

The Ingredients of Success: A Positivistic Approach to Black Students Graduation and the University of Wisconsin- La Crosse

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Abstract

The project is a qualitative exploration of the pathways black students take in order to reach graduation. Uncovering the ingredients most vital to their academic success at UW-La Crosse was done through in-depth interviews with eight recently graduated, or expecting to graduate, black seniors. This research explores the relationship between motivational factors and academic success. Themes of identity development, adaptation strategies, and racial consciousness are woven into the paper. The project is an effort to locate where and how these students position themselves within the framework of the university. This insight into black students' successful graduation is to refine the tools administrators, faculty, and students use in addressing diversity related issues at UW-L, specifically the graduation gap between black students and the larger student body. The results offer insights into how a diverse learning environment beneficial to all students can best be created.

Keywords: Minority, Education, Graduation, Predominantly White Institution (PWI)

1. Introduction:

“And yet not a dream, but a mighty reality- a glimpse of the higher life, the broader possibilities of humanity, which is granted to the man who, amid the rush and roar of living, pauses four short years to learn what living means” - W.E.B Du Bois

This quote captures the incredible possibilities offered at institutions of higher education, as Du Bois (1903) contends that the university enables individuals to discover their inner humanity. With similar idealism, the mission statement of UW- La Crosse is to (1) “provide a challenging, dynamic, and diverse learning environment in which the entire university community is fully engaged in supporting student success;” and (2) “serve the needs of women, minority, disadvantaged, disabled, and nontraditional students and seek racial and ethnic diversification of the student body and the professional faculty and staff.” (Provost & Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Office, n.d).

Fundamental to achieving the mission of UW-La Crosse is a rich, diverse learning environment. However, the gap in graduation rates between white students and students of color reflects the reality that not all of the university's students are allowed to fulfill their dreams. For example, in 2011 UW-L black students had a 6-year graduation rate of only 50%; a rate 20% lower than their white counterparts (The University of Wisconsin System Student Statistics & National Center for Education Statistics). Despite a stated commitment to Inclusive Excellence by the university and UW-System, the gap in graduation rates between white students and students of color has remained unchanged since 1997 (The University of Wisconsin System Student Statistics).

The purpose of this research is to better understand the gap in graduation rates at UW-L by exploring the experiences of black students who have successfully navigated their way through a predominantly white university. While previous research has focused primarily on uncovering the factors that contribute to black students' inability

to successfully matriculate college (Toby 2006; Cannady 2009; Torres 2009), this research is concerned with black students who have been successful. As such, the respondents in this study are students who have already graduated from UW-L or who are near graduation. This research seeks to answer the question: how have these students overcome the odds? In other words, what ingredients, characteristics and/or factors have contributed to these students' academic success, and how might their advice translate into helping other minority students at UW-L overcome the pervasive graduation gap?

2. Assumptions:

While this research offers suggestions for ways to address the graduation gap, it does not intend to overgeneralize the "black student experience"; the individuality of each student who participated in this study should be recognized. The research only provides a snapshot into these individuals' lives. Further, these students are not speaking on behalf of all African-Americans. It is assumed that their testimonials are honest and accurate representations of their own personal perspectives. It is also assumed that the experience of black students at UW-La Crosse is comparable to the black student experience nationally at predominantly white institutions (PWI's) and lastly that academic success is correlated with higher rates of graduation.

3. Implications of the Research:

This research will benefit administrators at UW-L that seek to increase the African-American population on campus as well as with improving retention. Additionally, this research will benefit the participants by offering an opportunity to reflect on their own higher education journey and share what they have learned to help future minority students. Ideally, this study will contribute to the development and overall design of a comprehensive strategic plan aimed solely at providing incoming minority students more resources that will ultimately lead to a higher probability of graduating from UW-L. Exploring how the university can better create a rich, diverse learning environment, while creating the opportunity for every one of its students to succeed is a worthwhile area of research.

