



**From the SelectedWorks of Robert T. Palmer,
PhD**

January 2011

A contemporary examination of factors promoting the academic success of minority students at a predominantly White university

Contact
Author

Start Your Own
SelectedWorks

Notify Me
of New Work

Available at: http://works.bepress.com/robert_palmer/10

**A CONTEMPORARY EXAMINATION OF FACTORS
PROMOTING THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF
MINORITY STUDENTS AT A PREDOMINANTLY
WHITE UNIVERSITY**

ROBERT T. PALMER

DINA C. MARAMBA

SHARON L. HOLMES

State University of New York, Binghamton

ABSTRACT

Although the numbers of minority students are increasing in higher education, researchers remain concerned about the ability of predominantly White institutions (PWIs) to support and retain these students. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore factors promoting the academic success of minority students at a research intensive PWI. Four themes emerged, including the impact of: a) student involvement, b) faculty interaction, c) peer support, and c) self-accountability. While this study confirms research about minority students at PWIs, it also provides new insight and provokes questions that warrant further investigation. Implications for practice and research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Demographic shifts in the U.S. ethnic minority population have triggered an increase in the number of students participating in higher education (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Yet, research

reports indicate some colleges and universities have been unable to encourage the retention and persistence of minority students through graduation (Harper, 2006a; Maramba, 2008; Museus, 2008; Nelson-Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams, & Holmes, 2007; Schmidt, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008). Retention and persistence concerns lie primarily with administrators of predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2006a; Nelson-Laird et al., 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Strayhorn, 2008), who have been unable to provide minority students with a comfortable, supportive, and engaging environment that supports their overall academic success (Harper, 2006a; Nelson-Laird et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2008).

According to some researchers, minority students attending PWIs experience alienation and chilly campus climates (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Nelson-Laird et al., 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Rankin & Reason, 2005); they have strained relationships with White faculty (Guiffrida, 2005; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993), which impede their ability to form cross-cultural mentoring relationships (Guiffrida, 2005), they experience racism, discrimination, view the curriculum as culturally exclusive, and lack adequate support services (Person & Christensen, 1996). Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) found that African-American students attending three elite PWIs experienced racial microaggressions, defined as unconscious and subtle forms of racism. These experiences triggered participants in their study to seek a "positive collegiate racial climate" (p. 70). As a result of their experiences at PWIs, one could speculate that the growth of minority students attending minority serving institutions (MSIs) (Li & Carroll, 2007) is, in part, a response to the unwelcoming campus climate at PWIs. For example, according to a recent report released by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), while MSIs enrolled 38% of all minority students in 1984, they enrolled 47% in 1994, and 58% in 2004 (Li & Carroll, 2007).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Over the years, there has been a proliferation of contemporary research on minority students in higher education with particular attention focused on their experiences at PWIs (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Guiffrida, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006; Harper, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2007; Maramba, 2008; Museus, 2008; Patton, 2006). While this research has been helpful to student affairs practitioners and other institutional support agents, given that many PWIs continue to struggle with the retention of minority students, the purpose of this study was to explore factors promoting the academic success of minority students at a research PWi. This research is indeed noteworthy, as a report recently released by the Southern Regional Education Board explained that educational institutions need to reverse the precipitous decline in postsecondary education graduation rates among minority students

(e.g., Black and Hispanic students), who represent the fastest growing student population in higher education (Nealy, 2009).

In the context of this study, all students were juniors and seniors during data collection. Consistent with Palmer and Young's (2009) definition of academic success, in this study academic success is defined as persisting to upperclassmen status with a grade point average (GPA) of 2.5 and above. The central question that guided this research was what factors do academically successful minority students attribute to their academic success at a PWI?

METHODOLOGY

We conducted this study at a public, mid-sized, research PWI, located in a small-town in the northeast region. Approximately 12,000 students were enrolled when data were collected. Forty-five percent of students enrolled at this institution are White, and their Asian, Black, Hispanic, and racially/ethnically unknown counterparts comprise 13%, 6%, 7%, and 22%, respectively. Approximately 81% of White students matriculating at this institution complete a baccalaureate degree within 6 years, whereas that figure is 80.6% for their Asian, 72.1% for Black, 70.7% Latina/o students, and 80.6% for their racially/ethnicity unknown students.

Using in-depth interviews complemented by responses to a short open-ended questionnaire, we sought to explore the academic and social experiences of a particular group of students situated in a particular context (Lincoln, 2002). Thus, the study's epistemological approach was anchored in the constructivist tradition to construct knowledge, understanding, and meaning through human interactions (Lincoln, 2002). To a large extent, grounded theory strategies were incorporated into the research process. These strategies were not bounded to the interview process, but occurred throughout the entire research process and included continuously asking questions, utilizing research notes, and exploring hunches (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Participants

For the study's recruitment, we sought the help of student affairs staff and minority graduate students at the university who had access to students who matched the study's criteria. We recruited additional participants through snowball sampling (i.e., asking those who joined the study to recommend others who might meet our criteria). This study's sample consisted of 19 junior and senior minority students who attained a grade point average (GPA) of 2.5 or above. All students started as freshmen at this institution. Data were collected during the fall semester of 2008. The majority of the students were women. Specifically, the study included 14 women and 5 men. Eleven participants self-identified as Black, four as Hispanic, two as Asian Americans, one

as Pakistani, and one chose not to identify with any racial/ethnic group. The participants' ages ranged from 20-23 years old and their average GPA was a 3.3.

