

When the Majority is the Minority: White Graduate Students' Social Adjustment at a Historically Black University

Brenda Hall Rosemary B. Closson

Comparing the experiences of White and Black graduate students illuminate various social adjustment challenges for White graduate students at historically Black colleges or universities (HBCUs) that are distinct from those challenges experienced by Black students on traditionally White campuses (TWIs). Findings in this exploratory and descriptive study indicate that while Black and White students report no stories of direct racism, there are expressions and concerns related to social exclusion, especially among the minority (Whites). Additionally, student expectations about entering a historically Black environment affect their perceptions about social climate.

Among both Black and White students there are varied perceptions about their sense of identity at an HBCU. Overall, Black students indicate a higher level of certainty regarding their racial identity indicating a satisfaction with their sense of Blackness. White students express lack of certainty in their racial identity yet their beliefs indicate a desire to address issues of race and adopt a nonracist identity. Implications based on these findings are provided for student affairs departments.

Increasing complexities in graduate student populations at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) raise questions regarding student interaction and experience, especially for White students at a predominately Black institution. For example, programs and policies designed to attract and

retain students must on the one hand promote inclusion and at the same time stay anchored in cultural heritage and a dedication to serving the Black community. This requires a unique perspective in higher education as well as effective and appropriate graduate student development initiatives. To develop such actions, administrators, faculty and students need to explore and understand graduate student adjustment issues and the impact of differing racial identities of students interacting and learning in a historically black environment.

The challenges of historically Black colleges and universities to retain a viable role in higher education are multiple. There are pressures to increase minority enrollment, strengthen and maintain institutional quality, and clarify the unique function of the HBCU. Graduate programs in particular have increased in size and diversity. Master's program offerings in high-demand fields attract larger numbers of White students, often at much larger rates than undergraduate (Conrad & Brier, 1997). Master's programs in fields such as business, education, and engineering attract large numbers of minority (White) students. Retention data from 2002 indicates that White students represent 22% of the graduate student population compared to 6% undergraduate. According to Conrad and Brier, graduate level offerings attract White students who are nontraditional (older adults, working, part-time) and who seek convenience and

Brenda Hall is Associate Professor of Counseling at North Carolina A&T State University. Rosemary B. Closson is founder and managing director of Closson & Associates in Winter Park, FL.

flexibility while attending school. This graduate student population has distinct characteristics and needs.

In general, graduate student experiences in higher education have not been adequately documented, and when the race variable is included the number of studies drops even further. Within the past 20 years only a few studies have addressed the social adjustment of Black students on predominately White campuses (Astin, 1990; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Hart, 1984). During the 1980s Allen Walter (1982) and associates reported that the experiences of Black graduate students in the areas of social adjustment, academic performance, and interactions with faculty were at best conflicting and often negative. Black students often lack role models, students of similar cultural backgrounds, and experience feelings of racism (Nettles, 1990). Other studies discuss graduate student success in specific disciplines such as social work, clinical psychology, business and sociology (Ault, 1996; Graham, 1991; Nelson, Dell'Oliver, Koch, & Buckler, 2001; Potts, 1992). Research regarding graduate students' experiences at HBCUs is even more scant. Conrad and Brier (1997), focused on factors that support the matriculation of White graduate students at historically Black campuses. There is evidence to suggest that in general HBCUs have been more effective at retaining and graduating Black students than predominately White institutions (Astin; D'Augelli & Hershberger). Factors associated with higher retention and graduation rates include faculty relationships, supportive environments, and the absence of racism. Given the growing numbers of Whites in graduate programs at HBCUs, it is necessary to explore how White students view their environment and relationships as well as identify additional issues and concerns specific to the historically Black

college and university experience.

One critical theme found in undergraduate studies related to social adjustment is the campus social environment (Furr & Elling, 2002; Schwitzer, Ancis, & Griffin, 1998; Schwitzer & Thomas, 1998; Watson & Kuh, 1996). Schwitzer et al. suggest that social adjustment and interpersonal climate are essential to providing effective student services (p. 81). They constructed a model of social adjustment for Black Students at predominately White institutions. Within this model, four distinct features affect social adjustment: sense of under representedness, direct perceptions of racism, hurdle of approaching faculty, and the effects of faculty familiarity. Through follow-up studies, Schwitzer et al. established that undergraduate Black students and White students at predominately White institutions experience different social adjustment barriers. Our current study explores the same features of social adjustment at the graduate level for White students in a predominately Black institution.

