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# Black Student Leaders: The Influence of Social Climate in Student Organizations

Cameron C. Beatty, *Indiana University*  
Antonio A. Bush, *Indiana University*  
Eliza E. Erxleben, *Indiana University*  
Tomika L. Ferguson, *Indiana University*  
Autumn T. Harrell, *Indiana University*, et al.

## Black Student Leaders: The Influence of Social Climate in Student Organizations

Cameron C. Beatty, Antonio A. Bush, Eliza E. Erxleben, Tomika L. Ferguson,  
Autumn T. Harrell, Wanna K. Sahachartsiri

*The social climate of student organizations can alter a student's perception of their influence upon the organization. This study examines Black student leaders' perceptions of social climate of campus governing boards at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Black students' experiences were investigated using Moos's (1979, 1987) social climate dimensions. Implications and recommendations for student affairs professionals advising Black student leaders are detailed based on three salient themes: mission and direction, relationships, and mutual impact.*

As college campuses across the country continue to become more racially diverse, a need exists for student affairs professionals to understand diverse populations and the unique characteristics of their experiences. Research has shown Black students' experiences can differ from White students at a predominantly White institution (PWI) (Harper & Quayle, 2007; Sedlacek, 1987). Moreover, a Black student often has to "handle cultural biases and learn how to bridge his or her Black culture with the prevailing one at the White university" (Sedlacek, 1987, p. 539). Campus involvement, such as student organizations, can function as one way for Black students to become acclimated to their university. Researchers studying the leadership experiences of Black students did not examine how social climate affects Black students. Social climate is an area for concern as Davis (1994) found that "many institutions are concerned with the possible negative effect of campus social climate of African American students" (p. 622). We are interested in how relationships within the environment influence relationships in student organizations. In this study, we will use Moos's (1979, 1987) social climate dimensions as a framework for assessing student organization environments in campus governing boards.

By analyzing the experiences of Black student leaders, we gain a better understanding of their experiences, and contribute to the creation of learning environments conducive to their needs. We will review literature that discusses social climate, Black students at PWIs, and Black student leadership and involvement. Also, we will explain our methodology, discuss our findings, and provide evidence for implications and our recommendations for higher education.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Kuh (2000) described the campus climate as "how students, faculty, student affairs staff, and other institutional agents *perceive and experience* their institution" (p. 60, emphasis in original). Using the preceding description of campus climate as a foundation, the social climate describes how students perceive and experience their socially-based interactions at their institutions. This includes, but is not limited to, experiences within residence halls, classrooms, group projects, and student organizations.

## Social Climate

The social climate is “the ‘personality’ of a setting or environment” (Moos, 1987, p. 2). Halpin and Croft (1963) state, “personality is to the individual what ‘climate’ is to the organization” (p.1). For example, just as some people are more supportive than others, some environments have aspects that provide more support (Halpin & Croft, 1963). If students in an organization felt that their members embrace their ideas, then they would perceive that environment as supportive.

As Halpin and Croft (1963) alluded, the effects of the relationship between the social climate of an environment and the people in that environment are reciprocal. The personalities of people define the social climate of a setting and, therefore, simultaneously influence those individuals who make up that environment. The aspirations, achievements, morale, and well-being of an individual may be impacted as a result of the social climate (Moos, 1979). Social climates, just as human beings, have personalities made up of several distinct characteristics, which can be assessed using Moos’s Social Climate Scales.

Moos (1987) developed 10 Social Climate Scales used to assess 10 different types of settings, such as family environments, classrooms, and correctional institutions. These scales are used to: describe and compare settings, examine stability and change over time, examine the influences of environments, and make people’s lives more satisfying. Although the environments assessed by the social climate scales differ, the three dimensions that define each scale do not: relationships, personal growth and development, and system maintenance and change.

The relationship dimension reflects the participants’ mutual support, involvement, and manner in which they

express themselves in an environment (Moos, 1987). This dimension will allow us to determine if the students feel supported by their organization and their peers within it, the extent of the participants’ involvement in the organization, and the ways the participants communicate with others within the organization. The personal growth and goal orientation dimension covers areas of individual achievement related to the purpose of the environment. Also, this dimension will help us better understand our participants’ motivation to stay in a student organization, their level of involvement, and their commitment to their respective organizations. The system maintenance and change dimension reveals the environment’s control, clarity, and responsiveness to change.

