In the higher education environs in the United States Blacks remain underrepresented as students, faculty, and administrators. For the most part, Blacks are still invisible women and men against the backdrop of an American educational system where education is a primary route to upward mobility and increased wages (Adair, 2001). This circumstance is even more evident at elite research institutions (Bowen and Bok, 1998). The elusive graduate degree has a greater impact in helping to close the economic gap between the White and the Black middle class than any other factor (Bowen and Bok, 1998). So it is doubly discouraging that the retention rate decreases to between 50 to 25% as students move on graduate degrees, 'the higher up the educational pipeline' (Onwuegbuzie, 1999, pp.189-190). The dropout rate means that the chances of Blacks securing a slot in the middle class via the higher educational track are diminished.

The physical location of the Southern Research University in this study is a city of 100,000 residents that is dominated by the University’s presence. This research university historically serves undergraduates, approximately 25,000 in the Fall of 2006. Since Blacks have historically been considered the special population at the University since its desegregation in the 1960s, this study only focuses on African Americans. The graduate and professional programs currently enroll an estimated 8,300 students. Two-thirds of the students in the university’s graduate degree programs are residents of the state; a higher number of state residents, 90%, comprise the university’s professional degree programs. In a state where the percentage of Blacks citizens is 29.2%, a mere 1,900 Black students (undergraduates and graduates) or 6% attend this premiere state university. A disproportionate percentage of the 1,900 students, 649 students, are graduate and professional students. So the undergraduate percentage of Black students is approximately 5% of the total undergraduate enrollment and the graduate and professional degree level it is at approximately 9% of the total graduate and professional school enrollment. The desegregation of the school's graduate programs does not parallel the University’s stormy undergraduate desegregation. The desegregation of the graduate programs occurred without incident or fanfare and the graduate school has continued to outpace undergraduate programs with success in the area of enrolling Blacks and other minority groups.

Background and purpose of the study

Now that Black students can gain acceptance to the elite flagship colleges of the South, what happens after admission? Is access alone enough? (Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 2004). Overwhelmingly, the answer is a resounding, 'No!' A more telling marker is whether or not Black students obtain degrees. The national graduation rate for undergraduate Black students is 40%, compared to an undergraduate graduation rate of 61% for White students. The graduation rate decreases with professional and terminal degrees (Golde, 2005). Therefore the retention rate for Black graduate students is even less than the
retention rate for Black undergraduates. The 1980s saw a decrease in Black graduate school enrollment at historically White universities, with Black students comprising approximately 5% of total graduate school enrollments (Onwuegbuzie, 1999). The lack of access is of course compounded by retention problems which were mostly due to Black graduate students experiences with undue stress during their schooling compared to their White counterparts (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000).

Therefore, creating a positive social environment and facilitating support are essential to the success and retention of Black graduate students. To that end, we studied Black students who were alumni of graduate and professional degree programs at a large Southern Research University. The research questions were: To what extent did Black graduate students experience support during their studies? What types of social problems did Black graduate students experience during their studies?

Review of the literature

Black Americans have a long and troubled record with American higher education: legal prohibition on education, de jure segregation, de facto segregation, and futile efforts towards real integration and full participation. Since the 1970s, the majority of Blacks have attended predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Bowen and Bok, 1998; Nettles, 1988) and research attests that these students routinely struggle with isolation and loneliness, discrimination and indifference/insensitivity (Allen, 1988; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald and Bylsma, 2003). Additionally, lack of social integration, participation in campus organizations and activities, interacting with peers and faculty, has more of an impact on the grade point averages of Black students than it does for White students (Nettles, 2006). Also compounding the dilemma for Black college students is the significant impact that positive student satisfaction has on performance and completion (Nettles, 2006).

The results of a racially insensitive or hostile college environment are often psychological distress (Allen, 1988) that can result in withdrawal, self-doubt, and lowered self-concept (Allen, 1988). Inevitably such issues have been shown to have a negative effect on the retention and progression rates of Black students, while such issues have not been shown to affect White students as a group (Allen, 1988; Nettles, 2006). According to a comprehensive study by Allen (1988), 60 % of the Black students he surveyed had encountered racism (verbal insults and negative attitudes) during their college years. Routinely research reveals that Black higher education students feel that there is bias in that they are invisible, unseen or ignored on campus and that White college professors stereotype them as one-dimensional representatives of their race.