CURRENT STUDY

This was an exploratory and descriptive study using quantitative and qualitative research methods that addresses a gap in higher education literature regarding student social adjustment and student development at historically Black colleges and universities. It has implications for exploring the unique role and mission of HBCUs.

Research Question

The research question that guided the study was: To what extent do White students on an HBCU campus experience the same or similar barriers to social adjustment that Black students at a Traditionally White Institution

(TWI) experience? A subordinate but related question was: Does there appear to be any relationship between the racial identity of these students and their perception of social adjustment barriers?

Rationale for Mixed Method Approach

“A way of seeing is always a way of not seeing” (Burke as cited in Tyack, 1988) and so one method alone would not provide the sort of insights we sought in this exploratory study. Standardized instruments provided the primary data for this study; focus groups yielded supplemental data. Helms’ (1990) YES standardized racial identity scales (White and Black) provided a framework and definitions for racial identity and were immensely significant in aiding us to posit influences identity beliefs could have on student perceptions of social barriers. Because our question dealt foremost with student perceptions, in addition to a framework we required a means for a subjective definition of student barriers. Focus groups provided a means for students to share their first hand experiences and, perhaps especially important for this study, for us to collect anticipated and unanticipated data. Although we used Schwitzer et al.’s (1998) template for focus group questions, this approach allowed us to uncover additional categories not revealed in that study.

Participant Background

The institutional site for this research was a public, comprehensive, land-grant urban, southeastern HBCU with a total enrollment of 10,030 (8,715 undergraduate and 1,315 graduate). Consistent with many HBCU profiles, the race classifications of undergraduate population (91.9% Black, 5.4% White, 2.7% Other) are significantly less diverse than those of the graduate population (65.8% Black, 23.5% White, 10.7% Other).

Participants were graduate students in the School of Education, Department of Human Development and Services (HDSV) who had completed at least one year of study toward a master’s degree in either counseling or in adult education. Students in this department were chosen to participate because HDSV has one of the largest numbers of graduate students (285 of a total graduate population of 1,315) as well as a significant percentage of White students (20%). Additionally, students in HDSV were accessible since the researchers were faculty members in the department. Of the original sample of 75 students, 25 persons responded—18 Black students and 7 White students. No incentives were given for participation (i.e., no extra credit, no stipend). Of the 25 respondents, 16 students (5 White and 11 Black) completed instruments and participated in the focus groups. Six of the 16 were adult education majors and 10 were counseling majors. There were 4 male participants and 12 females.

Average ages of the Black and White students were similar: White students averaged 30 years of age and Black students 32. Twenty-seven per cent (3) of the Black students were first generation undergraduates, and 40% (2) of the White students were the first in their family to obtain a bachelor’s degree. However, a larger percentage of Black students were first generation graduate students—73% (8) compared to the same two (40%) White students who were the first in their families to attend graduate school. One of the Black students had attended a TWI as an undergraduate, and all of the White students obtained their bachelor’s degrees from TWIs. Eight of the Black students obtained bachelor’s degrees from HBCUs.

Procedure

We held two focus group meetings with

students. Each meeting began with introductions and a description of the study. Students signed consent forms and completed a demographic questionnaire and racial identity scales. For the focus group session, the large group was separated into a Black group and a White group. Our foremost consideration was to ensure that students were free from self-censoring inhibitions evoked by the presence of non-White students and vice-versa. The validity of this concern was in fact borne out by comments made by the students themselves during the focus group sessions.

Measures

Racial Identity Scales. The inclusion of racial identity scales was a major departure from the Schwitzer et al. (1998) study. These measures provided an additional layer of insight about student social adjustment by examining the racial beliefs of students who were experiencing graduate school as temporary minorities and temporary majorities. We included these measures notwithstanding the critique the White Racial Identity Attitude Scale (WRIAS) in particular has received. The primary critique has been that the scale measures the *nature* of White identity (Mercer & Cunningham, 2003) rather than the *development* of racial identity. Moreover, Pope-Davis, Vandiver, and Stone (1999) claim the scale measures constructs *related* to White identity (e.g., Degree of Racial Comfort, Attitudes toward Racial Equality, and Attitude of Racial Curiosity). In our study, the scales were not utilized to understand the identity development process of White or Black graduate students but as a concise way to describe beliefs at a point in time, which may (or may not) relate to perceptions of social adjustment barriers.