Data Collection

We conducted one face-to-face, in-depth interview, which ranged from 90 to 110 minutes with each participant. As an incentive and recruitment method, all participants received a \$10 gift certificate for their participation. Prior to beginning these interviews, participants signed a consent form and completed a brief demographic form. During interviews, we engaged participants about their academic and social experiences at the institution. Although we used a standard interview protocol, discussions often became conversational, which encouraged greater reflection among participants. Many of the questions were open-ended. Some examples of questions were: (a) What are key factors that you perceive as contributing to your academic success? (b) What were obstacles to your academic success? (c) How did you overcome those issues? (d) What has been your greatest challenge as minority students at this institution? and (e) How have you been able to deal with or overcome that challenge? We recorded observations regarding the ways in which participants responded to questions and their willingness to engage in the interview. We also conducted follow-up phone interviews with participants. Specifically, we conducted separate phone interviews with 12 participants, which ranged from 20 to 25 minutes. Follow-up phone interviews were completed during the data collection phase of the study after consulting field notes and listening to participants' audiotapes. We conducted these interviews to ask participants to elaborate on themes discussed or clarify issues that emerged during the interviews.

Researchers' Positionality

For any qualitative study, it is important to discuss how the position of the researcher influences data collection, analysis, and interpretations (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Two researchers conducted this study. One identifies as an African-American male and the second researcher identifies as a Filipina American. Their research interests focus on the retention and persistence of college students of color. Additionally, both researchers have worked as student affairs practitioners in various capacities and have a wealth of practical knowledge supporting minority students at PWIs.

Data Analyses

We used constant comparative analysis on research notes, observations, and interview transcripts to identify recurring or unique topics (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Jones et al. (2006), constant comparative analysis engages the researcher in a process of collecting and analyzing the data simultaneously at "all stages of the data collection and interpretation process, and results in the

identification of codes” (p. 44). Specifically, as we collected and transcribed the data, we read through our research notes and made self-reflective notes in the margins to help form initial themes. These notes included questions and speculations about the data and themes that emerged. As the data became increasingly voluminous, we used ATLAS-ti (5.0), a qualitative data management software program, to organize, manage, and code the data. We used open coding, which involved analyzing the data line-by-line, to identify themes. The line-by-line coding allowed for themes to emerge from the data and become aggregated into response patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process continued until the data reached a point of saturation—which is when the data becomes redundant (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Furthermore, memo writing allowed us to not only refine the categories, but also to understand the relationships among them. In discussing the findings, we present excerpts from the participants’ responses verbatim to preserve the essence of the participants’ voices. We used pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of each participant.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

We employed several techniques presented by Merriam (1998) to ensure credibility of the study. For example, we provided thick description so others interested can draw their own conclusions from the data. Moreover, providing thick description enables the reader to vicariously experience the participants’ social reality at the institution.

To ensure the data’s trustworthiness, we also conducted member checks by returning the transcribed interviews to all participants so they could check for accuracy and clarity following the interviews (Jones et al., 2006). Lastly, we used feedback from three peer-debriefers, who were well versed in in-depth interview methods and active researchers on minority students to ensure credibility. Debriefers were provided with raw transcripts from each participant. These debriefers engaged the researchers in a series of ongoing discussions regarding the tentative meanings made of the participants’ experiences throughout the research process (Jones et al., 2006).

FINDINGS

In this section, we summarized three major themes that emerged from the interviews. The first theme discusses the impact of student involvement on the participants’ success. While some participants described the impact of campus involvement, they noted that they were primarily engaged in minority organizations. The second theme focuses on the relationships that students had with faculty and its impact on engendering a supportive environment. Interestingly, while previous scholars (e.g., Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Guiffrida, 2003, 2005) have suggested that minority students may have chilly

relationships with White faculty at PWIs, some participants reported the opposite. The third theme discusses the relationship between participants' peers and success. Participants explained that their friends supported and motivated them to succeed. Some participants' peers encouraged accountability and acted as parental figures. The final theme discusses how participants recognized that being personally involved and displaying responsibility for their success positively enhanced their academic achievement. In the following section, we delineated these themes and present quotes from participants to preserve the essential aspects of their experiences.

Student Involvement Spurring Academic and Social Integration

Many participants noted the relationship between involvement in campus activities and academic success. They expressed that being involved facilitated their connections to social and academic outlets on campus. While participants noted the importance of campus engagement, they mainly discussed their involvement in minority organizations. Barbara, a 21-year-old Black female majoring in history, noted that campus involvement enabled her to develop support networks that she was able to access for academic and emotional support. Specifically, Barbara explained: "I'm involved in a few [organizations] on campus . . . a lot of the friends that I had made, I made through the different organizations that I'm involved in."