4. Literature Review:

Scholarship exploring the gap in graduation rates for white students and students of color suggests the gap is a result of marginalization within the social hierarchy (Wilkins 2007; Grant and Breese 1997). Some scholars, for example, regard the African American male as an endangered species in higher academia as black males nationally are more likely to become incarcerated than educated, in part due to an inherited legacy of differential access to wealth (e.g., Jenkins 2006; Midgette and Glenn 1993). Predominantly white institutions (PWIs) complicate the matter as African American students have been found to undergo "culture shock," which hinders psychological growth (Torres 2009; Kaufman and Feldman 2004). Similarly, race-related stressors heavily factor into graduation rates where students must adapt and develop coping strategies such as "acting white" where the situation becomes entangled with issues of identity (Davis et al. 2004; Neville, Heppner, L.; Wilkins 2012). Nasim et al. (2005) found that academic support systems, the ability to deal with racism, and a humanist attitude, were the most reliable predictors of achievement and reduce these stressors. An increased sense of ethnic pride is positively correlated to higher self-esteem and adaptation methods ultimately contributing to more a higher graduation rate for black students (Elion et al. 2012; Neblett et al. 2009).

According to Duckworth (2011), black students can overcome these barriers with high levels self-control and prolonged determination. Students holding the commitment to do whatever it takes to be successful constructs an identity, which is in turn internalized (Cannady 2009). The majority of current research is focused on explaining the problems of black achievement in higher education and how predominantly white institutions complicate the matter. Although coping strategies scratch the surface (Davis et al. 2004; Midgette; Glenn 1993; Cannady 2009; and D. M. Thomas et al. 2009) little research has been done from a first-person perspective, of the academic experiences of students as it coincides with determination and success. Previous research on African American

Students at the UW-La Crosse (Cannady 2009; Root 2001; Miller 1989), is focused on the level of satisfaction black students hold in regards to certain aspects of the university. Tokenism, the idea of being regarded as a necessary piece of diversity along with the duality of hyper-visibility/invisibility was explored. Building off this research on the African American Student Experience at UW-L this research explores an area yet to be fully uncovered: the internal catalysts that stimulate the conditions of graduation for black students. This research expected to find a relation between extrinsic and intrinsic motivators as it coincides with involvement theory (Baker 2008). Another expected finding was a healthy dose of coping strategies, a determination related to racial pride and adaptive perfectionist techniques that coincides with thriving academically.

5. Methodology:

Preliminary research investigations commenced at UW-La Crosse in the summer of 2013 with the approval from the Institutional Review Board and research instruments were continuously developed. Potential participants were contacted either through email, or text and were given an overview of the research goals along with the possible benefits in taking part in the study then given the opportunity to choose to participate or not. Interviewees were selected in a non-random fashion for their “success” and prominent leadership within the university. Each of the students selected self-identified as black or African-American and each held unique backgrounds. With a gender balance wanting to be maintained there was a total of five male participants and three female participants. Two of the students were alumni from UW-L, the remaining six were all in their final year of their undergraduate degree.

After receiving another overview of the research goals and background, consent and confidentiality agreements were covered. The in depth interviews took place mainly in academic buildings, the majority of participants met the researcher in Centennial hall where an Olympus digital voice recorder recorded the following interviews. Participants received \$5.00 at the completion of the interview for their time. The conversation was guided by a series of initial questions, leading to more in depth questions. After the interviews are conducted, the interviews were coded into a software and transcribed using a foot pedal. For confidentiality purposes letters are used to symbolize each participant.

6. Results:

Several recurring themes were present upon analysis of the data. Themes supported by the literature were involvement theory along with the importance of foundational academic support systems. Further, the data suggests that in each student’s transitional period they developed a greater ability to deal with racism. Having a strong sense of determination combined with a sharp sense of self that’s inclusive of racial pride was present within much of the data also. Lastly, having the sheer determination to succeed by any means necessary is vital in the process of reaching graduation. The interviews were a rich source of data creating a foundation for the results section.

6.1 University Experience:

Many of the participants brought up that small stressors such as the unwanted responsibility of having to teach white students and faculty about diversity related issues took away from their academic experience. Almost all of the participants expressed some level of distaste towards being forced into the role of an educator.

D: “You’re supposed to be here getting your education and not educate everybody else about your culture so they can have a better education.”

T: “Like I can be an educator, but its draining.”