The Black Racial Identity Attitude Scale (BRIAS) was originally designed by Parham

and Helms in 1981 to measure racial identity attitudes as proposed by Cross (1971; 1978) in his model of nigrescence under conditions of oppression. The scale is designed, say Helms and Parham, to “be a personality measure evolving from a Black perspective which could be used to theorize about and assess the personality characteristics of Black samples” (Helms & Parham, 1984, p. 3).

The BRIAS provides descriptive data for Cross’s (1978) five stages which are Pre-encounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, and Internalization. According to Helms and Parham (1984) each stage represents a worldview and each describes distinctive racial identity attitudes (p. 2). The Preencounter world view is dominated by a Euro-American frame of reference where the individual thinks and behaves in ways that devalue one’s own Blackness. Persons at the Encounter level begin to question his or her old identity because of disorienting personal or social events. Immersion is a stage in which the person’s level of Black pride is high; the person may idealize all that is Black and diminish all that is White. Emersion develops overtime as one’s intensity of immersion subsides and individuals take on a more balanced worldview of the strengths and weaknesses of Blacks as well as Whites. In the last stage, Internalization, the person achieves an inner sense of satisfaction with his or her Blackness.

A version of the WRIAS (White Racial Identity Attitude Scale) first appeared in 1990 (Helms) 1990. The form used for our study was the 2002 revised inventory. The WRIAS is, “designed to assess the six types of White racial identity schemas described by Helms” (Helms & Carter, 2002, p.2).

The scale levels differ based on degree of acknowledgement of racism and consciousness of Whiteness. Initially Helms (1990) described the WRIAS stages as linear and hierarchical;

more recently she has acknowledged that the scales may in fact interact and she recommends all six scales be used for interpretation (Helms & Carter, 2002). It is for this reason that she prefers “ego status” over “stage” language. The final ego status, autonomy, “involves an awareness of personal responsibility for racism, consistent acknowledgement of one’s Whiteness, and abandonment of racism in any of its forms as a defining aspect of one’s personality” (p. 53). The other five statuses are described by Helms (1990) as follows. Contact is considered a lack of awareness of the significance of racial-group membership. Disintegration is a state of confusion about one’s own Whiteness and a period of questioning one’s stereotypical beliefs about other racial groups. Reintegration is a stage where individuals consciously resolve the dissonance of their previous status through assuming a belief in White superiority. Pseudo-Independence is the status during which the individual begins to question the premise of Blacks as inferior. Whites here intellectualize in order to suppress feelings aroused in earlier stages. Immersion/Emersion is a period in which the individual immerses herself in a search for a role model of positive (nonracist) White identity. The outcome of this phase is a White person who has redefined White identity by sometimes reading about other Whites who have taken the same journey.

Focus Groups

Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, and Thomas (1999) used focus groups as their data collection method, which they considered a qualitative method (p. 190) despite the absence of thick description (often considered a hallmark of qualitative research). Primarily their intention was to avoid quantitative standardized measures frequently normed on majority groups (White).

We organized a Black focus group and a White focus group after extensive debate. Foremost was our desire to ensure that students were free from self-censoring inhibitions evoked by the presence of non-White students and vice versa. Researcher and faculty member A (Black) facilitated the Black group and researcher and faculty member B (White) facilitated the White group. Because we as faculty members facilitated the focus groups, we weighed the possibility that students might withhold their true feelings if they believed they might face us in future classes. We believe we overcame this hurdle because faculty member A was leaving the university; therefore, students knew they could not have her as a future professor. Faculty member B had already taught most of the respondents. A graduate student recorded notes for each session. We trained these recorders to avoid value judgments, to note nonverbal behavior as well as the spoken word, and to hold all comments in the strictest confidentiality.

The three questions used for the focus groups were the same questions used in the Schwitzer et al. (1998) study:

1. What words best describe what it is like to be a student here in this university? In particular, what words best describe what it’s like to be an African American/White student here?
2. To what degree, and in what ways, is the faculty here supportive and helpful—or less than supportive and less than helpful—to individual students? To what degree does race influence faculty supportiveness and helpfulness?
3. To what degree are you comfortable approaching instructors here? Which instructors are the most comfortable or least comfortable to approach? In particular, those of a different race? Same race? (p. 191)

Focus Group Procedure

In addition to notes being taken by the graduate student recorder, the focus groups were audio taped. Minimal ground rules were set, which included a reminder to speak one at a time, to speak from one's own experience, to agree to disagree, to be willing to be honest about experiences and feelings, and to stick to the question. The time frame for each focus group was 90 minutes. After each question was discussed, we as facilitators made an attempt to summarize what we heard as a type of immediate member-check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants who desired to read a preliminary summary of the study gave us their email addresses so that a summary could be sent to them. Ten participants provided their email address; none responded following receipt of the summary.