She expressed that her involvement in two organizations, in particular her law fraternity and gospel choir, helped her develop meaningful relationships with other peers on campus. She noted:

. . . I've been in both of them since freshman year. In gospel choir, you meet a lot of people that are interested in the same things as you, and you know if you are having like a bad day, you will have someone to talk to. And everyone is spiritual, so they understand where you are coming from. . . . I'm really spiritual, so it gave me a chance to connect with people and to go to church with and stuff . . . the fraternity a lot of people are history majors, they have the same career goals as me. So I have older people to talk to who have graduated and went on to law school.

John, a 21-year-old Latino male majoring in business management, echoed Barbara's sentiments about the gospel choir and its ability to provide a cathartic outlet. He noted: "the gospel choir, when I'm stressed with school work, we just get together and we'll pray, and we'll talk about what we're going through and I get encouragement that way."

While Barbara noted the impact of being engaged in campus organizations, primarily the gospel choir and a law fraternity, and how they helped her develop relationships with others on campus, Tiffany, a 21-year-old Black female majoring in Industrial Engineering, explained the impact of being involved in

the local campus chapter of the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE) had on her ability to persist. In particular, she emphasized how being involved with the NSBE helped her develop a support group that was instrumental to her academic success. She explained:

The support group, especially the National Society of Black Engineers, we're all engineers and again we're all students of color. So we have that in common, we all pretty much take the same classes. We support and help each other . . . and stay strong, don't quit engineering and all that other stuff.

Similarly, to the other participants, Kimberly, a 21-year-old Hispanic female majoring in psychology, expressed a relationship between on-campus involvement and developing connections and succeeding academically. Furthermore, as with many of the previous participants, Kimberly mainly participated in minority organizations. In fact, she explained that if minority organizations had not been available on campus, she would have opted not to get involved in anything. Specifically, she indicated:

minority organizations. If they weren't here, I don't know where I'd be . . . a lot of whether it's academic, social, or this or that, it's usually facilitated by these [organizations]. And without them, I probably would be that person in the corner.

While participants noted the positive relationship between campus involvement and building important social and academic connections, some expressed concern because engagement in campus organizations appeared to be segregated along racial and ethnic lines. While Barbara explained that students tend to get involved in racial and ethnic organizations that relate to them, she tried to diversify her participation in campus activities. She explained:

I think it's [campus involvement] very segregated . . . there's a lot of different ethnic organizations. . . . I'm in a couple . . . I feel like in a lot of the organizations that I'm in, it's either a few people of color, or it's all people of color.

Another participant, Rick, a 21-year-old Black male majoring in economics, expressed a similar sentiment about how student engagement was centered along racial and ethnic lines. Specifically, he stated:

I think campus involvement is very segregated. I feel like people do not step out of their comfort zones . . . if something's called Haitian American Association . . . strictly Haitians go. Or if something's called [The Black Nurse Association] . . . they think only minority students can go. And I feel like not enough culture organizations reach out to really explain their purpose. . . . But the thing is that I feel like sometimes we need to promote intermingling among groups . . .

John agreed with Rick about the need to see more racial and ethnic groups on campus interact to promote civility and racial understanding. He noted:

I would like to see people intermingle more. I feel you could learn more from people that way. And not be so closed off, that's what I would like to see. Cause in high school, I met so many wonderful people. . . . I had Indian friends, Asian friends, like some of my closest friends are Asians, you know I learned so much. And you know, I feel like everybody, each culture has their own strength and weaknesses.

Meaningful Connections with Faculty

Another factor that participants described as important to their success was relationships with faculty. Interestingly, while research has shown that minority students lack critical connections with White faculty at PWIs, some participants described the important role that White faculty played in their success. For example, Barbara described how one of her professors—a White female—supported her. She explained:

I guess I know of a professor that I talk to a lot, and she's very, she's like a mentor, she's very supportive. . . . I talk to her about academic goals and my career goals, and I know she knows a lot. So she's always been very helpful to me.

While Barbara noted how helpful and supportive that this professor was, she expressed some concern over whether this professor was supportive because she is an African American. She broached:

I don't know, I guess sometimes I feel like she's nice to me because I'm black, cause I think she's a nice person in general. But I feel like when I had her in my seminar class . . . there were like 15 students, and I was the only Black one. And I always felt like if I raised my hand she would be like, "Yes, what do you have to say?" It seems like she went out of her way to make me feel comfortable.

Barbara continued:

I mean, it's always been on the back of my mind, but she taught me so much . . . that it's not going to affect our relationship, but I always wondered is "she so nice to me because she thinks I'm a nice person, or because I'm Black?"

Lisa, a 21-year-old Black female majoring in psychology, recalled a positive experience that she had with a White professor in a music course she took. She noted:

well the one relationship I can think of is with my music professor, and she actually thinks I'm crazy for doing . . . so many majors. . . . But she's supportive. I remember once um, I'll never forget this, she was like, "Lisa

you're doing too much." And that, you know that was kind of hurtful, and then she called me back 10 minutes later, she's like, "You know I shouldn't have said that. Keep doing what you're doing, just don't stress yourself out."