While most of the research on Black students focuses on undergraduate education, the studies that have specifically targeted Black graduate students concur with the finding regarding the undergraduate population. However the graduate focused studies simultaneously add another dimension, a diminishing population of students. For example the retention rates for students transitioning from undergraduate studies to graduate studies drops dramatically, 50 to 75% for Blacks when compared to the rates for Asians and Whites (Onwuegbuzie, 1999). In addition, in 1990 Blacks in graduate school represented only 4.8% of total graduate school enrollment (Onwuegbuzie, 1999). In other studies, the Black graduate students surveyed believed that their professors avoided outside classroom contact and the students also reported that because of unintentional racism (social discomfort) they received fewer research and essential teaching opportunities from their professors.
Personal relationships with faculty are essential in graduate work, especially at the doctoral level where the committee’s interest and approval drives the thesis and dissertation process. Therefore this lack of mentoring, advising, and unease is particularly costly at the graduate level (Nettles, 2006). As a testament to how the unfriendly social milieu of racism can affect the graduate pipeline, the literature reports that racism is the main reason reported by Master’s level Black students as to why they did not pursue their doctorates.

Conceptual frame and methods

The conceptual frame is based on critical race theory (Bell, 1992; Foucault, 1980) and therefore focuses on interpreting the data with an awareness of the diffusive nature of power and positionality. Influenced by this theoretical base, the researchers approached the study and the resulting data with an acknowledgment of the systems of oppression that had produced and structured the inequalities in the educational system.

The research sample for this study consisted of the population of all of Black graduate students since the University’s desegregation in the 1960s. This study is especially significant given its scope, 1962 – 2003, and its depth, a potential population of 2,287 Black graduate students and a responding sample of 586 Black graduate students. This study employed a mailed, self-completion questionnaire that was developed over a six month period. In its final form, the 72 item questionnaire had five sections. Data collection consisted of the distribution of the questionnaire in three consecutive mailings at three week intervals.

Findings

Questions were asked regarding support and social experiences relative to four groups: Black professors, Black students, White professors, and White students. These four social groups were chosen because the literature shows that connections or disconnections with these groups are most significant to the graduate school experiences of Black students (Allen, 1988; Nettles, 2006; Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso, 2000).

It was noted in response to the first research question that in most instances Black graduate students did not receive sufficient support from the university community, administration, staff, faculty, or their fellow students. The students who did report receiving support overwhelmingly represented that support as coming from Black professors and the Black students. It is noteworthy that the Black students felt that the somewhat new cohesive community of Black professors was also disenfranchised. When the survey group felt that they received support from White professors, they considered that in most instances the support was limited and less than the support received by White students. When faced with the absence of mechanisms of support, the Black graduates believed that it was their self-efficacy, determination, or will to survive that helped them to persist through to graduation.

The results show that the support provided by all four groups was rated higher than the theoretical midpoint of the six-point scale. The results indicated the following findings: (a) Black professors provided significantly more support than did White professors; (b) Black students provided significantly more support than did White students; (c) White professors provided significantly more support than did White students. In order to determine whether levels of support were affected by historical time, secondary analyses were conducted. Respondents were divided into three chronological groups: (a) Group #1: Graduate students who graduated before 1986; (b) Group #2: Graduate students who graduated
after 1985 and before 1996; and (c) Group #3: Graduate students who graduated after 1995.

Findings revealed that patterns of support held relatively constant for the early and late graduates. Independent sample t-tests for the four sources of support revealed no significant mean differences, and the relative levels of support for the four sources of interpersonal support held constant across time. Black professors and Black students provided more support for Black students; White professors also provided support for Black students, although they provided less than did Black professors. However, the peer group of White students provided relatively little support for Black students and it has been shown in another study on this same population that White students were the primary source of hostility and open racism. The qualitative data were consistent with the statistical findings related to support in that responses to the six open-ended questions revealed that Black professors and Black students were the primary support for Black graduate students.

Research Question #2 called for the search for latent dimensions of the social problems encountered by Black graduate students. A large number of items indicative of social problems were measured and the data were subjected to exploratory factor analysis. Many solutions were examined in an attempt to achieve conceptual clarity. Ultimately, we settled on a five factor solution using orthogonal rotation and a loading criterion of .55: Factor I: White Professor Discrimination; Factor II: Enforced Social Isolation; Factor III: Underestimation of Academic Ability; Factor IV: White Student Discrimination; and Factor V: Forced Representation for the Race.

