For Coloreds Only: An Analysis of Institutional Safe Spaces

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Abstract

What does it mean to have space, to walk into an area where you know those around you are allies rather than hidden land mines waiting to explode your physical and emotional wellbeing? These are ideas that consume the thoughts of many persons of color on a day-to-day basis. This project explored how institutional space, dedicated for students of color to use, affected their college experience at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, a predominantly white institution. The purpose was to explore relationships between the availability of cultural space and the retention of students of color, whether students of color find it imperative to have spaces to promote their feelings of safety and inclusion on their campus, how academic spaces dedicated to discussing diversity and social justice affect the college experience of these students, and finally, how effective student affairs programming creates culturally inclusive spaces. To explore these questions, all Black students at UNC Asheville were invited to participate in a self-administered survey over the course of one week. In addition to surveys, the university's Director of the Intercultural Center was interviewed, and a content analysis on the presence and functionality of sister Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC) universities intercultural centers and cultural academic departments was conducted. It was found that UNC Asheville is a top ranking university in offering intercultural and multicultural programs, however the safe spaces on the campus are underutilized.

Keywords: African-American, Higher Education, Inclusivity

1. Introduction

A safe space is created when individuals have a place where they are comfortable in expressing their identities without fear of violence. It is a place where they can experience life through a lens of equality, rather than consistently overcoming oppression. The idea of not having a space like this consumes the thoughts of many persons of color on a day-to-day basis. Whether they are grocery shopping, attending sporting events, or walking to class, their presence can always be seen as a threat. Examples of this perceived threat of those with colored skin can be seen in the already existing, but recently brought to light abuse on black bodies by police officers, as well as the exacerbated fear of all Muslim people in the United States after the tragedy on 9/11.

These stressors carry great weight on the minds and bodies of people of color, especially those who are already experiencing pressures not directly related to their ethnicity or race. For example, those between the ages of 16 and 24 generally experience the greatest level of mental health illnesses[1]. This age range surrounds the usual time individuals attend college in Western countries like the United States. With this being noted, could it be assumed that people of color experience heightened levels of mental illness as well as greater need for support in these college environments?

Many recent race-related conflicts on predominantly white campuses (PWI) would support the idea that people of color are facing greater modes of stress and challenges to their safety. To address these issues, small race-related civil

rights movements such as #solidaritywithMizzou and #blackgradsmatter on Twitter, a social media website, were mobilized[2]. Recently, students at The Kalamazoo College in Michigan started a student group called the Kalamazoo College Intercultural Movement[3]. This was sparked by an anonymous letter written and published on the university's public Google drive that made threatening comments to many underrepresented groups on the campus[3]. One of these groups consisted of students of color. Those students have now come together to charge their university to promote a more inclusive community and to support the current marginalized students. The movement leaders have made a myriad of requests from administration, but specifically they have demanded a designated intercultural space dedicated to fostering community between students of color. Their strong passion for this space raises the question of the impact that an institutional dedicated space, otherwise known as a safe space, has on students of color[4].

This paper will investigate how UNC Asheville compares to other institutions in resources for students of color, all while exploring how these student's experience safety, or lack the of, in different spaces on the campus. More specifically, the following questions will be evaluated: Is there a correlation between the availability of cultural space and the retention of students of color? Do students of color find it imperative to have spaces to promote their feelings of safety and inclusion on their campus? How do academic spaces dedicated to discussing diversity and social justice affect the college experience of these students? In what ways does student affairs programming create culturally inclusive spaces?

2. Literature Review

The history of Black students in higher education is incredibly rich. The civil rights movement of the 1960's reconfigured the order of America's higher education system[5]. Between the years of 1960 and 1980 great changes occurred throughout colleges and universities nation wide. During these years the percentage of black students enrolled in PWI's jumped from 0% to 8.4% in barely twenty years[6]. This shift occurred due to the concerted efforts of many Black educators, Black students, Black political figures, non-black allies, and especially the Black youth. Greatly influenced by the Black Power movement a new group of young leaders began to emerge. These groups of people were the change agents of the Black Student Movement. "They sought to make their institutions more receptive to their needs, representative of their culture, and relevant to their situation as Blacks in America. However, many institutions were slow to change or were resistant."[7] In response to the violent reluctance to black bodies at a white school, these students sought out measures to make their experience a success by making their respective campus a safer environment.