Data Analysis

In the original study Schwitzer et al. (1998) used the constant-comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyze their data, as did we. Constant-comparison involves the following basic steps: (a) organizing the data (in this case transcripts and notes from the focus groups); (b) using the data to generate categories, themes, and patterns; (c) testing the emergent propositions against the data; and (d) searching for alternative explanations of the data.

We analyzed our data using several approaches. We began by using Schwitzer's model (Newman, 1991, p. 421) as initial deductive categories in order to ascertain the level of fit with the data from our study. Schwitzer's model contained four key elements: (a) a sense of underrepresentedness, (b) direct perceptions of racism, (c) hurdle of approaching faculty, and (d) effects of faculty familiarity. Elements (a) and (b) were con-

sidered aspects of adjusting to the institutional climate as a whole. Using the recorded notes from our focus group's dialogue, we applied the constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to generate conceptual categories, test hypotheses, and to search for alternative explanations. Generating categories requires looking for recurring regularities in the data (Guba as cited in Patton, 1990). Categories were determined by examining the extent to which data were alike and different—"internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity" (Guba as cited in Patton, 1990). In other words, at the same time that we sought "convergence" in the data, we also sought "divergence" or ways to extend the data to build categories. Our initial analysis occurred immediately after the focus group meetings. After recorder notes were reviewed, the graduate student recorders along with us (faculty members) generated categories and suggested hypotheses. These emergent categories were then reviewed (a second level of analysis) by both researchers separately and then the proposed interpretations were reviewed again by both researchers together. Testing emergent hypotheses and searching for alternative explanations are both ways of preventing our assumptions from blinding us (Marshall & Rossman, 1990). We also triangulated our qualitative data with the bivariate analyses of racial identity scale scores for Black and White graduate students. The triangulation enabled us to hypothesize relationships between racial identity stages and qualitatively generated concepts. In some cases our empirical data illustrated Schwitzer's model but our analysis also generated categories unique to our study.

Limitations

A primary limitation of this study is the small number of respondents. Only 14% of the

White students in our sample responded and, even though 28% of the Black students responded, both were low response rates. We are especially troubled by the extremely low response rate of the White students and believe this in itself indicates a need for some sort of follow-up research on their nonparticipation. Not only were invitation letters sent, follow-up phone calls to students' homes (both Black and White) were made by student assistants. Ultimately, participation of White students resulted from invitations extended personally by researcher and faculty member B (a White professor).

A second limitation is that we are using one HBCU and one department on that campus as the source for our data. More HBCUs and a larger cross-section of students in both the graduate and undergraduate programs are needed to enhance understanding of social adjustment on the HBCU campus. Consequently, we do not expect that the findings in this study will be generalized. We remind the reader that this is an exploratory study and, although we suggest tentative implications, our primary intended outcome is the generation of questions for further research.

FINDINGS

We reviewed the data under two major areas: measures and focus groups. We classified the focus group data into the following categories: (a) adjusting to the institutional climate, (b) influences of academic relationship with faculty, (c) opportunity, and (d) racial identity. The first two categories, (a) and (b), were based on Schwitzer et al.'s (1998) model. The areas of opportunity and identity were additional themes generated directly by participants in the focus groups. Measures data included profiles from the White and

Black Identity Scales.

White and Black Racial Identity Scales

On both the Black and White Racial Identity Attitude Scales responses were made on a Likert scale from 1-5 with 1 representing strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 uncertain, 4 agree, and 5 strongly agree. On the White Racial Identity Attitude Scale, it is interesting to note that although overall our participant means for Abandoning Racism were low, the fourth highest mean (2.88), was Contact, an early stage whereby individuals, upon meeting Blacks, may begin to question their own stereotypical beliefs. The profile of the White students on the WRIAS indicated that the highest mean scores all fell under Creating a Nonracist Identity (Table 1). The following text was quite cumbersome—have the changes kept your meaning? Autonomy had the highest score with a mean of 3.56, which tends toward agreement with both the abandonment of racist beliefs and an awareness of personal responsibility for racism. Independence had the second highest score with a mean of 3.48, a score that borders between uncertainty and agreement about the inferiority of Blacks. Students who clearly agreed with this status would typically continue to behave in ways consistent with beliefs in Black inferiority and may continue to expect Blacks to solve the racism problem. Immersion/Emersion had the third highest score with a mean of 2.92, which suggests Whites in this study were uncertain about searching for nonracist White role models. For those who clearly agree, the outcome of this status is often Whites who have committed to help one another eliminate racism.

