



Black Student Networks at Predominantly White Universities in Texas Year 1

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Contemporary research has a long history of investigating the experiences of Black college students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (Steinfeld, Reed, & Steinfeld, 2010). These studies have used ethnicity, cultural heritage and identity, and racial identity to describe the college experiences of African American students who attend PWIs. Research has largely treated Black students in higher education as a homogeneous group and has assumed that all Black students share similar experiences (Harper, 2007; Cuyjet, 2006; Fries-Britt, 1998). Other research, however, has highlighted that there exist important intra-group differences among Black students that create variations in experience, and that universities, policymakers, stakeholders, and research should be aware of (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Cuyjet, 2006; Fries-Britt, 1998).

In *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*, the Supreme Court ruled that the University of Texas at Austin could continue with its holistic admissions policy that included race as a part of the evaluation criteria. The *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* decision was a reminder that race is an important indicator when it comes not only to admissions, but also as it relates to student retention and graduation. White and Asian students enroll in postsecondary education at higher rates than their Black counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Studies have shown that Black high school graduates are less prepared for college than any other racial group, as they take fewer AP and honors courses and are more likely to take remedial courses in high school (ACT & United Negro College Fund, 2014). Black college students are more likely to come from low-socioeconomic neighborhoods and communities and to be underrepresented at 4-year universities (Berkner-Chavez, 1997). Black students are also more likely to enroll in community colleges than they are to enroll in 4-year universities (Berkner-Chavez, 1997). The underrepresentation of Black students at 4-year universities is supported

with data that shows Black students graduating at lower rates than Whites and Asians (Astin & Osegura, 2005).

Once enrolled at a postsecondary institution, Black students are often challenged with adjustment difficulties that are not usually experienced by their White counterparts. This includes, but is not limited to, stressors such as lack of knowledge about the college process, institutional racism, poor health and energy, social isolation, and family and financial problems (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Watkins, Green, Goodson, Guidry, & Stanley, 2007). In one study, Prelow, Mosher and Bowman (2006) found that 98.5% of Black students reported experiences of discrimination at their college campus. The marginalization of Black students at higher education institutions, specifically traditional four-year universities, has been the focus of numerous research studies for decades (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005). Existing literature suggests that campus environments exert an important influence on college students' experiences and outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This is especially true for Black students, as their campus environment can have detrimental effects on their mental, physical, and social health.

Many Black students started entering PWIs in large numbers at the end of the 1960s due to gains made during the Civil Rights era (Peterson et al. 1978). Many of these campuses were not adequately equipped to meet the needs of Black students (Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016). Much of the research literature that examines the experiences of Black students at PWIs has found that Black students feel racially isolated, segregated, and singled-out (Benton, 2001). Despite increasing enrollment of Black students at these institutions, research has suggested that Black students continue to have inequitable experiences in the classroom and with faculty (Haskins et al., 2013). While all students face social and developmental challenges in pursuing a college education (Cole & Arriola, 2007), Black students face distinctive challenges. They not

only have to develop a stance toward other Black students, Black culture, and social organizations, but they must also establish some level of comfort in their interactions with White students and faculty (Grier-Reed, Ehlert, & Dade, 2011).

Black students can often experience hostility aimed at them from white students and can face exclusion from student organizations and activities except for those that are specifically targeted for Black students (Guiffrida, 2003). Policymakers, research, and relevant stakeholders have often recommended the hiring of more Black faculty and staff members, increasing financial aid, admitting a critical mass of Black students, establishing curricula relevant to the Black experience, and creating responsive counseling services as necessary steps in improving the campus and academic life of Black students (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Yet economic downturns have led to decreases in financial aid offerings, and a rising backlash to the diversification of college campuses has led to the elimination of affirmative action admissions since the 1990s (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Today, universities are now more legally and financially restricted from implementing meaningful changes that could help Black students. As a result, Black students continue to experience many of the same issues, such as alienation and isolation from the larger campus community that researchers have uncovered in numerous other studies.

The purpose of this three-year qualitative study is to examine the academic and social experiences of Black undergraduate students who are enrolled at PWIs. In particular, I investigate how Black students navigate and use their social networks (peers and university staff) during their postsecondary journey. My intention is to expand the research base to not only understand the Black student experience at PWIs, but also think about applicable ways research can inform institutional practices and policies that could improve Black student academic and social outcomes.