Over the past decades the representation of black students has continued to grow. As of today, 13% of college students identify as Black or African American.[8] However, though representation has continued to increase overall, there are still instances where Black students are threatened and their college experience hindered. This fact is not surprising seeing as those who integrated PWI's are still alive and well today. Our nation is not too far removed from the past. Currently "six of every ten Black and Latina/o undergraduates who begin higher education at a four-year institution will fail to earn a bachelor's degree within six years.[9]" In response to this disturbing statistics scholars have started to expand research to investigate the causal mechanisms of the high drop out rate and methods to combat it.

Research shows that aspects of a healthy learning environment are the appearances of vulnerability and the challenging of dominant ideologies[10]. "The greater the complexity and emotionality of the material, the more dangerous it becomes to participate in classroom discussions.[11]" It is important to note that these two characteristics can only effectively facilitate positive change if they are done in a safe environment. "Beyond physical violence and verbal threats, a safe place can refer to inclusive groups of learners, students who may be underrepresented based upon race, sexuality, religion, nationality, or ideology.[12]" Safe spaces are intended not to minimize conversation, but to facilitate and foster tough dialogue. These spaces are incredibly beneficial for black students as they report greater senses of vulnerability at PWI's, but experience a sense of safety when they are engaged in the classroom[13]. A recent study of nine Black senior high school students on the college track showed that "having safe spaces in predominantly white learning environments for Black students to escape psychological, emotional and physical stress stemming from experiences with race.[14]"

University's nationwide have started to include themselves in the dialogue. A new student intercultural lounge at Columbia University was recently added after countless formal request from students of color. According to Christina Edmondson, dead of multicultural student development there, "the decision to create this space arose from conversations with current and former students and staff about the idea of belonging.[15]"

With the ever-changing trends in higher education, this study aims to determine how spaces dedicated as safe for Black students at UNC Asheville affect their feelings of inclusion and safety. This information is critical to know for the overall retention and experience of black students as their needs are forever changing, as with any student.

2.1 Key Concepts

In this study there are four keywords that must be defined. A safe space is characterized as a place where an individual feels free to express their thoughts and opinions without fear of repercussions through violent verbal altercations, physical violence, or online attacks[16]. People of color are characterized as individuals who do not identify as white. Interculturalism is typically characterized when an environment includes people from varying cultures, ethnicities, religious groups, and nationalities that are able to equally contribute and participate in society by interacting with one another[17]. Multiculturalism is typically characterized when an environment includes people from varying cultures, ethnicities, religious groups, and nationalities that are able to peacefully exist in society together, but lack interaction that promotes equal growth and opportunity for all. In this study the difference between the latter two will be respected[18].

3. Methodology

This study used a mixed methods approach to address a cluster of questions. Previous research at UNC Asheville indicated that there was moderate evidence that supported the idea that the more a student visited the IC the less satisfied they were with the space. This proves that the students who are engaging with the IC on a consistent basis feel that their needs are not being met. These findings influenced the data and methods for this study.

3.1 Interview

Dr. Dahlia Hylton, Director of the IC, was interviewed on Friday, November 21st, 2014. She served as both the key informant and gatekeeper in this entire study. She was privy to critical information pertaining to the IC that provided insight on how to structure possible questions for the student experience survey. The interview was constructed in a way to gather information about the purpose of the IC and how she felt it was currently performing for the students it served. Questions eventually evolved into exploring her past experiences at other institution where she held positions similar to that of her current title[20].

3.2 Content Analysis

A total of five universities in the COPLAC system, including UNC Asheville, were chosen for the analysis. These institutions include Eastern Connecticut State University, Midwestern State University, University of Minnesota Morris, Henderson State University, Georgia College and State University. All universities were chosen with the following criteria in mind: population size, geographic location, Black student population, faculty to student ratio, and number of degrees offered in comparison to UNC Asheville. These criteria were chosen based on the comparative analysis data results from the previous study done in 2014.

