on campus by acknowledging and greeting one another, being more welcoming to one another in general, getting rid of individualistic mentalities, and engaging in more social/cultural activities with one another. Black faculty was also mentioned as having the potential to enhance the sense of community by being more supportive of Black student organizations and by being present at events.

Unsupportive, Unwelcoming Faculty Experiences

Forty-six percent (19/41) of the student respondents described unsupportive and unwelcoming experiences with their professors. These students described their professors as unsupportive teachers who show no interest in getting to know them or understanding them on a personal level. They also mentioned these teachers holding them to low standards. Moreover, they explained that one of the greatest challenges Black students face on campus is being mistreated and misunderstood by their professors. They explained their belief that, because they are Black students, some of their professors have lower expectations of them and treat them poorly compared to their non-Black classmates. For example, one of their responses was:

"Like when we go to class and we're getting our work done versus a professor knowing your name. I know for sure I go to class and I do all my work in that class. The professor just collects your work, everything, then there's multiple other people who aren't my race and the professor's talking to them, knows their name, calls their name out in class, all that stuff. So, I mean, personally it doesn't bother me because I know, obviously, I'm getting my work done. I'm getting this A, so I'm not tripping about it. But still, for people may want that recognition, that's going to be tough for them because they're not really going to continue like that because they're like – I'm not going to say they're expecting you to be lower than everybody else, but they're not holding you to the same pedestal when you are doing the stuff that they want you to do." … "I would say that if you have an advisor or a counselor, they need to ask you questions. You shouldn't be the one asking all the questions. They should be asking questions that they need you to know the answer to. Because that will help you – it would help direct to wherever you're trying to go, or would help clarify some things that you didn't even know how to ask." (Izac, an 18-year-old, male, freshman, Mechanical Engineering Major)

These students felt mistreated and misunderstood as Black students in several different ways. Some felt uncomfortable interacting with their professors due to their professors holding them to low standards and having low expectations, or their professors being suspicious of their achievements. Adding to the pressure of being one of the only students in their classes, this mistreatment and misunderstanding causes some Black students to be uncomfortable approaching their professors. Some students express that their professors display a don't-care attitude toward them, don't put forth much effort toward getting to know them as students, or display a lack of effort toward providing them with academic support and encouragement compared to other students. When students described faculty whom they had had unsupportive or unwelcoming experiences with, they discussed how those faculty have a very limited interaction with them as students. These faculty treat them like numbers and merely talk at them instead of to them. The participants described their teachers as uninterested in getting to know them on a personal level. Others explained how they had been held to a lower standard than other students because of their race. Some described experiences where they had been accused of either cheating or plagiarizing because they did well on a test or paper and their teachers doubted their abilities. Students described these experiences with their teachers as disheartening. Because of experiences with faculty who are unsupportive, these students feel that they cannot develop a connection or relationships with those faculty or faculty in general. In other cases, students will only communicate with these professors when it is absolutely necessary or to avoid doing poorly. Some students who described unsupportive faculty spoke of their efforts to make a connection with their faculty as a one-way street because the faculty do not make any effort in return.

The Significance of Black Faculty

Forty-one percent (17/41) of the participants indicated that one of their biggest sources of support at the university is the population of Black faculty. These students identified Black faculty as key sources of guidance, motivation, and a sense of family on campus. They identified multiple kinds of unique support they received from Black faculty on campus. These students described how Black faculty would go out of their way to make them feel welcome, supported, and understood. They also identified the limited number of Black professors on campus as a major challenge for Black students. These students explained how low numbers of Black professors on campus make it difficult for them to feel comfortable. For example, one of their responses was:

> "I think it's the Black faculty, Africana Studies mainly … I think the faculty I'm closest with tend to be Africana Studies and my art classes, even though more so Africana Studies over my art classes – it's because a lot of them recognize where we're coming from and understand the struggle of trying to establish yourself as an artist in a way that – a future isn't necessarily promised to you when you take this type of Major, and understanding the sacrifice that you make when you join those classes, and being a lot more empathetic of who you are as a person and things that might be happening to you outside of life. But other than that, most other faculty, it seems almost they don't make a lot of personal connections with people. It's more so in and out, lecture and then leave. And it's really draining on you. It's really draining on your energy and your spirit because it's like you sit in that class, and you're like, 'What am I here for?' and 'Should I really even be here? Is this really what I'm planning to do for the next – two years, maybe now?' But I will say that the Africana Studies faculty has been a big help in making sure that I see my reason for being here and seeing more of my people in academia, especially when they don't want us to succeed." (Maylene, a 20-year-old, female, junior, Art and Psychology Major)

Students who identified Black faculty as one of their biggest sources of support often spoke of the Africana Studies Department as the place where they encountered Black faculty on campus. The Africana Studies Department, was referenced to, by many respondents, almost synonymously with Black faculty support. Students described the Black faculty as being a support system that was like another family for them. Black faculty provide them with guidance through the university environment which they described as being, sometimes, unfamiliar and confusing. Participants found it important that Black faculty took initiative to check in on them and ask them how they were doing both personally and academically. Participants credited Black faculty with providing them with motivation to perform well academically and to pursue higher education.

Their presence gave these students a sense of hope and validation of their academic identity at the university. These students described Black faculty as letting them know that they are there to help them. There are several ways they do this according to student descriptions. Black faculty go out of their way to connect them to resources and opportunities (i.e., campus services, scholarships, jobs, etc.). According to the respondents, Black faculty are typically willing to have conversations with them about school, their lives, and professional futures. They described Black faculty as going out of their way to check in with them regarding their academic performance or general wellbeing and let them know they care. Some talked about how Black faculty would hold them to high standards and let them know when they were not performing to their potential. These students explained that their Black professors were more likely to understand, empathize, and/or personally relate to the experiences they were going through and this made the students more comfortable talking to them. Black faculty gave these students a sense of family and/or a sense of being welcome and at home. According to these students, the availability of Black professors on campus makes them feel more comfortable because it is easier to relate to them. Some explained that it is easier for them to make connections with Black professors. Others explained that having Black professors in classroom environments makes them feel more comfortable discussing Black experiences and contributions related to their academic disciplines. Moreover, Black professors are more likely to incorporate those experiences and contributions into the curriculum. Lastly, some students mentioned their appreciation of the presence of Black students in the Department of Africana Studies and their frustration with the fact that it is difficult for them to find Black professors in other departments across campus.

The Department of Africana Studies

Forty-nine percent (20/41) of the participants explained that a major source of support for them was the Department of Africana Studies. They described the Africana Studies Department as a unique source of supportive faculty and staff, a relevant curriculum, diverse teaching styles, and a communal environment. For example, one of their responses was:

> "I just think that in general – because everyone has different learning styles and so I think that not everyone is not – if it's not cognizant, not considered, but the fact that everyone has different learning styles like me, I'm a visual and I'm a kinesthetic learner. So I either need to do it or walk through it or you need to show me a picture. You can't just keep talking at me. Or, instead, I can't always – I can catch a few words, but that's it. So when it's class settings that – unless it's applicable to me, the information that's being said, unless it's applicable to me. Like Africana Studies, you can talk at me all day and I'll just sit here and listen, take notes like, oh, let me start that. And that's it. But, especially if it's like a science class or something or a history class and you're just talking at me, like, 'This is what happened.'" (Deja'nae, a 20-year-old, female, junior, Sociology Major)