Further, the burden of representation was often present within the classroom setting. Students also noted their dissatisfaction with the environment of UW-L forcing them to change. The interviewees were not short on experiences with racism and micro-aggressions noting that the little stuff adds up overtime and can be more insidious than the overt racism.

D: “You’ll get this feeling in any class dealing with race or any class in general when a professor speaks to you they speak to you as if you’re supposed to speak on behalf of the entire black community”

D: “It doesn’t make the university as pleasant knowing that you have to basically cater your personality to people who don’t deserve to have your personality catered to them”

Several of the participants highlighted they do not feel safe nor respected on campus also adding their frustration with the university administration to create a safer environment. Overall, when asked if the university should care about diversity related issues all of the participants said they should care, however there was a significant lack of trust that the university will take any bold stance in the future with any race related issues.

R: “But the other thing about it too is, I feel the university and I’m gonna use the Chancellors cabinet, I’m talking the highest, they don’t really do anything in terms of diversity and inclusion, what I mean by that is that the majority of the efforts for diversity and inclusion comes of office of multicultural student services, campus climate, student support services, those office so they are at the bottom and they tend to go bottom up”

J: “The whole Eagle Hall incidence, someone had wrote f niggers across Africa- it’s just like it scared me cause you know it’s someone here who doesn’t like people who look like me for whatever reason and you were this close to me in a place that I’m supposed to call you know a home away from home.”

Two of the participants advised the administration strongly consider security cameras to at least have the threat of punishment to lessen incidences like the one in Eagle Hall. This participant noted the hypocrisy of university administration, while the throwing of a squirrel received immediate administration attention, the Eagle Hall written racial slurs did not. To build upon this, another participant stated that even when the Eagle Hall incidence was recognized in a campus wide email, that it wasn’t even written by the Chancellor.

J: “So we get the email about this stupid squirrel that got thrown around and the cars being flipped but when one of your own students’ lives are in danger and people don’t feel safe the school doesn’t have much to say about it. I’m still advocating for cameras.”

R: “I think a lot of it goes back to administration not taking a stance. Have you ever seen the Chancellor supporting diversity and inclusion? Oh, and the one email that he did send, I don’t mean to put him on the spot but I wrote it.”

6.2 Suggestions for the Administration

Participants were asked the following question; “what do think the university can do to help alleviate the graduation gap?” Having more black staff and a safer campus were the main points.

S: “Probably up minority professors, I don’t know what else they can do, because honestly they don’t care so I don’t know what they can or should do.”

B: “Give us a safe campus, and a lot of us don’t feel safe. Or give us a space so we can speak our minds and you actually implement change.”

6.3 Support Systems & Motivation

Many of the participants’ shared a similar story of being a first generation college student, while being a first generation is a great challenge having supportive family is nonetheless incredibly powerful as a motivational factor.

T: “I wanted to make them proud, I’m the first guy, first student going to college out the family. First generation student, it’s a huge deal. So I come back home and they’re like what are you going to do? You’re not just gonna do nothing, what’s up?”

DII: "My mom is one of my highest motivations also cause I know she's proud of me for doing this."

One participant shared that his family was so excited for his accomplishment to graduate from the university that they thought of it as their degree

R: "Even when I graduated with my undergraduate degree they felt like it was their degree so like ha that's all you would hear. Like we got our degree!"

6.4. Advice for Future Black Students

Many of the interview participants did not want incoming minority students to be lied to saying the lack of diversity here should not be sugarcoated prior to a student entering the university. Participants were asked to share their advice for incoming black students. Having a determined sense of confidence being one of the key features.

C: "Confidence is the only way that you're gonna get through a place like this."

D: "You literally have to have a strong sense of self when you come to a predominantly white campus because it will test you almost every day until you get like a real good grip on reality and how you will perceive yourself. You gotta have that self confidence in order to continue."

Not only is it simply having a plan and being determined, but it's sticking with your future and being able to adapt when necessary.

S: "You figure out a lot on your own, I think being confident is very important or you will get swallowed into an abyss of nothing, umm I wouldn't say I'm 100% successful I'm just good at making plans and changing these plans around

Incoming black students should be told that it may be very difficult to seek out a few individuals whom they can rely on.