Each institutions website was analyzed in a consistent method for the following variables: diverse mission statement, minority population, black student population, retention rate, six year overall graduation rate, six year graduate rate for black students, presence of a bias incident response team and the amount of incidents reported. In addition to these characteristics the amounts of diversity programs and diverse spaces were measured for academic, student affairs and residential divisions. See Table 2 for more detailed variable measurements.

Most data was recorded in nominal or ratio measurement scales and a rubric was used when collecting information from each website. The about section was searched for quick fact information such as population and racial demographic. To find space and programming the terms "diversity" and "safe space" were typed into university website search engine. Only links connected to the results page or extensions of the pages connected to the results page were used in tallying programs and spaces. No schools were directly contacted about resources offered or for explicit data because an overwhelming majority of students in the 2014 survey responded that they acquired most information about diversity at UNC Asheville using the university website. Refer to tables one and two for more details on how information was collected.

Table 1. Data Sources for Content Analysis

Variable	Data Source
6 year Graduation Rates	National Center For Education Statistics
Biased incident	Institutional Security and Fire Safety Reports (ISFSR)
Residential, Student Affairs and Academic Programs	Searched "(institution division) Programs"
Residential Space	Searched residential life webpage
Retention Rates	Institutional Fact Books
Student Affairs and Academic Space	Searched interactive campus maps

Table 2. Content Analysis Measures

Variable	Variable Measurement
Academic Space	Liberal Arts Core curriculum; study abroad programs included
Academic Programs	Programming entities sponsored by academic affairs
Mission Statement	Appearance of the key words diversity, culturally competent, interculturalism, people of color, women, or LGBT+ community
Residential Programs	Area wide programs including all residence halls
Residential Space	Living Learning or Experience Communities
Student Affairs Programs	Programming groups dedicated to people of color, women or the LGBT community (ex. Mentoring group)
Student Affairs Organizations	Includes cultural student organizations and black or multicultural greek letter organizations
Student Affairs Space	Spaces dedicated to people of color, women or the LGBT community
Separate Student Affair Space	Spaces dedicated to people of color, women or the LGBT community not located in the student union

3.3 Student Experience Survey

The student experience survey was drafted in the fall semester of 2015 through Google Forms. The Institutional Research Board (IRB) request was submitted in February 2016 and later approved in March of 2016. Dr. Dahlia Hylton released it to 224 black students at UNC Asheville through email using a master list from the registrar's office. The survey was open from March 23rd of 2016 and closed on Mar 25th at 11:59 PM. Individuals addresses were not recorded once their response had been submitted. A total of 36 students responded and the data was collected into a Google Sheet and transferred into a password protected Microsoft excel spreadsheet.

Once all responses had been transferred to the Microsoft excel spreadsheet, they were coded in preparation for SPSS analysis. Bivariate relationships were created based on the specific research questions mentioned in the introduction. For nominal variable responses a Lambda test was used and for ordinal responses a Gamma test was used.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Interview

The main conclusions of the interview with Dr. Dahlia Hylton were that she too found the size and location of the IC to be "troublesome." She believes that though the space may not be ideal, it is functioning and greatly underutilized in some aspects. The collaboration of academics and student affairs is a relationship that she stressed greatly. Because the space must be used for a variety of reasons: a student hangout, programming space, professional and student organization meeting space, student space, etc., it is often times hard to find time for them all to exist harmoniously. The generality of the space hurts it functionality more than helps it. There is no clear space for student's campus-wide

to know exactly what entity is housed where. Without common knowledge on campus of the growth of the IC and its programs, it is easy for events and cultures to be overlooked.

Her hopes for the IC are grand. She explained that the ideal space would have student work cubicles, a kitchen, literature space, a computer lab, student organization offices, lounge spaces with televisions, and be located in a space with much more foot traffic. She would like to create a program similar to the one she was in charge of at Auburn called Very Impressive Tigers (VIP). This program would give prospective students a personalized preview to Ashville's campus and the surrounding community. As she can not do this on her own, she believes a large, more specialized space would allow her to foster large scale programs like youth mentoring, creation of living and learning communities, and specialized Bulldog experience classes for possible recipients of scholarships from the similar VIP program. Dr. Hylton argues that there should be an institutional wide effort in collaboration with diversity affairs.