Researchers have argued that the system maintenance and relationship dimension are sufficient to grasp the climate of an environment because they are the most consistently recognized across all environments (Moos, 1987). Moos designed the social climate scales specifically to use all three dimensions. Standing his ground, he maintains that each social environment arranges itself around a collection of goals that play an essential role to complete the picture of a setting. Therefore, a two-domain idea will not “capture the complexity of social settings or fully explain their scales” (Moos, 1987, p. 31). In these dimensions, we will examine the participants’ impact on and influences of the student organization’s mission, values, and performance standards.

While this framework has not previously been applied to the social climate of student organizations, Moos’s dimensions reveal a great deal about student organizations and the experiences of students within these organizations. Each dimension takes both the student and the organization into consideration when describing the environment and interactions

between the members and advisors of the organizations. We used the previously defined dimensions as a framework for analyzing the social climate of Black students in predominantly White student organizations.

### **Black Students at PWIs**

Black students at PWIs have been studied to better understand their experiences in environments where they are the minority (Allen, 1992; Arminio et al., 2000; Fleming, 1991; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Levine & Cuerton, 1998; Schoem, 1991; Sedlacek, 1987; Tatum, 1997; Turner, 1994). Steward, Jackson, and Jackson (1990) found that Black students expressed the inability to “be themselves in predominately White environments” (p. 512). The predominately White student environment influenced the behavior of Black students at PWIs because these students understood how White students and faculty perceived them. These studies, among others, have found that Black students often feel unwelcomed, unsupported, and have different perceptions of campus climate than their White counterparts.

Turner (1994) indicated that many students of color did not find a positive “level of comfort” (p. 355) on university campuses, despite the implementation of supportive programs and specific policies intended to serve students of color. Also, Hurtado (1992) found that Black students at PWIs perceived higher levels of racial conflict than other college campus environments. The campus racial climate at PWIs also influenced Black students’ experiences in all aspects of the campus environment (Arminio, 2000; Hurtado, 1992). Since research examined Black students and the campus racial climate, but not Black student leaders’ experiences of the social climate in student organizations,

we chose to further investigate these experiences.

Sedlacek (1987) found eight non-cognitive variables that affect Black student life on campus. The successful leadership experience of Black students is one non-cognitive variable that has not been extensively studied in higher education. Sedlacek’s research, among others cited, has demonstrated the many unique aspects of Black students’ experiences on a predominantly White campus. However, the literature has not given much attention to the social climate perspective of student organizations that influence Black student leaders’ experiences.

### **Black Student Leadership and Involvement**

More recent research conducted by Arminio et al. (2000) recommended that PWIs assess their programming in order to determine whether it adequately serves students of color, since the programs provided for all students had not met the interests and developmental needs of students of color. This research also recommended that PWIs examine their social and educational programming in order to determine whether the resources currently offered on campus by student affairs offices have met the needs of racial minority students. Furthermore, recommendations for practice included examining the experiences of students of color and why they choose to get involved on campus at PWIs.

Harper and Quaye (2007) examined the experiences of Black male student leaders within student organizations and focused on students’ purposes for engaging in such commitments. The authors recommended that Black male student leaders use both predominately Black and White student organizations as platforms for racial uplift and support for minority student interests. Black student leaders’ perceptions and

experiences are vital for analyzing the social climate of student organizations at PWIs. Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) studied Black students' involvement in minority student organizations at PWIs, and found that Black student leaders remained in self-segregated student organizations because of the organizations' mission and commitment to enhance academic and social environments for other Black students on campus. Sutton and Kimbrough also found that Black student leaders' involvement on campus plays a crucial part to their overall undergraduate experience. Black students who help lead student organizations on campus become more grounded in and shape the culture of the student organizations they lead because of their additional level of commitment and responsibilities. In other words, Black students with high levels of involvement and commitment to their leadership roles have an in-depth understanding of social climate of their student organizations.