Taken together, these five 'factors of social problems' represent, in plainer English, the 'dimensions of racism' which our graduate students experienced. Factor analysis is useful for discovering such dimensions; however, there is no indication about the relative impact of these five dimensions on the lives of Black graduate students, since factor loadings are an indicator of the 'conceptual integrity' (based on covariation) rather than magnitude.

The most severe problem confronting Black graduate students pertains to stereotyping, in the form of underestimation of ability and the treatment of blacks as a monolithic racial group. Next in severity are the dimensions that pertain primarily to interactions with White students, who enforced social isolation on Black graduate students and treated them with obvious discrimination. The least severe dimension, which still evidences a mean that approaches the response scale midpoint, is discrimination by White Professors.

For respondents who graduated before 1986 and those who graduated 1996 or later independent sample t-tests found significant change on three Dimensions: (1) White Professor Discrimination has decreased over time; (2) underestimation of Academic Ability has decreased over time; and (3) White Student Discrimination has increased over time. There have been no changes on two Dimensions: enforced Social Isolation has stayed the same and forced Representation for the Race has stayed the same.

The second research question regarding social problems was significantly influenced in direct response to survey question 61, ‘Did you experience racism on campus?’ Of the 678 participants who composed the open-ended respondent sample, 384 of the former students answered affirmatively and 170 answered negatively. Therefore, over half of the respondents completing the survey experienced racism. The remaining 24 of the 678 surveys returned yielded answers that were coded as neutral or not applicable. Interestingly, the survey group wrote more on this open-ended question regarding racism
than on other open-ended questions. Stories emerged in response to this question that can be classified accordingly: (1) police harassment; (2) racial epithets, (3) isolation in the classroom; and (4) an unwelcoming environment at extra curricula activities. If this can be seen as an indication of responses, it is not unreasonable to conjecture that the over non-responding 1,000+ participants might have been discouraged from responding by their experiences here at the University or their possible lack of commitment to further participation in matters concerning the University. Again, it must be emphasized that the participants responding to this survey were Black graduate students who successfully matriculated at the major Research I University, a seemingly more positively disposed sample.

Discussion

Having a diverse campus is the best way to recruit and to retain Black students (Allen, 1988; Nettles, 2006; Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso, 2000); this study provides more than four decades of data underscoring the phenomenon that a more diverse campus contributes to further diversifying the campus and to creating an equitable university environment. While stressing the importance of support from Black students and Black professors, this study also shows that White professor support can also be a factor in the retention of Black graduate students.

While family relationships emerged in the qualitative data as a response on only 44 of the 586 responses, this was not alarming given that attending graduate school can often mean that students are removed from their family settings for long periods of time. Another point possibly influencing the participants’ lack of family interaction is that the graduate school culture might be unfamiliar to family members and so the respondents might conceivably have turned to other knowledgeable insiders for support out of necessity. This potential pool of well-informed supporters is more likely to be other graduate students or faculty.

Of the four factors listed by the participants as helping them through graduate studies, religion was the least mentioned factor. This is a departure from studies that report high levels of religious involvement and spirituality among Black students and report that such involvement is greater than that found among White students. Findings regarding the strong religious base among Black college students resonated with similar findings regarding the Black community. However, it must also be considered that only recently have researchers begun to study spirituality and its connection to the higher education and adult schooling experience. Since religion and spirituality was not a strong theme in the literature, the quantitative data did not address it and this might have influenced its absence in the qualitative data.

The connection of graduate students to their programs is essential in that their success as graduate students is directly connected to their relationship to their program, to their program faculty, and to other graduate students in their programs (Gasman et al., 2004; Golde, 2005; Margolis and Romero, 1998; Onwuegbuzie, 1999). For graduate students the locus of control is the individual graduate degree program. The information in this research study can inform graduate school administrators and faculty on how to provide adequate forms of support Black graduate students. Recommendations suggested by the data in this study are to: (1) encourage and support existing formal and informal networks among Black students and Black faculty; (2) monitor existing formal campus networks to insure that they include Black students; (3) build new formal campus networks and insure the inclusion of Black students; (4) educate faculty about the ways in which their courses as part of the a department and the university’s larger curriculum might contribute to the hidden curriculum that discourages and oppresses Black students; and (5) build
accountability regarding diversity efforts into the University system for faculty and administrators.

References


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This document was added to the Education-line database in June 2008