4.2 Content Analysis

Table 3. Facts on population demographics, graduation rates as well as student affairs, academic and residential resources offered at the six institutions chosen for the content analysis[21,22,23,24,25,26,27].

Institution	State	Black Population	Graduation Rate Black Students	Student Affairs Programs	Student Affairs Organizations	Residential Spaces	Student Affairs Spaces
UNC Asheville	NC	3%	57%	11	9	2	3
Eastern Connecticut State University	CN	7%	55%	1	10	8	3
Midwestern State University	TX	14%	33%	n/a	13	1	1
University of Minnesota Morris	MN	1%	45%	8	8	2	2
Henderson State University	AR	24%	24%	0	12	0	0
Georgia College and State University	GA	5%	61%	6	19	0	1

The data suggests that there could be evidence supporting the idea that physical space encourages programming potential in all three campus divisions researched (academic, residential, student affairs). It should be noted that there exist a strong interconnection between these divisions. For example, the higher the graduation rate the more student affairs programs there were. This shows that the overall experience of black students is not only linked to one university area. Making the intentional effort to include black identities in all aspects of campus life is essential.

Another interesting display of this relationship would be resources available at Henderson University (HU) and the University of Minnesota at Morris (UMM). HU performed the worst in terms of space and programming for all three divisions, however it had one of the largest minority populations and the largest minority black population of the six universities that were compared. UMM had the second largest minority population but the smallest black population with a miniscule one percent. However, it performed second best with the availability of space and program resources. The explanation to this contrast is simple; physical representations as well as divisional resources are equal contributors to improving the college experience of Black students and promoting their educational success. Faster matriculation through college for black students is often linked to increasing population size. Because patterns at other institutions prove that divisional resources improve overall matriculation through college, the argument cannot be made that representation singly improves the overall experience black students.

In the cross tabulation results the only significant value was the negative correlation between academic space, which was diversity within core curriculum, and graduation rate for black students. This correlation is interesting because as the amount of minority students increased, the amount of academic space did as well. This could suggest that the current core curriculum is insufficient in serving the institutions black students or that it is not needed for their success. The argument of quality over quantity could also be presented to further explain this result.

4.3 Student Experience Survey

A total of thirty-six students all identifying as Black/African -American or mixed race responded to the survey, averaging twelve participants each day. With a sample size of 224, there was a 16.07% response rate.

Table 4. Sample Descriptives

		n = 36
Item	**Category**	**Percentage**
Gender	Female	63.9
	Male	36.1
Race	Black/African American	94.4
	Biracial	5.6
Classification	Freshman	16.7
	Sophomore	25
	Junior	33.3
	Senior	16.7
	Other	8.3
Major	Natural Science	33.3
	Social Science	38.9
	The Arts and Humanities	5.6
	Interdisciplinary Studies	16.7
	More than 1 Major	8.3

There were two major trends that appeared from the results of the survey. The first is that the longer a student was a member of the campus community, the more inclusive they found their majors curriculum. This strong correlation value of 0.713 was identified using a cross tabulation gamma test in SPSS programming. Responses from the sample group were directly reflective of the relationship found between academic space and graduation rates of black students in the content analysis. With a large proportion of students feeling as though their curriculum was not inclusive of black cultures, they often articulated the importance of specific faculty of color that improved their experiences both in and outside of the classroom. The majority of individuals who felt as though their curriculum was in fact inclusive of Black cultures had attended the university for 2 or more years, or were a post-baccalaureate student.

> "Professor Agya-Boaten's office-Because he's knows the ways people treat us more than I can try to ignore. I feel safe in Owen Hall because I don't have to deal with people who stare at me inappropriately."