A profile like this suggests that in our sample of White students, very few held beliefs in the Abandoning Racism levels; more held

TABLE 1.
White Racial Identity Attitude Scale:
Mean Scores for White students
(N = 5)

Stages of White Identity	Mean Scores
<i>Abandoning Racism</i>	
Contact	2.88
Disintegration	2.00
Reintegration	1.74
<i>Creating a Nonracist Identity</i>	
Pseudo-independence	3.48
Immersion/Emersion	2.92
Autonomy	3.56

beliefs in the area of Creating a Nonracist Identity. The schemas of this sample suggest that these White students' beliefs may be demarcated by efforts to transcend race (autonomy), while perhaps still occasionally perpetuating a Whites-as-superior system (pseudo-independence). A lower mean in the immersion/emersion schema may characterize this group as uncertain about nonracist models for their White identity. Overall, the scores in Creating A Nonracist Identity were moderate and suggest a lack of certainty regarding students' White identity.

On the Black Racial Identity Scale, Black students' highest mean scores were internalization (4.23) and emersion (4.12) (Table 2). This suggests a profile of Black students more certain of their identity who may move between two worldviews: internalization and emersion. When students are operating out of an internalization worldview, they are satisfied with their sense of Blackness. In this stage one might note a decline in strong anti-White feelings; typically, reason governs rather than emotion. When operating from a stage

of emersion, often individuals are content and joyous being in their own group, which contributes to an emerging sense of security and Black identity. They are less likely to be heard idealizing all that is Black and are generally more balanced in their worldview about the relative strengths of Blacks and Whites.

Adjusting to the Institutional Climate

Adjusting to Institutional Climate is one of two themes from the Schwitzer et al. (1998) study that were supported by focus group data from this study.

Underrepresentedness. Respondents in the White focus group reported that prior to starting classes they were nervous and apprehensive about attending a historically Black institution. Thinking back on the experience, one White student was surprised to realize that "I am really the minority here," and another student was concerned that she would be viewed as "the old White woman" by Black students that she was to mentor as part of her field experience in the public schools. Apprehension also stemmed from expectations that Black faculty would treat them differently. One student recalled seeing a Black professor in traditional African dress and assumed that the faculty member was

TABLE 2.
Black Racial Identity Scale: Mean
Scores for Black students (N = 11)

Stages of Black Identity	Mean Scores
Pre-encounter (conformity)	1.92
Encounter (dissonance)	2.55
Immersion	2.37
Emersion	4.12
Internalization	4.23

“very into race” and would “not like me.”

Interestingly, these White students’ initial expectations of feeling underrepresented were not their reality once they entered the environment. Contrary to their expectation, they quickly became comfortable. The general consensus from the White students was that there was not special treatment from White professors or less than equal treatment from Black professors. Any true conflict about being a minority came from feedback and ridicule from other White friends or co-workers off campus who made comments such as, “I wouldn’t let my wife go there,” or “Aren’t you scared to go there?”

Respondents in the Black focus groups reported having a general sense of comfort and acceptance. They used words such as “supportive,” “nurturing,” “togetherness.” They described the university as family but alternatively suggested the relatively small size of the university (10,030/1,315 graduate students) might promote this closeness. There was some evidence that race did play a part. One Black student remarked that she believes [Black] professors want to help their race and said that, “I feel the love from Black professors.”

Direct Perceptions of Racism. In Schwitzer et al. (1998) Black students reported “unexpected feelings of underrepresentation and specific incidents of racism” (p. 93). In our study, White students as temporary minorities expressed feelings of exclusion but struggled with how to articulate that exclusion. They spoke of difficulty separating prejudice from personality; they ascribed their exclusion to the Black cliques or sororities rather than racial differences. Their rationale was that their exclusion was social, not racial. However, this exclusion seemed painful. One White student said that “if I want to be accepted I have to pretend like I don’t care.”

Black students shared no stories of direct racism. Individual Black students did share specific concerns regarding being in an all Black environment; their concerns were not widely shared by others in the Black focus group. For example, one female student voiced a concern that “Things are one-sided from my classmates. . . . They are saying Black this, Black that. I don’t want to hear about Blacks all the time. I want to leave here knowing about [my field].”