### **Current Study**

Moos's (1979, 1987) social climate model provided a framework to examine relationships, personal growth, and the change and impact students experience within student organizations that may or may not differ across race. In order to examine these dimensions we used Moos's social climate framework as opposed to racial climate, which emphasizes the race relations and social psychology when the climate relates to racial/ethnic diversity. In this study, Moos's social climate dimensions will be used to examine Black student leaders' experiences through the lens of the three dimensions: relationships, personal growth and development, and system maintenance and change.

Specifically, our study investigated how the social climate of campus governing boards is experienced through the

perceptions of Black student leaders. Our research examined the social climate of non-culturally based campus governing that did not focus specifically on race-based initiatives. For example, the Black Student Union, Latino Student Association, and Asian American Student Association would not be included because they are culturally based organizations. We explored how the social climate influenced the experiences for Black students who hold a leadership position within the campus governing board. By analyzing their perceptions, we gained a better understanding of their experiences with intentions that others will use this information to influence policies and adopt practices that contribute to the creation of learning environments conducive to the needs of Black student leaders. Therefore, we pose the following question: How does the social climate of large non-culturally based campus governing boards at a PWI influence Black student leaders?

### **METHODS**

Because qualitative methods allow for the identification of unanticipated phenomena, such as an individual's contribution or the influence of a specific practice on group morale, this approach is preferred when conducting exploratory studies (Maxwell, 1996). Specifically, phenomenological studies "focus on exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning" (Patton, 2002). For that reason, we used Moustakas's (1994) guide for phenomenological research to conduct our study.

## **Site**

Our study focused on two non-culturally based campus governing boards at a large, public PWI in the Midwest. Each study participant held a leadership position on either the campus programming board (CPB) or the housing governing board (HGB). We chose these specific organizations because the executive boards had a mix of elected and selected positions intended to represent the entire student body. In addition, the student organizations had similar missions of providing opportunities for leadership, programming, intellectual growth, and socializing in academic environments outside of the classrooms. Traditionally, the leadership boards have consisted predominantly of White students.

The CPB comprised 16 student directors who led committees that focused on educational and entertainment programmatic initiatives on campus and governed the policies of the college union. The HGB consisted of 25 executive board members at various levels in the organization. The board members worked to promote a “home away from home” for students living in the residence halls. All participants in this study held a position on one of these two executive boards.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

Students who met the criteria and chose to contribute to the study participated in a semi-structured interview that lasted no longer than one hour. Students were asked open-ended questions that were intended to gauge their perceptions of the social climate of their organization. Questions were organized along the three dimensions outlined by Moos (1979) to obtain responses that spoke to the relationship, personal growth and development, and system maintenance and change dimensions. Such

questions included, for example, “How would you describe your relationship with your organization?” and “How have the values of your student organization influenced your experience as a leader within the organization?” Probing questions were used to elicit clarification of participant responses. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researchers for data analysis.

## **Sample**

We used criterion sampling to identify our target population. Recruitment efforts were initiated by contacting the advisors of each student organization to identify participants who met the inclusion criteria. Our criteria included students who identify as African American or Black, had completed at least one year of undergraduate coursework, and held an executive leadership position in one of the governing boards outlined above.

All participants were at least in their second year of study at the institution. The gender split was even: three females and three males. Four students were members of HGB and two were members of CPB. Participants chose their own pseudonym for use in the study.

## **Data Analysis**

Through semi-structured interviews, which allowed interviewers to ask probing questions, we gained a better understanding of how the dimensions of the social environment affected Black student leaders. As mentioned previously, Moustakas’s (1994) phenomenological step-by-step techniques were used to analyze interview responses. Consistent with Moustakas, we first reviewed all the transcripts to get a sense of the individual participants and the interviews as a whole. Two researchers read

each interview and coded for themes within individual interviews. Next, we combined consistent codes across interviews to identify major themes for the study. We then reviewed these themes for their alignment within Moos's (1987) dimensions. Finally, we identified passages from the student transcriptions that best captured these themes while maintaining the student's voice.