The increased feelings of inclusion in a students respective major and the amount of time they have been a student could yield itself to many possible variables. Their extended time at the university most likely allowed for more of the individual connections with faculty, which then improved their sense of safety in academic settings. With time students typically are able to determine their passions and in turn find their place within their major where they feel most respectfully challenged. If a student initially had a negative experience in their freshman or sophomore years, time allows them to navigate their space towards one that is less stressful and a better proponent of learning and safety. It could also be that students grow more tolerant of the lack of inclusion as their tenure grows longer. This would most likely be because they were able to find another outlet that provided them with greater senses of safety. In this case responses would suggest that these places are the IC, individual staff and faculty offices, the university's gym, the library, their residential room, and the cafeteria.

It was also apparent that some major disciplines were creating more effective safe environments in comparison to others. Many students in the social sciences and interdisciplinary studies mentioned their department specifically as a safe space. However, there were no occurrences of a student exclusively mentioning the natural sciences as a safe space, be it a specific department as a whole or staff member. This is not to say that the majors in natural sciences are not safe. However, the large representation of natural science majors in the sample and the infrequent mentioning of the departments as safe spaces does raise question.

"Owen Hall Studios - I am an artist and there is a sense of "home" i get with being surrounded by people's creations and creative people. I am more likely to be accepted and understood in this environment than in other places on campus."

The second trend expresses great inconsistencies in the feelings of safety amongst Black students in regards to spaces. Over half the respondents did not make use of the safe spaces provided on campus: Hyannis House, IC, Center for Diversity Education, and the Sandbox. Though the majority of students did not frequently visit the IC, it was the most visited of the four designated safe spaces. In addition to this, many students mentioned that the space and those who work in it were one of the top three reasons they felt safe on campus.

"I feel safe in the Intercultural office- It's far from where I usually have my classes and my apartment, but sometimes I feel that the people who work there are invested in my success. The counselling center usually refers me to the psychologist to give me meds, but when I'm at the Intercultural center with myself I'm able to feel comfortable at Unca."

"Intercultural Center - many peers that I find relatable often occupy this space; the director and assistant director of this space have been consistent mentors throughout my time at UNC Asheville; I can use this space for several reasons - lunch, meetings, study spaces, etc."

"IC - i am a person of color and this is a space that is often populated by people of color. Also the administrators associated with this environment are respectful and understanding about various issues pertaining to my experience."

What raised the most questions were the variations in feelings of safety between the black students. Many students were polar opposites of one another. Nearly half of the responding group felt safe only in environments with others similar in race to them, others felt safe around individuals with similar interests as them, and some felt most unsafe around fellow Black students.

"Classrooms, dorms, academic buildings in general. I feel safe there because college is supposed to be a place to learn from others who have differing opinions. The only time I don't feel safe is when I have an opinion that may differ with the minority, i.e. Black people on campus."

"Any place that I go is a safe space in an institution of higher learning. Perhaps it is because of my age that I believe that, but I have never felt uncomfortable about expressing my opinion even if someone else disagrees with it."

"I dont feel like this campus is entirely a "safe space" because most of the individual's on this campus are very concerned with political correctness. Many students, including myself, cannot fully express their opinions due to the likelihood of offending another student. I believe this stifles thoughtful discussion and promotes narrow-mindedness. Without being able to fully exercise freedom of speech on college campuses, we prevent our growth as educated individuals. Without freedom of speech, there truly is no such thing as a safe space."

The survey did not provide open-ended questions for further elaboration on these feelings of lack of safety. However, participants were able to provide their own definitions of safe space. Most articulated that safety occurs when there is representation of people of color in addition to open conversation that did not prompt fear once and idea had been expressed.

"A safe space when I someone with the same demographics as me to feel comfortable with. I don't have to defend myself with another African who knows the problems we share, I don't have to explain fully when I have another black female with me. It's very hard to find a safe space in a PWI as a black/african female if the therapist they give me is a white woman who isn't from the culture that I live in."

"A place where minority groups can come together, socialize, be ourselves and talk about specific issues that only we know and understand to be reality. A place where we can see others who look like us being successful in the same environment."

"A place where I can be myself and openly discuss the issues that I face daily on this snow covered campus."