The majority of the participants who identified the Department of Africana Studies as a source of support for them were **not** Africana Studies Majors. These students discussed how the Africana Studies curriculum was particularly engaging for them, in part because it was relevant to them. They also discussed how their Africana Studies classes would make use of teaching styles that went beyond lecture. They also explained that Africana Studies faculty were more likely to try to make sure that everyone understood the information than in some of their other classes. Students said Africana Studies faculty show genuine concern and go out of their way to provide them with individual support. Africana Studies faculty and staff were described as encouraging and having high expectations. These faculty are understanding and take the time to get to know them on a personal level. They are more likely to open a discussion and to feel welcome asking questions. They described being more welcome and comfortable discussing issues such as race and racism in their Africana Studies classes. Students explained being able to learn more about the social justice-related curriculum in Africana Studies classes than in non-Africana Studies classes. These classes give them more exposure to African/Black cultural and experiential perspectives. Students explained being more comfortable in their Africana Studies classes because they are less likely to be the only Black student in those courses. Africana Studies courses provided them with opportunities to meet and make connections with other Black students whom they could relate to. In addition to the curriculum, students explained that they see the Africana Studies Department as a place they can go to that provides them with resources and helps them navigate through the university environment.

Supplemental Findings

There were several other themes which impacted Black student engagement, including *the challenge of finding friends*; *lack of direction and poor advising; supportive faculty experiences; Black student organizations*; and *the BUC.* Thirty-two percent (13/41) of the participants mentioned that a major challenge for them was finding friends on campus. These students described their challenges putting together a support group of people they could relate to. Some of them described the challenges they face making friends inside and outside of class. They explained the advantages and disadvantages of forming meaningful relationships in both settings. A part of this, they explained, is their struggle with forming *meaningful* relationships with their peers. These students discussed the extra effort it takes to make friends on campus, especially with other Black students, and their desire for more programs for Black students to facilitate making connections. Twenty-four percent of the participants (10/41) identified a lack of clarity and/or direction as a major challenge they face as students. They expressed their unfamiliarity with how to navigate through university structures combined with poor direction as major obstacles to their success. Students who mentioned a lack of clarity and guidance as major challenges for them frequently spoke of entering the university without a clear understanding of how to navigate the system and never having a helpful introduction to how the system and the bureaucracy work. Twenty-seven percent of participants (11/41) identified the qualities of supportive faculty members.

They described faculty who were understanding, supportive, and motivational to them. Students who gave descriptions of supportive faculty often described faculty who were willing to listen and who were *understanding*. Some discussed supportive faculty as those who took an interest in understanding who they are, the struggles they are faced with (e.g., economic challenges), and what their goals are. Twenty-nine percent (12/41) of student respondents stated that one of their main sources of support at the university was Black student organizations. Primarily, students identified the BSU. They also mentioned other Black student organizations as central components of the Black community on campus. They explained how Black student organizations serve as an important connection to the community, as personal and academic support, and as a connection to resources for them. Twenty-nine percent (12/41) of the participants identified the BUC as an intermediary place on campus where they are able to meet Black peers, faculty, and staff and be introduced to helpful resources and advice. These students identified the BUC as a place on campus where students can make connections with other students, Black faculty, and staff.

Discussion and Cconclusion

This study provides timely critical insight into the relationship between ethnicity and student engagement among Black students at an MSI of higher education. Several participants mentioned how their school's treatment of Black students contradicts the social justice components of how it brands itself. What is unique about the present investigation is its demonstration that Black students face a series of unique yet overlapping and reinforcing barriers that undermine their abilities to enhance and pursue their passion and interests in connecting to the college environment. Some of these challenges are unique, and while others are challenges Black students share with different ethnic groups, they experience them at different levels and in unique ways. The wide scope of this study covering Black students' experiences in all aspects of their careers at the university reveals that Black students are undersupported and many face resource insecurity, underrepresentation, isolation, discouragement, and the burden of counter-activity. However, from a few sources they receive proactive support, a sense of family and community.

Participants in the present study identified *financial challenges*, which cause them to be insecure about housing and food. Black students face higher levels of food insecurity on college campuses compared to other racial/ethnic groups and greater levels of housing insecurity and homelessness than non-Hispanic White students across the United States (Blumenthal & Chu, 2017; Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2017). Because of the work schedules some must maintain, they face difficulties meeting their academic demands which causes them stress. Another stressor students face is a sense of *lack of direction and poor advising*.