## FINDINGS

Through our analyses, we produced three overarching themes that explain how the social climate of non-culturally based campus governing boards influences Black student leaders: mission and direction, relationships, and mutual impact. The first theme, mission and direction, encompassed both the students' understanding of the mission of their organization, and how they used this understanding to maintain or change the organization through their actions as well as how their performance reviews affected their perceptions of the organization. The second theme, relationships, emerged after noting how positive and negative relationships with peers and advisors contributed to the students' experiences within the organization. Finally, the mutual impact of the students on the organization and the organization on the students influenced the students' growth within the organization.

### Mission and Direction

**Perceived Alignment with Organizational Mission.** *"I carry out that mission through my leadership" – Charlotte*

Though not every student knew the official mission of their organization, they worked to uphold its goals and values. Each student provided a description of their interpretation

of the mission, often highlighting key phrases and goals. When asked about the mission of the organization, Shawn gave this reply:

I don't know if we have an exact mission statement, but I can just say... it's just to improve the lives for the residents in the dorms, make it a cohesive community, make it fun for the residents, basically like that.

Tyler, who has been in the organization longer and holds a higher leadership position, gave this response: "Our main mission and goal is to create a home away from home.... Our job is to keep retention [up] but also show that we're doing things to make you feel welcome and that's our main goal."

The organization's official mission statement includes elements of what both students stated, however, their interpretations directly related to the roles they held within the organization. Shawn has a more programmatic role, while Tyler has a more administrative role that is focused on maintaining order and facilitating processes within the overall organization. The students embraced particular elements of the mission and actively worked to meet the goals of the organization. This personal connection added to their growth as leaders and overall commitment to the organization.

Identifying how their positions affected the organization also showed benefits for students' personal growth. Some students could articulate their role within the organization and understood how they contributed to carrying out the organization's mission. Students took ownership of their role within the organization and articulated how their association to the mission enhanced their role. Henry's interpretation closely aligned with the organization's stated mission, and he also commented that he viewed his role as one who "checked" his

peers or made sure their actions were fair and equal. He gave an example of such an occurrence for the organization as a whole: "You're doing a lot of good things for the community, for the campus, but the way you're going about doing it... it's not embodying what we hold true to our mission." Henry's motivation and commitment to the organization came from both his official role and the one he ascribed to himself, and how he fulfilled the mission of the organization in both positions. In addition to his personal growth, through challenging his peers' actions based on its mission, Henry both maintained the organization's mission and changed the way the organization achieved its mission.

**Performance review.** *"They help us out on a weekly basis" -Henry*

Evaluations provided an avenue for members of an organization to congratulate or correct behavior, revisit expectations, and address the performance of individuals. We noted two types of reviews, structured and unstructured, in both organizations. Unstructured reviews were often responsive in nature, either to address a success or failure with a program or when a specific need arose. The structured reviews were planned, conducted at the end of the semester or academic year, and often included feedback from both peers and advisors. Charlotte described the review she would receive through the organization:

We have performance reviews at the end of every semester; I have one coming up in December, which is basically myself, my advisor, the [HGB] advisor, and either the vice-president of [HGB] or the president of [HGB]. And what we would do is go down the list and review my

strengths, my weaknesses, [and] how did I contribute.

Because Charlotte expected this review, the organization positively maintained its system, and she was prepared to assess her successes and areas in need of improvement. Charlotte also participated in an unstructured review. Noting that the organization gave no assessments during the semester, she created one on her own:

But I made one myself and passed it to my board. I just really wanted to see how they felt like we were doing. I added a few questions about myself, but I just really wanted to see how we were doing and what they thought we needed to work on. Because I really feel like if we are not doing good then that may be a reflection of my leadership. I figured it kind goes both ways, there's two sides [*sic*].

Charlotte's structured and unstructured reviews helped improve her leadership as well as contributed to the organization's system maintenance. In both reviews, Charlotte could acknowledge achievements and problems that she experienced as a leader and member of the organization.