Table 5. Respondents' feelings of safety and representation in student affairs, academic and residential spaces.

Questions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral or No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel that the curriculum taught in my major is inclusive of the varying aspects of black cultures?	27.8%	22.2%	25%	22.2%	2.8%
I feel as though these criteria for a safe space are met when I attend classes within my major.	13.9%	16.7%	25%	36.1%	8.3%
I feel as though these criteria for a safe space are met when attending events held in the Intercultural Center.	0%	5.6%	33.3%	27.8%	33.3%
I feel as though these criteria for a safe space are met when visiting the Intercultural Center.	0%	5.6%	38.9%	25%	30.6%
I feel as though these criteria for a safe space are met when visiting the Hyannis House.	0%	2.8%	63.9%	25%	8.3%
I feel as though these criteria for a safe space are met when attending events put on by the Hyannis House.	0%	2.8%	61.1%	27.8%	8.3%
I feel as though these criteria for a safe space are met when in my residence hall common lounge areas, computer labs and kitchen.	3.3%	26.7%	36.7%	20%	13.3%

4.6 Challenges

The major threat to the content analysis was time. It would have been ideal to include more COPLAC institutions, however time constraints made that difficult. By including more universities the accuracy of the discovered relationships would have been stronger. There could also possibly be relationships present that were not revealed due to the smaller sample size. However, the advantage of the smaller sample size is that each institution received more time towards discovering available resources presented online. It would have been ideal to compare second year retention rates in place of six-year graduation rates. This was not achievable because there was great inconsistency with transparency in regards to lack of diversity on campus between the institutions websites. Because of this, it is likely that some resources available were not included in the counts for this study. In the future, it may be wise for institutions to centralize their diversity resources to provide a more accurate representation of what they offer to students, faculty, staff and visitors.

Similar to the comparative analysis the greatest challenge to the student experience survey was time and available resources. It would have been ideal to follow the IRB approved plan to administer the survey and follow up with a focus group, however that plan was incredibly ambitious for one semester of work. The variation in findings, however, proves the necessity for this project to continue.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Overall there was sufficient evidence to argue that UNC Asheville's IC is one of the leading centers in programming and available resources in the COPLAC system. However, students showed dissatisfaction with the current physical space of the IC.

"I feel that the Intercultural Center has grown in the sense of putting on programs and making their presence known on campus. I feel that the physical space should match the progress that the Intercultural Center has made."

The next steps to this research would be to identify the core causes for the dissatisfaction with the IC and determine the methods to improve the spaces service to all. Another survey with open-ended questions exploring student use of the space would open the doors to determining the problem and solution. Other avenues to be explored would be the

inclusivity of introductory classes in both the liberal arts core curriculum and individual majors. Are there other external factors separate from academia that are assisting in improving the feelings of safety, representation and inclusivity in the classroom? The best way to gather this information would be to follow up with focus groups.

These focus groups would be a great opportunity to have the varying Black students in one room to engage with one another. The diverse responses in the student experience survey suggest that some students have far greater feelings of safety than others. In some instances it was expressed that other Black students were the cause of the lack of safety. Conversations rather than surveys would be a more powerful method of qualitative research in this instance. Communication between Black students who feel challenged by other Black students and the possible offending students may offer an opportunity for better understanding between the two parties. It would also allow the university to interpret its role it has played in possibly facilitating the uncomfortable relationship between some of the students.

The racial demographics of higher education are changing drastically at the national level. During the shift from the 20th to the 21st century, the percent of Latino, Asian, and American Indians/Alaskan Natives in the United States grew exponentially while the percentage of Black people remained the same at twelve percent[28]. Similar trends can be seen in the population levels of both public and private higher education institutions in both undergraduate and graduate levels. Black people account for the most disparate gender gap between females and males with a 7:3 ratio[29]. It is imperative that research exploring the experiences of underrepresented individuals is continued during this evolution, especially those of Black people. Concern is fully warranted over the lack of congruency in the increasing trend of representation between that of Black people and other persons of color. In order to achieve the goal of equal access, representation, and opportunity to education for all, these inconsistencies cannot be ignored.

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