Lisa continued:

I thought that was discouraging what she said, "you're doing too much." You know, I am doing a lot, but it's good to have someone you look up to express concern and provide encouragement.

Eugene, a 21-year-old Black male majoring in biochemistry, described a positive experience he had with a White professor. Specifically, he recalled an experience where a White professor, who was not in his field of study, provided him an opportunity to conduct research with him. He noted:

Professor Jack Martin; he was my teacher for Molecular Biology lab. And I like the stuff that he was teaching so I immediately went to him and asked . . . you know "would you help me in my research?" And he incorporated me into his lab, I stayed here over the summer working with him, and I'm still [working with him].

While some participants explained some positive encounters and experiences they had with White faculty, others, at times, still felt like they were being treated differently because of their race. For example, Lisa noted:

Sometimes, you might see how their approaches are different. I remember one experience. . . . I was waiting in line for help or whatever. And then the way the teacher approached the student, you know, White person, he was more willing to um, take more time with her. And then I had a question, he's just like "well if you don't understand, then you have to read, read more." I was like, but she had the same [question]; he showed her what she had to do.

Other participants noted that while some White professors created, to some extent, an unwelcoming environment, they encountered similar treatment from some minority professors. For example, Mary, a 21-year-old Black female majoring in nursing, stated

my statistics professor she was Asian and she, she's a very standoffish person . . . Like I would go to her office hours and it was kind of like, "why did you come? why are you here?" And she just answered the question right away and like you know some professors they'll just keep talking to you even after they're done. . . . if you got your question answered, she just got right back to her computer, and it was like, "okay, bye."

However, while Mary had an unpleasant experience with one minority professor, she also recalled having a positive experience with another minority professor. She noted how her Indian professor was supportive and engaging when she attended his office hours. She had a positive experience with him. Specifically, she explained:

[my] Indian professor last semester as well, and he was really nice. . . . he's really open and if you went to his office hours, he's really helpful, and he sat down and took the time to explain things to you, so that was really good.

Peer Support: Powerful Contribution to Student Success and Persistence

Many of the participants also indicated the impact of peer support on their academic success. According to the participants, their peers supported them in a variety of ways. Not only did their peers motivate and encourage them to persist when the participants felt unmotivated and uninspired, but they also provided a sense of balance, which helped to enrich the participants' college experience. For example, Barbara expressed:

on days that I didn't feel like going to class [my friends would tell me] "You better go" that kind of thing. Or when I say, "Oh, I can't get this class in organic chemistry." . . . One of my friends [would say] you know "I went through it. I got through it. You can do it."

Furthermore, she explained: When I feel like, "uh, I can't do this, I'm too tired." My friends . . . they'll wake me up, No you have to get up."

Similar to Barbara, Tiffany also discussed how her friends played a critical role in her academic success by motivating and inspiring her to stay focused on doing well academically.

it's real easy to not study, and it's real easy not to go to the library. But I usually just have to tell myself like, "come on, you need to go." And also [my friend] calls me and its like, "why aren't you in the library, I don't see you in the library, where are you?"

Tiffany underscored the reason that she and her friends held each other accountable for success. She indicated:

it's just because we all want to do well and basically all my friends we all want to succeed. And when we see one slipping we, you know we try and intervene as quickly as possible because like we can't, you can't do bad, like you can't fail school.

Interestingly, Lisa was also inspired to perform well academically because of her relationship with her roommate, which blossomed into a friendship. Unlike the other participants, her motivation to do well did not emanate from a sense that she and her friend were holding each other accountable, rather it emerged from a need to dispel a stereotype that her roommate and later friend had about African Americans. Specifically, she stated:

I had a roommate . . . she was Caucasian. And she generally didn't know a lot about African-Americans. . . . I guess what she learned from television, she had one view on how we were. She was just kind of, "how do I say this" . . .

like look at me a certain way, um, and say that I can't do a certain thing. You know, try to um, discourage me. She had this view of how a lot of black people don't attend college, and they're not successful. But you know, I spoke to her and I said you know your information is not correct. I tried to work even harder to prove that her idea was wrong. And right now, we're really good friends.

While Barbara and Tiffany described how their friends inspired and encouraged them to succeed, Kimberly noted how one of her friends assumed the role of a parental figure to help her negotiate the academic and social demands of college life. Specifically, she explained:

I had one friend in particular, she transferred eventually . . . was like a really close friend . . . she was really good with her studies, her grade point right now is a 4.0 . . . she was amazing. There were times when I would just freak out like, "Oh my God, I have to do this, I have to do that." She would sit me down and be like, Kimberly, school is first. Ignore that, forget that, just do your homework, and then when you're done with your homework, just go. I got in trouble with her a few times, she was basically my parent when my parents weren't around.

Eugene also explained the kind of support that he received from his friends. In particular, he mentioned that he viewed one of his friends as a role model and this friend helped him with his academic assignments.

One of the classmates . . . he's a good friend of mine. He spent a year extra here because something with his major affected his graduating on time. But he stuck with it and now he's going for his Master's in engineering and working full-time. He is doing well. His work ethic influenced mine also, he was always in the library, he was always seeking help, and he was always helping me out with my work. So he's the kind of man like I would like to emulate.