Several students in this study described entering the university with a lack of awareness about how to navigate the bureaucracy and making decisions about which classes to take and when and making matters worse, they reported frequently receiving a poor quality of advice, including misinformation. Because of this many of them feel alone and take a "go-it-alone" approach to navigating the university. For students like those in the present study, it may be helpful to create opportunities for them to meet and collaborate with university administrators, given that many students only interact with administrators when facing academic or financial challenges (Chen, Ingram, & Davis, 2014). It may be particularly impactful for Black Faculty and Staff organizations to interact and collaborate with Black student populations.

Feeling supported is significantly related to student engagement and satisfaction (Chen, Ingram, & Davis, 2014). Students in the present study explained feeling undersupported in some important ways. Many explained having *unsupportive, unwelcoming faculty experiences* with professors who were unavailable, showed little interest in getting to know them compared to their non-Black peers, and proved to be inaccessible. This experience may be made worse by Black students' experiences with racism and stereotyping from some of their non-Black students, and being treated rudely by advisors and other staff, leaving them feeling unsupported. The combination of compounding unsupportive experiences can have a discouraging effect on Black students, which can frustrate them psychologically and academically.

Some Black students in the present study explained receiving support from several sources within the university, primarily their peers. Most research on Black student engagement shows that they receive support from their peers, particularly their Black peers (Patton, Bridges, & Flowers, 2011; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017). Similar to available research, students in the present study mentioned the importance of their peers who share with them common outlooks, goals, and/or experiences, because they can understand and relate to them. However, they explained that they are better able to develop these kinds of supportive relationships with their same-race/ethnic peers of African descent (Black, African, African American, etc.). The combination of Black faculty, Black peers, and Black student organizations gave Black students a sense of support. However, both Black students and Black faculty were overburdened and underrepresented on campus.

Black students mentioned being underrepresented and isolated in several ways. In addition to giving them a feeling of being unsupported, low numbers of Black students on campus gave some students a sense of being *underrepresented* on campus. This underrepresentation on campus made some of them feel disempowered and lacking voice and influence. They also complained of being pressured to give "the" Black perspective and experiencing anxiety for being in the spotlight. In fact, the expectation to represent the views of all Black/African/African American people is an experience that has long been associated with low Black student engagement (Patton, Bridges, & Flowers, 2011). This was made worse by their frustration stemming from the intellectual heritage and experiences of Black people not being included in their curriculum.

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In this study, underrepresentation was related to a sense of isolation, as similarly concluded in previous research, in which it was shown that a lack of representation can give Black students the feeling of being *absent while present* (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017). Being underrepresented numerically on campus made some participants feel a heightened sense of isolation. Similarly, the difficulties some of the participants mentioned experiencing connecting with peers they can relate to, particularly but not exclusively same-race/ethnic peers, increased their sense of isolation or being alone on an otherwise crowded campus.

Belonging is a term meaning being a valued or important member of something larger, in this case, an educational environment. However, the language Black participants in the present study used to describe their sources of belongingness were more intimate. They described many of their Black peers, Black student organizations, and Black faculty as providing them with a sense of family and a feeling of being at home when around them. The Department of Africana Studies and the BUC were both described as giving students a sense of community by providing them with resources and advice and bringing them in contact with one another and Black faculty and staff through programs and physical space (the Africana Studies Department offices and the BUC offices. However, the Africana Studies Department also gave them a sense of community in the classroom through relevant curriculum and inclusive teaching styles.