Influences on Academic Relationship with Faculty

Influences on Academic Relationship with Faculty is the second theme from the Schwitzer et al. (1998) study that was supported by focus group data from this study.

Approaching Faculty/Faculty Familiarity. Contrary to Schwitzer’s et al. 1998 model, both Black and White students described faculty as supportive and helpful. Exceptions were mentioned—one rude and one moody faculty member. But for the most part, illustrative comments from White students were: “Fabulous faculty here”; “They stay later if they know you are coming.” White participants expressed no hesitation in approaching faculty who were not White saying, for example, “I’ve been able to go to anybody with anything.” One White female student expressed that she found it easier to talk to Black professors. She appreciated the sense of responsibility they expressed for her.

Black participant comments ran along the same lines: “I’m comfortable approaching anyone,” and “If I need help I’ll ask.” It was interesting to note, however, that while Black students expressed positive statements about faculty support from Black and White faculty, they also expressed assumptions about a higher level of service from Black faculty based on race. For example, they said Black faculty

would “want to put more effort to help their own,” and that it was “human nature to be drawn to your own race.” However, they could offer no examples illustrating that, in fact, this was the case. In fact, they cited examples of White faculty who were as concerned and in some cases more flexible than Black faculty. It appears that their beliefs about what *should* be were not borne out by their experience.

Opportunity

Opportunity is one of the focus group themes that are direct outcomes of our study. Black students discussed opportunity as a chance to accomplish and to give back to the community. One student expressed a responsibility as a Black person to work in the Black community. The White students defined opportunity as having a unique experience and to grow personally. They said things like attendance is “a privilege” and it’s “a fabulous learning experience.” Some White students were attending to get their degree in the most convenient, least expensive way. Specifically, one White student stated that she was here to use the university to get her degree and “get out of here.” She felt no obligation to the university or the community. Another White student shared an experience in which a Black faculty member questioned whether the student was simply *using* (as in exploiting) the university to get her degree. The student was not certain but sensed that she had somehow offended the faculty member so the student tried to make clear that she was grateful for the opportunity to attend.

Racial Identity

Racial Identity is another of the focus group themes that are direct outcomes of our study. Although White students were initially apprehensive about their foray into the HBCU environment, they found the social climate

more positive than they expected, especially with regard to their relationships with both White and Black faculty members. A noticeable distinction between Black and White students was how they framed attendance at an HBCU. For the White students, attending was a “unique experience” that enabled them to learn first hand about being a minority. For some White students attendance was foremost an affordable way to obtain a master’s degree. Many of the Black students, however, framed attendance as a means to serve the Black community. In crystallizing the student’s focus group comments, we began to hear Black and White students describing their identities: Black students identifying with the Black community and White students identifying themselves as outsiders in the HBCU milieu, coming to experience something quite new. In this section we turn specifically to findings about racial identity.

Among the Black students, although most students saw the HBCU environment as “nurturing,” they resisted attributing this to the fact that they were Black and so were most of the faculty. Interestingly, although White students agreed the campus climate is supportive, none of the White students used “nurturing” to describe the college; none used the word “family.” Divergent opinions among the Black students included one who noted that it was possible to feel “betrayed” and occasionally excluded in the HBCU environment if one holds an Afrocentric perspective, because this point of view is not predominant. Another Black student was concerned that classroom discussions of Blackness detracted from time spent on course content. Beliefs regarding whether the classroom is the appropriate place for discussions on race diverged in both the Black and White focus groups. There were both Black and White students who justified not discussing race

based on whether or not race would take center stage in TWI classrooms: “Wouldn’t have expected to discuss race at [named a White state university]” [White student]. “In TWIs you don’t hear White this, White that” [Black student]. Conversely there were Black students who believed an HBCU is clearly the place to hold such discussions. Some Black and some White students believed race is relevant to their field and therefore holds an important place in classroom discussions. White students noted that they perceived that their presence caused Black students to censor themselves in discussions about racial issues, and Black students (separate from the White students) said that they do in fact censor themselves. Black students also noted that they felt uncomfortable for White students in their multicultural course because of the heavy emphasis on the negative aspects of the Black American experience.