Personally Invested in My Success

While participants realized that "it takes a village to raise a child," meaning that a variety of institutional agents (faculty, staff, administrators, and peers) play an important factor in encouraging and sustaining students' academic success, many were also cognizant about the significant role that they themselves played in being academically successfully. For example, Lorenzo, a 21-year-old Black male majoring in English, discussed how he had to motivate himself to achieve academically. He intimated that he seemed to have been slacking off and needed to reenergize his focus to achieve his goal of getting into law school. Specifically, he stated:

well I guess I got tired of being a lazy bum and I realized that I really needed to start studying harder and getting my grades up and having a

goal of getting a specific grade point average by the time I'm done with the school, before law school.

Rick emphasized the importance of being personally responsible for his academic success. He noted that while his classes were hard and he encountered academic challenges, the onus was on him to stay persistent and focused on achieving academically.

There are always academic challenges and I think that's kind of the heart of it. Some people always complain that classes are so hard, which they are and I'm not going to deny it. I guess I'm the type of person that you know, likes adversity, and just . . . try my best, even if it was hard. I am telling myself that "you could do it."

In particular, Rick explained that not only did he use prayer and motivation to help him achieve success; he also stayed focused on a larger goal to inspire him to be successful. He indicated:

motivation and prayer . . . just being able to see past myself [have helped me achieve success.] Like if I have a goal, I want to make sure that you know what? I seek something else besides that goal. . . . I want to obtain more than just a bachelor's degree. So once you see that bachelor's degree, that's a short-term goal, but what's after that, are you going to stop? Like you know what's your motivation? What's your perseverance?

Kimberly also recognized that her academic success, to some extent, was within her control. She noted that if she was going to be successful then she had to stay focused and committed to her goal. She opined:

I think that honestly my success at [the university] is based on my ability to I guess understand what I need to do. When a lot of people come to school, it takes them a while to know what they want to do. . . . But I came into this school knowing what I wanted to do, I had goals and I stuck with them as much as possible. No matter if there was like a fork in the road, I managed to get around it and I'm still pursuing the same thing that ever since a senior at high school, I wanted to do.

Similar to the other participants, George, a 23-year-old Black male majoring in sociology and computer science, voiced the significance of motivation to his academic success.

. . . You have to be motivated to go to class when you're tired, you studied all night. You have to go to class, cause you know you want to graduate. Motivation is like a big, big factor. You know, you have to be motivated to get out of bed . . . when you know your show is on to study.

DISCUSSION

While a number of contemporary researchers (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Griffin, 2006; Harper, 2005, 2008; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Maramba, 2008; Museus, 2008; Patton, 2006; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Strayhorn, 2008) have contributed valuable knowledge to the literature on minority students at PWIs, given that many of these universities continue to struggle with retaining minority students, in this study, we explored factors contributing to the academic success of minority students at a PWI. One factor participants discussed was student involvement. Some participants explained that campus involvement facilitated their connections to social and academic outlets on campus, which ultimately had a positive impact on their academic success.

A strong body of research has documented the impact of student involvement inside and outside of the classroom (Astin, 1985; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). These researchers have shown that such involvement is associated with a wide range of educational outcomes, including cognitive development (Kuh et al., 2005), moral and ethical development (Kuh et al., 2005), and retention and persistence (Berger & Milem, 1999; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000). Nevertheless, the participants primarily described the impact that campus involvement had on their academic success. Research has shown that student involvement helps facilitate academic and social integration (Astin, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), which positively impacts academic success. Astin (1985) noted that the more students become engaged with the institution's resources, the more satisfied and successful they will be with their experience. Similarly, Kuh and associates (2005) suggested that students who engage in educationally purposeful activities are more likely to persist than students who do not. According to Kuh et al. (2005), student involvement is so important to the success of college that Kuh and colleagues emphasized that "what students do during college counts more in terms of desired outcomes than who they are or even where they go to school" (p. 8).

While research has documented the importance of student involvement, some research has suggested that minority students are generally disengaged on the campuses of PWIs. According to research by Nelson-Laird and colleagues (2007), minority students experience "impediments to their engagement, such as negative racial/ethnic campus climate" (p. 39). While participants in our study were actively engaged on campus, as supported by research (Guiffrida, 2003; Nelson-Laird et al., 2007; Patton, 2006), their campus involvement was mainly limited to minority organizations. In particular, Guiffrida (2003) noted that minority students were involved in minority organizations because they provided a safe outlet, facilitated a connection with minority faculty, and served as a conduit through which they are able to give back to the minority community.

In addition to student involvement, participants also explained the relationship between supportive faculty and academic success. A strong body of research has

underscored the importance of faculty-student interaction (Chickering & Ressler, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), particularly out-of-the classroom interaction with faculty (Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While research has supported the connection between faculty interaction and academic success, some research has suggested that minority students lack supportive relationships with White faculty at PWIs (Allen, 1992; Feagin et al., 1996; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Guiffrida, 2003, 2005). While Guiffrida (2005) noted that faculty, regardless of race, at research institutions are generally not intentional about forming meaningful relationships with their students because they are evaluated heavily on their research and publications rather than teaching and advising, some participants in our study noted how their White faculty established supportive relationships with them. Because our findings are derived from one study, at a single institution, it does not firmly challenge findings from other researchers who note that minority students have chilly and unsupportive relationships with White faculty at PWIs; however, it does support findings from Fries-Britt (1995), who found that minority students perceived White faculty to be supportive if they displayed sincerity and interest in working with them.