Students also received unstructured reviews after straying from the organization's established norms. After completing what he thought was a successful program having primarily Black participants, Henry's peers questioned him:

[They asked] "Well, what do you think you could do to have, like, changed that to make it more diverse?" I'm like, this has never been discussed before when we do all the other programming... We never discussed that before, why are we discussing

this now? If we're gonna start now, why now?

This line of questioning from peers within the organization was new to Henry; he perceived it as an attack on his program and counter to fulfilling the mission of the organization. The organization's members maintained the organization's status quo while simultaneously stifling Henry's personal development within the organization. However, when discussing the weekly meetings he had with his advisor, he had a much more positive tone:

They help us like "Well, look you need to do this; you've been kind of lackadaisical with this, you need to get back on it." They help us out on a weekly basis and that's very helpful and it's reflected in our programming.

Henry viewed this gentle nudging as helpful for him, and it benefited what he could accomplish within the organization. The ongoing structured, planned reviews provided Henry and the other students with guidance for improving their programs and processes, and the semester reviews gave students ample time to assess their own performance. The unstructured, responsive reviews had either a positive or negative effect on the student and organization depending on how the students perceived them. Both performance reviews and student's interpretation of the organization's mission influenced the social climate of non-culturally based student governing boards.

## Relationships

**Supportive.** *"[The executives] offer advice, they lead by example, which I think is one of the best things you can do" – Charlotte.*

Student leaders addressed the supportive atmosphere of personal relationships within their student organization environments such as involvement, peer cohesion, and expressiveness of their leadership skills in their campus governing boards. The strong nature of the supportive relationships suggested an association with supportive environments. Students felt that supportive environments led to high levels of participation and togetherness while still retaining individualism. Students alluded to the strong supportive relationships with their campus governing boards as contributions to their professionalism and mutual respect for each other. Supportive relationships positively influenced the social climate of non-culturally based campus governing boards.

In addition, the student leaders' involvement within their student organizations heavily influenced their experiences. Regardless of which campus governing boards students involved themselves in, each student leader articulated the importance of supportive relationships from their campus governing boards whether from their peers or advisors. An example from Charlotte:

I feel supported by the leaders that lead over me, the executives of the [HGB], because they are really supportive and I can come to them about an issue...They offer advice, they lead by example, which I think is one of the best things you can do.

Student leaders' initial support from advisors could be as important as that from their peers. The support students received instilled and developed students to take on a larger leadership role. The early support Charlotte received from her advisor and peers helped her get acclimated with the university. This led to her continued

involvement in the organization at the executive leader capacity:

[My] first leadership experience was with [the summer bridge program], and with [my advisor], and I kind of learned a lot from him. He was pretty much our advisor over the summer and so from there, I just looked to staying involved with the residence halls. It's great and it's nurturing to put it that way.

Additionally, the supportive relationships established with the student organizations have helped students find their niche, and further developed a sense of belonging. Dawn felt the supportive relationship with the campus governing boards influenced her to aspire to do great things, and make an impact as a student leader. Dawn continued to credit her relationship with her advisor along with the strong support system from her colleagues as helping her know she belongs at the university:

I would describe my relationship with [CPB] as the organization on campus that made me feel like I belonged at [this university]...Joining the [CPB]... let me know I had a position. I had control. I had a say in things that went on with campus. So it just made me feel like I belonged.

Dawn's involvement with the CPB had given her many venues to establish strong supportive relationships with campus administrators. It also empowered her to be a better student leader. Through the CPB, Dawn was provided with networking opportunities with different people such as the Dean of Students and Executive Directors:

...having these types of connections and relationships with these people, and being able to talk to them about any problem that I saw on the campus, and have them listening... like they cared and [then] taking necessary steps to change [those problems].

The supportive relationships Dawn established with senior campus administrators influenced her positive experiences at the university. With the network established from her CPB connections, Dawn acknowledged the importance of her position with CPB that could potentially affect future policies at the university.