Among the White students, there were varied perceptions about their sense of identity at an HBCU. While all agreed that attendance allows observation and a unique experience, one White student revealed that she could better understand what it means to be a minority, to “recognize and feel oppression.” Vigorously, another White student stated that oppression should not be an issue any longer. A lengthy discussion ensued about social obligation. Even though one White student shared her lifelong struggle to *not* feel responsible for the unfair treatment of Black people the consensus was that an HBCU provides an opportunity to come to terms with feelings of obligation and learn how to better relate to people, especially those who are different from them.

DISCUSSION

White participants in the study reported a

general sense of comfort. These findings support Hazzard (1988) and Conrad and Brier (1997) who reported overall satisfaction of White students attending HBCUs. Contrary to Schwitzer et al.’s (1998) findings that Blacks as minorities at TWIs tend to experience the environment as hostile and foreign, the White students as the temporary minority on campus were surprised to find the environment welcoming and comfortable.

The Black students in our focus group described their social adjustment with general feelings of familiarity and inclusion. However, in response to the question describing what it is like to be a Black student at the University, one Black student remarked, “I’m tired of Black this, Black that.” This comment initiated a lengthy discussion in the Black focus group about the classroom environment and in particular the relevancy and comfort of discussing race issues in classes at an HBCU.

In Schwitzer et al.’s (1998) model for describing Black students’ social adjustment to college, the Black participants cited examples of isolation and racism in residence halls and in personal interactions but did not include classroom examples. Our graduate student sample—average age 31 and all commuters—considered their major social interactions to be classroom related. They discussed the quality of the curriculum. Black and White students raised the concern that dealing with race takes away from learning course content. Both Black and White students felt faculty do not facilitate questions regarding race very well. When conversations get “heavy” or uncomfortable, students said there is a tendency for faculty to “back off” and for students to engage in self-censorship.

Unlike Schwitzer’s group, no Black or White students noted obstacles in approaching faculty so faculty race was not an issue for the

students in our groups. Hickson's (2002) study supports this finding, noting that students at HBCUs were interested in mentors regardless of whether or not they were a different race.

Both Black students and White students discussed opportunity. White students emphasized the opportunity to grow individually. For the Black students, opportunity seemed to be associated with a deep connection to the university and its mission. As Gary Paul (2002) noted, "HBCUs were established to serve the community, produce leaders, develop responsible citizens, and to strengthen civil and democratic society" (p. 205), and Black students comments indicated that they shared this mission. For the most part, White students in our study did not connect with this part of the university's mission.

Although no specific incidents of racism were shared, the White students in our study did clearly define situations of exclusion. Their attributions of these negative examples to factors other than race may be indicative of the search for their own identity as temporary minorities. Based on scores from the White Racial Identity Scale, many of these students seem to be operating within the Creating a Nonracist Identity phase. Throughout the focus group session, there were indications that respondents were struggling to abandon racist beliefs, become more immersed in another culture, and feel a sense of autonomy as a White person in a Black environment. In spite of specific examples of exclusion or possible prejudices, students were reluctant to attribute these actions to race. At one point in the White focus group, all participants shared similar concerns regarding one Black male faculty member they regarded as rude and difficult. Even though others had told them that this man did not like White females, they were reluctant to identify his negative

behavior toward them as racially motivated. They offered many alternative explanations such as personality, gender, role, and personal character.

White students suggested that too often Black students received high grades for low quality assignments. This perception of unfairness could be related to Helms' (1990) Pseudo-independence schema of racial identity. Whites within this ego status abandon beliefs in White superiority but *act* in ways that perpetuate the belief system. White students in the focus group verbally acknowledged possible reasons for an inequity in skills, such as racially unequal educational preparation. These same students also readily acknowledged the mission of the HBCU to address those academic gaps. However, in general, they did not seem to accept that there were Black students whose skills might be better than theirs.

As indicated on the Black Racial Identity Scale, most of the Black students were either *satisfied* with their Blackness or had an *emerging* sense of security in their Blackness. Helms (1990) describes the emersion stage as one in which Blacks experience a joy and contentment in their Blackness, and the internalization stage as where the individual actually achieves an inner sense of security with her Blackness. Possibly in reaction to students in the emersion stage, one Black student wondered if he and other Black students are too content. He wondered if they are "stuck" in a "comfort zone." Specifically, he stated, "We do what we can to maintain, but we know this is a culture of support; we know we do not have to work as hard to achieve." On the other hand, another Black student countered that Black faculty helped students produce the quality work faculty expected. This comment raises a concern that those Black students attending an HBCU find