This study is grounded in the theoretical concept of social capital, as the networks of Black students at PWIs is based in large part on the ways in which they are able to access the resources and relationships that exist within their networks (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Social capital refers to the relationships with institutional agents and networks that afford access to resources, information, and expertise for advancement and accomplishment of goals (Harper, 2008; Small, 2007). Bourdieu (1986) posited that the amount of social capital individuals possess is determined by the size of their network. While researchers (Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Farmer-Hinton, 2006; Tierney & Venegas) have used social capital and concepts of network theory to examine access, retention, and persistence for college students, limited studies have examined the social networks of Black students at PWIs and how these networks assist or hinder these students in navigating their postsecondary experiences.

This white paper offers an overview of the study in its initial stages of data collection that aimed to understand the experiences of students through qualitative interviewing. Preliminary data analysis of five student interviews shows the extent to which Black students are navigating PWI physical and social spaces, as well their perceptions of being an underrepresented student of color at a large public university.

Methods

This study is guided by the following research question: *In what ways do Black students' social networks influence their academic and social experiences while pursuing postsecondary education?* The study also addresses a series of more specific, secondary questions that are integral to understanding the experiences of Black students. These questions are the following:

1. What are the resources and expertise embedded within Black students' social networks that influence academic success?

2. To what extent do student organizations influence the structure of Black students' social networks?
3. To what extent do peers influence the structure of Black students' social networks?
4. In what ways do university faculty and staff, family members, mentors, and other identified people encompass Black students' social networks?
 - a. How do these "actors" contribute to Black students' retention and academic success at their university?

Site Selection

The site for this study is a four-year research university in Texas (Texas Grand University [TGU], a pseudonym). This institution was established in the 19th century, and over the years, it has evolved into a top-tier Research I university. TGU is known for its public mission to the citizens of Texas, its highly-ranked academic colleges and departments, and its research innovation and discovery. TGU offers bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees from one of its 18 colleges or schools. It has an alumni network of nearly half a million and has an undergraduate student population of around 41,000. TGU is a PWI not known for having a racially diverse student body, with only 4% of the undergraduate student population identified as Black, compared to 42% White, 21% Hispanic, and 19% Asian. This site was chosen because it has historically had a low percentage of Black undergraduate students enrolled on campus, but its Black students (current and alumni) have had a profound impact on the culture, topography, and direction of TGU.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Given the small population of Black students on campus (4%), I mostly recruited participants for the study through snowball sampling. I built relationships with several Black

students on campus I planned on interviewing for the project and I asked them to refer me to other Black students they thought might be interested in participating. I also asked them to create introductions for me to other Black students they knew on campus. Moreover, at the end of each interview I asked students if they knew of anyone else who might be interested in participating and provided them with information that they could pass along to others. In addition to snowball sampling, I reached out to staff advisors of the Black Student Union (BSU), professional staff in Housing and Dining, and TGU Athletics who all were able to provide Black students for my study.

Data Collection

The use of in-depth interviews allowed me to gather in-depth information about the everyday lived experiences of students (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Interviews ranged between thirty minutes to one hour in length. They were conducted in a private office space on the TGU campus. Interviews consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions that asked students about several issues including: their financial concerns (e.g., how they pay for their college expenses and the challenges they face in doing so), connection with their Black peers (impressions and interactions with them), involvement within campus life such as Black student organizations (e.g., their role within the groups, positive experiences and challenges that they have faced) and experiences with non-Black and Black peers and faculty (e.g., what have your experiences been like with White, Latino and Asian students, describe a memorable experience with a faculty member).

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this project is still ongoing. The audio recordings from the first set of twenty-five students have been transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. I employed an inductive approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to examine and code transcripts for emerging

themes. I have used Dedoose, a web-based qualitative analysis program that has allowed me to thematically code relevant sayings and keywords for proper data management. Through the Dedoose software, I am able to break down larger themes into sub-themes. In future data analysis, I plan to sort transcripts by gender, undergraduate class status, and hometown to produce in-depth case studies of the students. To date, I have created profiles of five students which I will discuss in the next section.