C: "What you have to understand is that nobody else in this university will have to overcome the feeling of their peers not being their peers. Students of color are the only ones that have to deal with that, your peers are far and few in between."

Additionally, common tips for students to succeed in this environment included having a high level of confidence, a commitment to yourself, and an ambitious willingness to go after what they want.

T: "I'm a firm believer in closed mouths not getting fed at all. You have to be willing to reach out and open up to people in order to feel acceptance just to be overall happy in an environment like this, because if you're not. Man it's so hard."

Having defined goals may also help students succeed long term in the academic setting.

J: "Umm my advice for incoming black students is to know what you want because that will drive you the most."

Although the participants reported a host of issues associated with being black on this campus each said if given the opportunity they would do it again and that UW-L does have a lot of opportunities for minorities. Getting involved, especially with the individuals in OMSS was heavily recommended.

B: "Take everything that this school has to offer, and I mean take everyyyyythingggg that this school has to offer because they are going to use you, so make sure you get everything you can out of it"

C: "The last thing I want to say about student success, I look at everybody with a positive light, you know. Everybody has an opportunity to do something great with their lives."

D: "A few key things I want to talk about, if you are incoming most definitely make sure you link up with OMSS because that is vital."

And the last piece of advice from the final interview was simply this to trust in your abilities

"B: I would just tell them to know that you're brilliant"

Identity development is a collective process. The social stressors of simply being a minority on a PWI for many individuals to sacrifice effort towards their academics. The individuals kept a very positive outlook on the entirety of the experience, although challenging all participants said the experience was a valuable one for their future. Involvement was found to be an important factor of identity development feeling comfortable at the university. The involvement in two things was specifically stressed; getting to know the Office of Multicultural Student Services (OMSS) and the black community on campus.

7. Discussion:

The results portion provoked some very interesting questions regarding who on campus has the most potential to decrease the gap in graduation rates for black students. A bottom up philosophy was stated where the Office of Multicultural Student Services along with students themselves seem to be the main agents of change as the university in its entirety fails to make a concrete stance on issues surrounding race.

While arguing whose responsibility it is may be a circular discussion, analyzing who is the most likely to help the situation is valuable. Due to the participants displaying their strong lack of trust in upper administration's commitment to minority students OMSS along with students of color should be the ones entrusted with the problem because they are not afraid to do the work nor take a stance.

8. Limitations and Future Suggestions:

A limitation of the research is it being done by only one investigator. The process of data collection and synthesis is time consuming for only one individual. The small number of black students on campus nearing graduation is an apparent limiting factor. Gradation of skin color was not included in the study but very may well be a relevant factor in black students' experience as well. Future research should analyze the role of skin tones on outcomes and minority student attitudes towards the university. Future research should quantitatively investigate motivational factors that determine an individual's level of commitment in completing a degree in higher education. Also, future research should continue to seek to answer what makes the black student who graduate successful and how can this best be translated into more students of color? It should also investigate the burden of psychological stress brought about by elements of race plays on overall health.

9. Conclusions and Recommendations:

The research found the African-American students to be very diverse. Identity development, adaptation strategies, and racial consciousness were prevalent themes throughout in determining "success". Further, having the perseverance for long term goals combined with the ability to deal with racism held significant weight. Through analysis of the research the following recommendations should be strongly considered by UWL faculty staff and students. The recommendations are that upper level administration take a stance on creating safer campus, and continually support the expansion of programs like OMSS and SSS with the bottom up approach. Further, seeking to

hire more qualified faculty of color, and lastly to be become more conscious of the African American student issues on campus.

10. Acknowledgements:

The author wishes to express his great appreciation for faculty mentor Dr. Laurie Cooper Stoll for all the direction and guidance essential in composing this research. Further, the McNair Scholars Program, with Director Dr. Haro and Coordinator Jessica Thill deserve recognition for their unconditional support over the past two years. The research participants should be acknowledged for their honest participation along with their desire to enhance the student experience at UW-L. Also, Karen and Evan Wendland should be acknowledged for being an incredible mom and brother that provide a constant source of motivation. The work was supported by the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse: McNair Scholars Program and Undergraduate Research & Creativity

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