themselves safe, comfortable, and uninterested in being challenged to develop their full potential. Another interpretation more frequently cited is that with the sense of security gained at an HBCU, Black students, because of that supportive environment, are more confident in their professional career.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings reveal several implications for graduate student development and programming at historically Black colleges and universities as well as higher education in general. However, these findings are at best suggestive and are offered with multiple cautions. While both White and Black students overall expressed a level of comfort and support, White students lacked a sense of connection to the university and struggled with a sense of exclusion. Their rationale for this exclusion was social—none or little previous experience in a predominately Black environment and lack of bonding experiences such as membership in Black cliques or sororities. Traditionally, graduate student social interactions tend to be classroom related; however, promotion of social interaction through specific extracurricular planning and social outlets for mature graduate students who commute to campus could provide different avenues for all students to form social bonds and develop a connection to the institution. Creation of an inclusive campus culture requires opportunities for students to interact and understand each other's unique heritages. For graduate students, this could include alternative and flexible scheduling of events such as late afternoon social gatherings and special weekend family activities.

The White students in this study were interested in developing their sense of racial identity. Although there were varying degrees

of interest in exploring personal racial identity, all agreed that it was important to prepare them for their profession. The Black students shared a need for race discussions, but several Black students expressed concerns that when race discussions take place in classes, they are not facilitated well. On the other hand, some Black students believed that there is too much discussion on race without a connection to their professional preparation. These concerns suggest the need for open, frank, discussions regarding race and identity issues as well as an expectation that race matters in preparation for meeting the challenges of living and working in the world. HBCUs should explore their role as race neutral or race conscious institutions. Race neutral institutions lack the expectation to address issues of race overtly. Race conscious institutions incorporate dialogue about race and oppression into their curricula and research. Faculty can be excellent facilitators of open and difficult classroom exchanges among students but have limited time. Therefore, student affairs offerings should be aligned with course content and promote knowledge and understanding of race relations and the development of a positive racial identity among all students.

One of the common characteristics of HBCUs is an emphasis on serving the community. This ideal posits higher education as a tool for economic growth and civic responsibility. There is an expectation that students will utilize their skills and knowledge to enhance the welfare of others as well as themselves. In this regard, HBCUs serve as positive models for other higher education institutions. In this study, the Black students saw their pursuit of a master's degree as an opportunity to accomplish goals and make a positive contribution to their community. On the other hand, the White students viewed their opportunity from an individualistic

perspective to grow personally, have a unique experience, or simply get their degree in the most efficient manner. While the White students appreciated the experience, they did not seem to be aware of this mission to relate educational experiences to civic duty. As enrollment of White students increases, HBCUs must be careful to not lose sight of this important role in higher education. Student orientation programs should be designed to educate all students, especially White students, to the history, mission, and expectations of the HBCU. Not only does this set a foundation for collaborative practice, it can help foster a true sense of connection and family for all students attending the university.

HBCUs are caught in a dilemma of maintaining their distinctive features while also addressing financial strains and diversification of enrollment, especially at the graduate level. At the same time, they have the opportunity to offer a unique and valuable experience to White students who become temporary minorities and Black students who become temporary majorities to learn about race, identity, civic responsibility and community. Student development programming designed to meet the needs of the adult learner and address social adjustment issues at the HBCU is essential to further defining its viable and important role in higher education.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Four areas merit further research. First, the concept of student social adjustment will not be fully understood until the experience of

White students at HBCUs is more fully explored and the findings added to the literature on this important topic. Therefore, more studies at various HBCUs are required to enlarge the sample of White students. Secondly, racism and prejudice have not been eliminated. Every opportunity for increased learning about how all persons can heal this endemic disease is needed. Researching how Whites as temporary minorities change in their beliefs is a significant contribution to this ongoing process. Thirdly, do HBCU campuses promote feelings of inclusion and support across racial lines? White students in this study did not report the same types of obstacles in approaching faculty that Black students faced at TWIs (Schwitzer, 1998) Hazzard (1988) and Conrad and Brier (1997) found Whites comfortable on HBCU campuses. What is being done right on HBCU campuses to achieve these positive ends? Lastly, a commitment to community and service appears to be consistently threaded throughout HBCUs; however, based on the admittedly preliminary findings of this study, this crucial mission is not permeating the student body as it becomes increasingly diverse. How can this mission be preserved and promoted? It seems this would be a significant contribution that student development professionals at HBCUs can make.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Brenda Hall, 901 Battleground Ave., Bldg. 12, 143, North Carolina A&T State University, Greensboro, NC 27410; hall@ncat.edu

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