Year 1 Preliminary Findings

The purpose of this section is to briefly describe the interview participants and present preliminary findings for understanding Black student networks at PWIs. This section outlines the scope of the study so far, as the first year in a three-year research project. These preliminary findings will be added to with data already collected from other participants, new interview data, and network survey analysis that will provide a sociogram of the Black student ego networks. The rationale for providing participant biographies is two-fold. First, since data analysis has only been completed on five of the interviewees, it is still too preliminary to articulate if the themes that have emerged from the interviews will hold throughout the interviews. Second, the biographies give an insightful glimpse into the nuances of the experiences of the Black students at TGU. In each of these biographies, I will discuss the theme of isolation that emerged throughout the interviews, as it captured how these Black students were seeing themselves at TGU.

Student Biographies¹

Dominique. Dominique is a sophomore majoring in nursing. She described her experiences at TGU as particularly hard because she is one of a very few students of color who is

¹ Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the study participants.

majoring in nursing. In fact she described her major as “designed predominantly for White girls who want to do good in the world without doing actual good in the world.” When I probed Dominique about her response, she relayed that she was often frustrated how her courses lacked the cultural competency or awareness that other majors such as Black Studies or Women’s Studies offered. She was also frustrated that her peers didn’t seem to be culturally aware of the different types of people they could be coming into contact with in the profession. Dominique also related that she had not done much to reach out to other Black students on campus. First, she lives off campus, and second, her building is located away from the main campus; therefore, she is often isolated both physically and socially from other Black students. She has contemplated changing majors for a year, but comes from a family of medical professionals and wants to stick with it for now. An interesting theme that emerged from Dominique’s interview was this sense of isolation that she continuously felt, as she recognized that she was in a major in which she wouldn’t get to interact with other students who looked like her.

Christopher. Christopher’s interview revealed the nuances of being a Black student-athlete at TGU. While he said he gets to interact with many Black students on campus, mostly because he is an athlete and a lot of his teammates and other athletes are Black, he said interacting with “normal” students who are Black is rare. His major is in the Biological Sciences, and that major has very few Black students, according to Christopher. As a junior, he discussed how he has taken Biology classes with fewer than ten other Black students. He also discussed that because of his major, his friend group or network actually does not include many other student-athletes. His major requires him to spend many hours in labs, and outside of practice and games he does not spend much social time with other student-athletes. Isolation for Christopher was expressed in that he was in a major that not many of his Black teammates or other Black

student-athletes were in. He talked about how he cannot study with other Black student-athletes because they do not have the same assignments or classes together.

Rachel. Rachel was the only student out of the five for whom the theme of isolation was not salient. In fact, it was just the opposite. Part of the reason was because, as she put it, “I am from Austin, and I know many people in the city and at the university. So this feels no different from high school or my neighborhood.” Rachel is very involved in student organizations, but none of them are oriented specifically to Black students. Rachel discussed how she wanted to intentionally join organizations where diversity was appreciated and accepted. Rachel even discussed how she saw different race-specific organizations as “separating on purpose.” Further probing got me to understand that she had a hard time identifying with the other Black students at TGU. First, she was raised by White parents, so she described her upbringing as “something more like a White person than a Black person.” Second, she discussed how she did not have many Black friends growing up and that making Black friends was hard for her. Finally, she discussed that she hopes in the future to meet and be friends with other Black students but as a soon-to-be senior does not see it happening anytime soon.

Aimee. Aimee, a freshman at TGU, described her experience at TGU as a complete culture shock. She is an out-of-state student from the West Coast and discussed how “different” Texas was. In fact, what was interesting about interviewing Aimee is that she talked about how attending TGU was the first time that she had ever spent a good amount of time around white people. As Aimee detailed to me, “I grew up in the rough part of town and was taught at an early age to not trust white people. So it has been hard adjusting to TGU.” Despite her upbringing though, she has several white friends, and her white roommate has helped her in acclimating to a more diverse environment than what she is used to. Aimee discussed not feeling isolated on

campus but feeling isolated in that she is the first in her family and her particular neighborhood block to go to college. Also, she is the first one in her family to leave their home city. She discussed how she often calls home and has thought about transferring, but the other universities that she was looking at attending did not offer her specific major.