From multiple sources in their environment, Black students receive discouraging messages. Resource insecurity, for example, can leave students disheartened, stressed, and uninspired at times. Moreover, their experiences being misunderstood, mistreated, and disconnected from faculty relative to their non-White peers can also leave some of them with feelings of being uninspired and unmotivated. Seeing the contributions and experiences of people of African ancestry excluded from the curriculum in their classes is an additional source of discouragement which can depress some Black students' levels of motivation. Many students reported experiencing being underestimated and having their intelligence doubted by their professors because of their race/ethnicity. Others reported experiences with racism from their professors and their non-Black fellow students, which can also be discouraging and uninspiring. Racist experiences like this, as well as low teacher expectations, both associated with low student engagement, are commonly reported by Black students at PWIs. Participants in the present study attend an MSI, yet report these experiences associated with PWIs. This indicates the anti-Blackness that these Black students must contend with. However, what this research has demonstrated is that the feeling of discouragement that can result from experiences with racism and low teacher expectations are compounded by the discouragement they get from resource insecurity, low numbers of Black students on campus, and the disrespect they sometimes experience from advisors.

According to Shappie and Debb (2017), Black college students, like some other underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, have to put forth *additional efforts* to succeed in academic environments which favor privileged racial/ethnic groups.

For some in the research world, this is because they are more likely to enter college unprepared, need financial assistance, work long hours, and have challenging family responsibilities.

However, students in the present study identify the fact that they have to put forth this effort in large part because they have to endure being marginalized on campus by faculty, peers, staff, and advisors. Because of this marginalization, Black students often feel a lesser sense of belonging on PWI campuses (Shappie & Debb, 2017). Yet the present study shows that Black students can also feel these exact same pressures at MSIs. Greene, Marti, Nathan, and McClenney (2008) refer to this additional stress effort as the *effort-outcome gap*, the notion that African American students have to put forth extra effort to achieve educational success, in part because for them, success requires different skills that it does for students in the majority or from privileged racial/ethnic backgrounds. These additional skills might include coping with racism and maintaining a healthy self-concept in a hostile environment while their peers from majority or privileged groups can focus more of their energy on academic pursuits. Without learning to deal with this anxiety they cab experience *racial battle fatigue*, which can affect their academic performance (Howard, 2014). This fatigue leads to race-related stress which comes from unsafe hostile environments. Contrarily, at schools with campus environments that do not favor dominant cultures, Black students are less likely to have to put forth additional efforts (Shappie & Debb, 2017).

Affirmation is validation and support. In this study, affirmation is related to being recognized, understood, and validated as Black students. One of the unique patterns across the thematic analysis in the present study is the notion that Black students find few instances where their experiences, cultures, perspectives, knowledge, and potential are validated, recognized, or understood. However, these instances and their sources are very impactful. They especially pointed out the importance of Black peers who provide them with validation because many of them share common outlooks, attitudes, experiences, and some frustrations. They also report receiving inspiration from motivational and supportive faculty. However, they also receive a certain affirmation and inspiration from some of the Black faculty across their campus. Many of the participants explained that Black faculty were able to relate to them, empathize with them, and hold them to high standards. Students also reported being affirmed by a culturally relevant curriculum and through diverse teaching styles which allow them to demonstrate their knowledge.

An additional factor, compounded by resource insecurity, is the burden of counter-acting sources of distress emanating from within the university. One of the questions students were asked in the present study was about how they managed to be successful despite the barriers they were confronted with. The most common responses to that question were responses which suggested self-reliance. They dealt with managing work and school by being more organized and making sacrifices. They dealt with the stress of being resource-insecure yet responsible for their own academic performance by engaging in self-care activities or non-activity.