**Unsupportive.** *"They'll criticize... but not really help" – Henry*

The student leaders' lack of a support system could easily impact later experiences and perceptions that may continue to influence the students' future at the university. Without the supportive experiences, students often felt the university lacked the resources and support to meet the needs of underrepresented students. Henry spoke about the lack of support and assistance from his peers in the CPB. After requesting assistance from his peers to diversify the previously mentioned program, his peers had this response:

"Ah, yeah, okay, we'll do that" but it didn't happen obviously... Although I marketed [the program] the best way I could, I really didn't get a lot of help from [CPB] members... [The assistance from them] didn't happen obviously...

Support is considered "efforts to aid one another" (Hearn & Moos, 1976, p. 298). Henry continued to describe his experiences

with unsupportive peers as influencing his perceptions of the student organization since his peers always questioned his programs. In addition, he felt his peers doubted his skills as they continued to question his work despite his acknowledgement of successful programs. Without a supportive relationship environment, students often felt their voices went unheard. Henry felt the voices of students of color were often missing when decisions were made in CPB regarding campus policies, the allocation of resources, and the selection of guest speakers that the organization brought to campus.

Supportive and unsupportive relationships established within student organizations have the potential to affect a student's entire experience and perceptions of their undergraduate career. The same applies to the type of support students received from peers and advisors of student organizations. Both supportive and unsupportive relationships influenced, positively and negatively, the social climate of non-culturally based campus governing boards.

### **Mutual Impact: Student Leader and Organization**

**Personal Growth.** *"It makes me want to go further and actually hold myself at a higher standard..." – Brandi*

Students exhibited personal growth when they could articulate one or more of the following: personal goals, goal setting, and finding their niche. The students' experiences, in relation to their personal growth, were influenced within the campus governing boards. This displays each student's individual achievement in relation to his or her organization's environment (Moos, 1987). They articulated an ability to develop as individuals while working with others, and how their growth in the

organization benefitted their future. Henry shared a personal growth experience within his organization:

I'm still learning how to appeal to [other organization members] and I think that will help me outside of this organization, well, in my future. I'm sure whatever field that I'm working in, I will be interacting with other ethnicities, backgrounds, sex, gender, all of that good stuff. So it's preparing me to be more versatile in my approach to people and working with them.

Henry viewed his ability to work with others as a benefit to his future. His organization assisted him by exposing him to different types of diversity, and providing opportunities for him to learn how to appeal to others from different backgrounds.

Charlotte expressed an immediate application of lessons learned as she described her growth and how it has motivated her to be a part of her organization:

I guess just really being able to develop as a leader. So I just want a growth of experience so when I leave, and I go to the business world, I already have these experiences of how to work with people on a team and how to plan things, how to use other resources, how to network with other companies, I guess that's what I really want from the experience.

One part of personal growth and goal orientation for students is the learning experience. For Charlotte and Henry, they saw their personal growth within their organization as having lasting consequences for their future. They leave the organization with varied experiences and abilities that can

transfer to other areas of their lives whether personal or professional. They saw the connections between their leadership experience within and outside of the organization that have prepared them for interactions with their peers and in their professional lives.

**Values.** *"I feel like the values are really aligned with how I feel as a person" – Charlotte*

Students identified certain values of the organization as aligning with their personal values, and how the values influenced their growth within the organization. The alignment of their values and the values of the organization showed evidence of personal growth. Students made connections about how the aligned values have influenced their lives. Dawn explained how the values of her organization aligned with her own: "[They] help to make me more well-rounded and to see what others value. I feel I am able to relate to more people better." Dawn articulated a positive influence from the aligned values as improving her interactions with others. This exhibited evidence of personal growth within her organization.

Also, Charlotte shared how her aligned values and her organization impacted her: "I feel like the values are really aligned with how I feel as a person. And so it's just like positive reinforcement...It's not like a conflicting standard and it's like they really support me." Charlotte accomplished two things. First, she saw the values of the organization align with her personal values in a positive manner. This demonstrated areas of personal growth for her as she saw the organization live out its values in a way that strengthened her. Second, Charlotte saw the organization as a source of accountability, and it was established as a source of support for her. This showed the development of

relationship between her and the organization. The students' ability to clearly articulate the positive aspects of the organization in relation to their values showed personal growth.