One reason we suspect that our findings, in terms of minority students' relationships with White faculty, differ from many of the aforementioned studies is that we disaggregated the gender of the participants in our reporting of the data, whereas some of these studies do not (Allen, 1992; Feagin et al., 1996; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Guiffrida, 2003, 2005). Research has shown that there are differences in the ways in which minority men, specifically African-American males, experience college than their female counterparts (Cuyjet, 2006; Polite & Davis, 1999). More research is needed to examine the nuanced ways in which minority males and females characterize and perceive their interactions with White faculty at PWIs.

Furthermore, participants discussed the relationship between peer support and success. Some participants reported that their peers motivated them to succeed, held them accountable, and acted as parental figures. Research has supported the participants' description of peer support and academic success (Astin, 1993; Guiffrida, 2005; Harper, 2006b; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Astin stated "student interaction with peers can positively influence overall academic development, knowledge acquisition, analytical and problem-solving skills, and self-esteem" (p. 45). Additionally, research from Thomas (2000) suggested that a portfolio of relationships improves persistence by providing access to academic and social resources.

Finally, participants noted the relationship between non-cognitive variables (e.g., motivation, displaying self-accountability, and initiative) and academic achievement. Scholars have identified the connection between non-cognitive and success for minority students (Cokley, 2003; Sedlacek, 1999; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Interestingly, Pace's (1990) Quality of Student Effort seems to indicate the relevancy of non-cognitive variables on the impact of students'

academic success. To this extent, he posited that while the onus is on the institutions to provide resources for students to become successful, the responsibility is on students to engage those resources to maximize their chances of success.

Limitations

There were several limitations in this study. First, this study was conducted at one public, research designated PWI with 19 participants. Nevertheless, we provided thick descriptions so others can decide the transferability of this study to their institutions. Given the number of the participants, we are unable to compare the experiences of the participants to other minority students with similar profiles at other research or non-research institutional types. Another limitation is that interviews may not be an effective way to collect reliable information when the questions pertain to matters the participants perceive as personally sensitive. Notwithstanding, we proceeded with this approach because researchers suggested the need for qualitative research to investigate the experiences of minority students (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Guiffrida, 2004; Hurtado, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000). In addition, the accuracy of the findings is contingent upon how well we analyzed the data, although this is true for all research studies.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Several implications for practice and future research can be derived from this study. First, we know that student involvement is equated with a host of educational outcomes, including academic retention. This study, similar to other research on minority students at PWIs, has found that minority students are more inclined to get involved in minority organizations. The participants attributed these organizations for promoting their academic and social integration at the university. Student affairs practitioners must be cognizant of the positive relationship between involvement in minority student organizations and its impact on providing a comfortable, supportive campus environment for minority students. As such, student affairs practitioners can continue to encourage minority student involvement in minority student organizations. However, practitioners must also realize the diverse interests that exist among minority students. Thus, they must also be careful not to assume all minority students are only interested in minority organizations. Therefore, to provide effective service and support to these students, it is important that practitioners recognize the importance of students' cultural background while being aware of individual differences.

While participants realized the benefits of campus involvement, they also desired more cross cultural engagement. Research has shown that diverse interactions among minority students increase their sense of belonging at PWIs

(Strayhorn, 2009). Furthermore, cross cultural relationships and organizational involvement will prepare all students for participation in the global economy (Öztürk, 2007). As such, faculty and student affairs practitioners should emphasize the importance of students developing relationships with students who differ racially and ethnically. On a pedagogical level, faculty can consider various ways to encourage interaction in their classes. In addition, on a student programming level, student life offices can encourage interaction between student organizations. For instance, programming that involves cross cultural interaction among various minority organizations as well as predominantly White student organizations may help address the concerns of students in the current study. To this end, the university community should work collaboratively to promote cross cultural campus engagement with ethnic minorities and the general student body. Universities may consider implementing programs or organizations to help bring this goal to fruition. For example, an historically Black college and university created the Male Initiative for Leadership and Excellence (MILE), an organization implemented to increase retention primarily among African-American males. Nevertheless, there were students of different races and ethnicities involved in this organization (Chickering, Peters, & Palmer, 2006). In an evaluation of this program, students explained that the MILE facilitated cross cultural interaction and communication; by doing so, participants noted that it helped debunk stereotypes and promoted group cohesion (Chickering et al., 2006). Thus, participants had a wide range of support to increase their academic success. Understand that we are not advocating that universities dismantle minority organizations, but that they implement organizations and activities aimed to promote cross cultural engagement.

It is important to emphasize that encouraging students to develop cross cultural relationships is equally important as encouraging their involvement in minority student organizations. These are complementary, not opposite. We included this caveat because some institutional administrators may be tempted to focus on one over the other.