Baker. A transfer student from West Texas, Baker discussed how connecting with faculty has helped to ease the sense of isolation at TGU. His major and degree plan have afforded him opportunities to work on research projects as if he were in graduate school. In fact, he is working with a Black faculty member on a project that is looking at ways to recruit more students of color to TGU with the intention of presenting findings to the university president later in 2019. As a sophomore he has already lobbied at the state capital for more higher education funding and is planning to run for student government sometime in the future. One of the reasons why he transferred to TGU was to be part of a larger student body and get a chance to interact with more students who look like him. “Being from West Texas, TGU has a lot more Black people than my hometown,” he said during our interview.

Discussion & Implications

From preliminary data, there are three things that I have learned about Black students at PWIs that I hope to explore further in later years of this study. First, that Black students have very different experiences for a variety of reasons. While many institutions tend to see their students of color populations as monolithic, these students have other demographic and social characteristics that make it difficult to define them solely based on their race. Second, isolation is something that is often overlooked or not discussed when it comes to postsecondary education, particularly as it relates to Black students. Isolation can exist in a variety of ways and be perceived by people differently. The data so far has revealed that the sample of Black students

who have been interviewed all discuss or acknowledge isolation, even though they sometimes do so in nuanced ways. For example, even though Rachel discussed not feeling a sense of isolation, she also was able to acknowledge the spaces and times where she was the only Black student in a given space or place. So as this study goes further and as I begin to formulate policy recommendations, I think this theme of isolation will need to be fleshed out more to fully understand how universities can help Black students navigate isolation physically, mentally, and emotionally. Finally, further research is needed to understand the role of different organizations within PWIs that help to either mitigate or increase isolation. Each of the students, not only due to their majors, but also due to their activities on campus, interact with various organizations. Understanding how these organizations function and why their existence plays an important part in Black students' academic and social well-being at PWIs could provide necessary insight for future research and policy decisions.

Next Steps

The second phase of this project will include another round of interviews with twenty-five different Black students. These students will range in undergraduate classification (freshmen to senior) and represent a diversity of majors. I will also conduct follow-up interviews with as many of the first-time participants as possible. This will be important to understand anything that might have changed since the first time we interviewed them. These interviews will provide an opportunity to further investigate how Black students are navigating the PWI physical and social space(s), how they interact with, faculty, staff, and their peers, and how they perceive success at a PWI.

In addition, the second phase will include administering surveys designed to understand individual Black student networks. In network analysis, egocentric networks are composed of the

relations between an ego (an individual subject) and a set of alters (the direct social contacts of an ego; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). By focusing on the egocentric networks, I will be able to find how many people (or alters) students listed as part of their network and, of the alters listed, how many were of the same race or gender, and what roles (if any) they occupy at the university. Furthermore, it will provide information on the number of students, faculty, staff, or outside “actors” (e.g., family members, community members, mentors, etc.) listed in students’ ego networks. The survey will ask students to describe their daily activities and work, identify their relationships with other students, identify the resources and expertise that are available to them at the university, and any ‘alters’ that are part of their network but not peers (such as faculty, staff, mentors, family members, etc.). The survey will consist of two components. First, a roster instrument, which is common in measuring educational networks (Butts, 2008; de Lima, 2010), will consist of a stem question (e.g., “Please indicate the faculty and staff members at the Office of Student Affairs with whom you have a relationship”) followed by a list of faculty and staff who work within that office or organization on campus. Respondents will be asked to indicate with whom they have a particular relationship, while leaving others blank. While the roster technique is a strong method for facilitating responses from respondents to remember (de Lima, 2010), the technique is not sufficient as a standalone instrument for this study, as it is not known in advance the whole set of potential alters (individuals) that should be included in the network survey. Therefore, the survey will incorporate a second component, name generators, to overcome the limitation of the roster technique. Name generators are often designed in a free-recall format, that ask respondents to identify other actors (individuals) in a network. For this study, I will design the survey to include multiple name generators to help reveal other students (or staff/faculty) that are part of the Black students’ social network(s) who could reside outside

of the initial sample of Black students. Students will be able to write-in names of people they believe they are connected to in the name generator sections.

Ultimately, this project will not only uncover the experiences of Black students at PWIs or their social networks, but also identify specific policies and practices that could be used to improve Black students' experiences. Furthermore, this study has the potential to provide insight on how Black students are able to persist and persevere at PWIs by using the resources and expertise that exist within their social networks. Finally, the study of Black students' social networks will provide awareness into some of the challenges and opportunities that exist for Black students at PWIs, and ways we can use available resources at higher education institutions to improve the overall experience of Black students.

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