They dealt with teachers' low expectations of them through positive thinking and determination. Self-reliance was an oft-stated comment in the present study. Some students who feel that their culture and heritage are not included in the curriculum speak out in class or attend programs put on by BSU, other Black student organizations, or the BUC. Students who feel faculty and advisors do not have their best interests in mind due to negative experiences become more proactive in seeking advice from different advisors or faculty. Students who reported feeling isolated often responded by taking a "go-it-alone" approach. Others rely on the support of Black faculty, the Africana Studies Department, or the BUC. Many of the Black students in this study reported engaging in activism and cultural programming to counter-act the inequitable aspects of their experiences at university. The consequence is that in addition to being students they have to use their student organizations to develop cultural programs which are lacking around the university, counter anti-Black stereotypes they encounter in the classroom and from their peers, assume the responsibility of bringing African/Black cultural perspectives and experiences to their teachers and classmates because they are not already a part of the curriculum, and advocate for their university to take measures to address the affordability and accessibility of food and housing on campus. This burden of counter-activity and other stressors may disproportionately crowd the psychological bandwidth of some Black students with worries many of their peers need not be concerned with, ultimately diminishing their abilities to be as productive as they can.

Many Black students in the present study identified several sources of safety and protection, such as Black student organizations and the Department of Africana Studies which were described as providing students with a sense of safety from racism, racist microaggressions, interpretations through the lenses of anti-Black stereotypes, and feeling elevated anxiety. In this way, they serve some of the functions of HBCUs on a MSI campus (Shappie & Debb, 2017). To improve their experiences the Black students identified the need for the university to help establish Black student organizations and to make support more visible to Black students. In addition to wanting more Black students on campus, they identified a need for the university to support more social/cultural programs specifically designed for Black students to facilitate their ability to meet one another and Black faculty and to take advantage of the available support. Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) argue that for part-time and commuting students, the classroom is the only venue where they have the opportunity to interact with other students. However, on campuses where they are underrepresented, for African American/Black students, the classroom is also one of the only venues some students feel comfortable meeting and forming relationships with other students, particularly other Black students. Implementing cooperative learning strategies in the classroom could assist Black students in meeting like-minded peers who they identify with. They asked for higher-quality and more available, proactive, and sensitive advice. Several students mentioned the need for classes and faculty to incorporate the experiences, heritage, and perspectives of people of African descent in the course curriculum. They identified the need for more equitable pedagogy with various teaching styles and more applied assignments and discussion.

Students also described a need for more supportive, anti-racist, culturally prepared faculty and staff in general, and more Black faculty in particular. At the university this study was conducted at, the present study reveals that barriers to Black student engagement are many. Their messages and impacts are similar and reinforcing. Yet the sources from which they receive support, affirmation, belongingness, and protection are few in number, underresourced, and subject to the same undersupporting as the Black students themselves.

The claims of the students in the present study about Black faculty are strongly supported by existing scholarship. The presence of Black faculty is directly related to Black student success. Blackwell (1981) found that the presence of Black faculty was positively related to Black graduate and professional students' rates of enrollment and graduation. However, Black faculty are challenged by the need for them to work with students within and outside of their academic majors (Pulliam & McGregory, 2009). Additionally, Black faculty face many of the same challenges Black students face, such as racism, isolation, and being overburdened by responsibilities on college campuses. Students similar participants in the present research might benefit from greater institutional efforts to identify and respond to the racism Black faculty face and greater compensation for the efforts of Black faculty. Moreover. Chen, Ingram, and Davis (2014) advocate for the restructuring of university faculty reward systems such that faculty are compensated, rewarded and incentivized to be more involved in service-related activities, particularly student affairs programming.

The results of the present study suggest the need to continue this research and conduct additional research, perhaps using different approaches. One possible option is the development of a quantitative instrument to investigate the factors influencing Black student engagement on a larger number of students at the university which served as the site for the present study. This would allow the researchers to identify how prevalent the identified experiences and attitudes are among the Black student population. Ultimately, the results of this study indicate how wide-spread barriers to student engagement are for the participants of the study. Moreover, they reinforce the same negative messages. They also indicate that these Black students have created and benefit from a few sources of impactful support, which are unfortunately subject to underresourcing and/or underrepresentation. For participants in this study, while advancement may come from their activism and exercise of voice, doing so represents extra weight they must carry, which many of their peers do not have to bear. Moreover, being a student while taking on the responsibility of making their higher education experience more equitable distracts them from their academic pursuits and threatens to exhaust them.

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