Participants in this current study also discussed the positive impact of peer support. They noted how peers encouraged them to stay motivated in school especially during times they experienced academic and social difficulties. Institutions must continue to work toward encouraging and maintaining these practices through providing services that promote peer academic support. For example, institutions can provide tutoring services on campus that foster academic support through encouraging peer study groups. Peer academic support, as shown by participants in the current study, eventually led to peer social support. Thus, both academic and social integration take place through maintaining these valuable peer connections.

Finally, future research should focus on the different ways in which minority men and women perceive their relationships and interaction with

White faculty at PWIs. Furthermore, as discussed previously, we can speculate that the increase in ethnic minorities attending MSIs may be a result of the chilly climate of PWIs. MSIs have had success in creating positive social and academic environments for their students (Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Nelson-Laird et al., 2007). To this end, research on understanding how PWIs can learn from minority serving institutions needs to be continued.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the years, there has been a tremendous interest and research on minority students at PWIs. Given that many PWIs continue to grapple with the retention and persistence of minority students, this study focused on salient factors germane to the academic success of minority students. While research has supported many of the factors revealed in this present study, what makes this study relevant is that it not only confirms research about minority student involvement on White campuses, but also provides insight and stimulates further discussion. For example, this study has confirmed evidence about the importance of minority organizations helping minority students become involved on campus. Second, this study underscored the fact that some participants would like campus officials to be more proactive in promoting cross cultural engagement in organizations; finally, this study raises new insight about minority students and their relationships with White faculty at PWIs, which warrants further exploration. We hope that the students' voices and recommendations in this study will be beneficial to practitioners and future researchers.

REFERENCES

- Allen, W. R. (1992). The color of success: African American college student outcomes at predominantly White and historically Black public colleges and universities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62(1), 26-44.
- Astin, A. (1993). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Astin, A. W. (1985, July/August). Involvement: The cornerstone of excellence. *Change*, 24, 35-39.
- Berger, J. B., & Milem, J. F. (1999). The role of student involvement and perceptions of integration in a causal model of student persistence. *Research in Higher Education*, 40(6), 641-664.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. R. (1998). *Qualitative research in education*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bonner, F. A, II, & Bailey, K. W. (2006). Enhancing the academic climate for African American men. IN M. J. Cuyjet (Ed.), *African American men in college* (pp. 24-46). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Braxton, J. M., Milem, J. F., & Sullivan, A. S. (2000). The influence of active learning on the college student departure process. Toward a revision of Tinto's theory. *Journal of Higher Education, 71*(5), 569-590.
- Charmaz, K. (2000). Grounded theory. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 509-535). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Chickering, A. W., Peters, K., & Palmer, R. T. (2006, March). *Assessing the impact of the Morgan male initiative on leadership and excellence (MILE)*. Baltimore, MD: Morgan State University.
- Chickering, A. W., & Reissler, L. (1993). Creating educationally powerful environment. In A. W. Chickering & L. Reisser (Eds.), *Education and identity* (pp. 454-485). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cokley, K. O. (2003). What do I know about the motivation of African American students? Challenging the "anti-intellectual" myth. *Harvard Educational Review, 73*(4), 524-558.
- Cuyjet, M. J. (2006). African American college men: Twenty first century issues and concerns. In M. J. Cuyjet (Ed.), *African American men in college* (pp. 3-23). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Feagin, J. R., Vera, H., & Imani, N. (1996). *Agony of education*. New York: Routledge.
- Fleming, J. (1984). *Blacks in college: A comparative study of student success in Black and White institutions*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Fries-Britt, S. (1995). *Voices of gifted black students*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Orlando, FL.
- Fries-Britt, S. L., & Turner, B. (2002). Uneven stories: Successful Black collegians at a Black and a White campus. *Review of Higher Education, 25*(3), 315-330.
- Griffin, K. A. (2006). Striving for success: A qualitative exploration of competing theories of high-achieving Black college students' academic motivation. *Journal of College Student Development, 47*(4), 384-399.
- Guiffrida, D. A. (2003). African American student organizations as agents of social integration. *Journal of College Student Development, 44*(3), 304-319.
- Guiffrida, D. A. (2004). Friends from home: Asset or liability to African Americans students attending a predominantly White institution. *NASPA Journal, 24*(3), 693-708.
- Guiffrida, D. A. (2005). To break away or strengthen ties to home: A complex question for African American students attending a predominantly White institution. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 38*(1), 49-60.
- Guiffrida, D. A. (2006). Toward a cultural advancement of Tinto's theory. *Review of Higher Education, 29*(4), 451-472.
- Harper, S. R. (2005). Leading the way: Inside the experience of high-achieving African American male students. *About Campus, 10*(1) 8-15.
- Harper, S. R. (2006a). Reconceptualizing reactive policy responses to Black male college achievement: Implications from a national study. *Focus*. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.
- Harper, S. R. (2006b). Peer support for African American male college achievement: Beyond internalized racism and the burden of acting White. *Journal of Men's Studies, 14*(3), 337-358.

- Harper, S. R. (2008). Realizing the intended outcomes of Brown: High-achieving African American male undergraduates and social capital. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *51*(7), 1030-1053.
- Harper, S. R., & Nichols, A. H. (2008). Are they not all the same? Racial heterogeneity among Black male undergraduates. *Journal of College Student Development*, *49*(3), 1-16.
- Holmes, S. L., Ebbers, L. H., Robinson, D. C., & Mugenda, A. G. (2007). Validating African American students at predominantly White institutions. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *Minority student retention: The best of the Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, & Practice* (pp. 79-96). Amityville, NY: Baywood.
- Hurtado, A. (1997). Understanding multiple group identities: Inserting women into cultural transformations. *Journal of Social Issues*, *53*(2), 299-328.
- Hurtado, S., & Carter, D. F. (1997). Effects of college transition and perceptions of the campus racial climate on Latino college students' sense of belonging. *Sociology of Education*, *70*(4), 324-345.
- Jones, R. S., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2006). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education: Fundamental elements and issues*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J., Whitt, E., & Associates. (2005). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kuh, G. D., & Love, P. G. (2000). A cultural perspective on student departure. In J. M. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp. 196-212). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Li, X., & Carroll, C. D. (2007). *Characteristics of minority serving institutions and the minority undergraduate enrolled in these institutions*. Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Statistics. U.S. Department of Education.
- Lincoln, Y. S. (2002, November). *On the nature of qualitative evidence*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Sacramento, CA.
- Maramba, D. C. (2008). Immigrant families and the college experience: Perspectives of Filipina Americans. *Journal of College Student Development*, *49*(4), 336-350.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Museus, S. D. (2008). The role of ethnic student organizations in fostering cultural adjustment and membership among African American and Asian American students at predominantly White institutions. *Journal of College Student Development*, *49*(6), 568-586.
- Nealy, M. J. (2009). College graduation rates could dramatically decline, if minorities don't improve college completion, report says. Retrieved July 6, 2009 from http://diverseeducation.com/artman/publish/article_12666.shtml
- Nelson-Laird, T. F., Bridges, B. K., Morelon-Quainoo, C. L., Williams, J. M., & Holmes, M. S. (2007). African American and Hispanic student engagement at minority serving and predominantly White institutions. *Journal of College Student Development*, *48*(1), 39-56.
- Öztürk, M. D. (2007). Global competition: America's underrepresented minorities will be left behind. *Teachers College Record*. Retrieved May 19, 2008 from <http://www.tcrecord.org>

- Pace, R. (1990). *The undergraduates: A report of their activities and progress in college in the 1980s*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Center for the Study of Evaluation.
- Palmer, R. T., & Strayhorn, T. L. (2008). Mastering one's own fate: Non-cognitive factors with the success of African American males at an HBCU, *National Association of Student Affairs Professionals Journal*, 11(1), 126-143.
- Palmer, R. T., & Young, E. M. (2009). Determined to succeed: Salient factors that foster academically unprepared Black males at a Black college. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 10(4), 465-482.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Patton, D. L. (2006). Black culture centers: Still central to student learning. *About Campus*, 2(2), 2-8.
- Person, D. R., & Christensen, C. M. (1996). Understanding Black student culture and Black student retention. *NASPA Journal*, 34(1), 47-56.
- Polite, V. C., & Davis, J. E. (1999). Introduction: Research focused on African American males. In V. C. Polite & J. E. Davis (Eds.), *African American males in school and society: Practices and policies for effective education* (p. xiii). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Rankin, S. R., & Reason, R. D. (2005). Differing perceptions: How students of color and White students perceive campus climate for underrepresented groups. *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(1), 43-61.
- Schmidt, P. (2008). College seek key to success of Black men in classroom. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 55(7), A1-A25.
- Sedlacek, W. E. (1999). Black students on White campuses: 20 years of research. *Journal of College Student Development*, 40(5), 538-550.
- Smedley, B. D., Myers, H. F., & Harrell, S. P. (1993). Minority-status stresses and the college adjustment of ethnic minority freshmen. *Journal of Higher Education* 64(4), 434-452.
- Snyder, T. D., Dillow, S. A., & Hoffman, C. M. (2008). *Digest of Education Statistics 2007* (No. NCES 2008-022). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.
- Solorzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experience of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 69, 60-73.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2008). The role of supportive relationships in facilitating African American males' success in college. *NASPA Journal*, 45(1), 26-48.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2009). Fittin' in: Do diverse interactions with peers affect sense of belonging for Black men at predominantly White institutions? *NASPA Journal*, 45(4), 501-527.
- Swail, S. W., Redd, E. K., & Perna, W. L. (Eds.). (2003). *Retaining minority students in higher education* (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report). San Francisco, CA: Wiley.
- Thomas, S. I. (2000). Ties that bind: A social network approach to understanding student integration and persistence. *Journal of Higher Education*, 71(5), 591-615.

- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2006). *The condition of education 2006* (NCES 2006-071). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Direct reprint requests to:

Robert T. Palmer
Assistant Professor
Student Affairs Administration Program
College of Community and Public Affairs
State University of New York, Binghamton
Binghamton, NY 13905
e-mail: rpalmer@binghamton.edu