Brandi explained her growth in consideration of the alignment of her values, the organization's values, and how it has influenced her aspirations: "...also it has...enhance[d] my education goals as well. It makes me want to go further and actually hold myself at a higher standard than what typical students that goes to [the university] would do." The alignment of the organization's and Brandi's personal goals has not only improved her educational goals, but also has allowed her to set personal goals in comparison to her understanding of her peers. Her experiences within the student organization produced her desire to improve herself.

**Student Impact.** *"I just came in and I wanted to impact the campus" – Tyler*

Students were asked to describe their impact on their student organization. In responding to this question, we noted two types of responses. Some students clearly articulated their impact upon their organization. Dawn recognized her impact, "So I think my impact...is [mainly] showing diversity...redefining diversity and opening people, who are not of color, their eyes to a different culture." Here, Dawn made a connection with her role in the organization and how this position benefited the growth of diversity for the organization. Her clear articulation of her impact showed congruence between her specific role and the benefit of what she has done for the organization. In her response, Dawn exhibited a sense of pride in accomplishing this task. She clearly identified her impact with confidence.

Other students could not clearly articulate their impact upon their organization. These students did not struggle to answer the question, but rather could not associate an example of roles within the organization as having any kind of impact. Charlotte initially responded to the question as follows:

It's hard to say 'cause sometimes I don't feel like I made that large of an impact. It's like I'm one of thirty other people on my board. So it's hard to say if there's one individual who makes an impact.

Charlotte did not believe that she had made a large impact on her organization in comparison to the number of other students she works with. Yet, as she continued her response to the question, she provided an example of her participation in the organization, which evidenced an actual impact that she has made.

...I'm just really big on having things set in order for the next year. 'Cause when I came into my position there was like nothing done, I had no one helping me. I was one person, I needed 10 other people for this beginning of the school year, so we could start [HGB] up and going and I don't want the person that comes after me to have to do that. I want them to have a support in place. Like right now I am actively recruiting right now, and we don't even start electing until [next year] and I'm recruiting right now.

Charlotte impacted the organization by preparing it for transition into next year's leadership. She identified that the organization did not have its leadership in place during the beginning of the academic year, but she proactively structured the

leadership transition for the next year. Also, she felt uncertain about the validity of her impact with her organizational involvement. This depicted a disconnection that showed Charlotte lacked the ability to clearly define her impact. Although Charlotte could not define her impact, she clearly impacted her organization by creating structure.

Mission and roles, relationships, and mutual impact on both the person and the organization were themes based on the perceptions of Black student leader's within the HGB and CPB. Students shared how their experiences influenced the social climate of the campus governing boards.

## DISCUSSION

The impact of the students' involvement was expressed in connections between relationships in and outside of the organization. Students experienced both unsupportive and supportive relationships; regardless, each student's level of commitment to their organization did not waver. They associated their experiences within their organizations as transferable with other experiences in life or on campus. Further, the broader campus influenced the social climate of each student organization since the representation of Black student leaders in these organizations reflected upon other campus leadership boards.

Arminio et al. (2000) stated that student leaders of color expressed a group's responsibility for their involvement in student organizations. Similarly, students in our study felt it was important to serve as a resource for peers in and outside of their organization. The relationships within the organization served as the motivation for students to be resources to others. As the organization's social environment became more conducive to reaching this goal, the

students' ability to serve as resources increased.

Structured and unstructured reviews by advisors and peers served to maintain the existing conditions of the organizations' social climate. The reviews supported the system maintenance and change dimensions, which consider clarity of expectations, control, and responsiveness to change within organizations (Moos, 1979). Our findings indicate that students did not always support maintaining existing conditions, specifically when they felt certain changes within the organization could help it better achieve its goals. From the students' perspectives, changing how the organization functioned would improve the organization's outcomes. Students challenged organizational practices that they felt hindered their ability to successfully carry out their roles. For example, Charlotte assessed her leadership role in the organization via feedback from her peers. Students knew of the opportunity to enhance their role as leaders as a result of structured and unstructured reviews.

The students' personal connection to the mission enabled their growth as leaders within the organization. Within Moos's (1979) personal growth and goal orientation dimension, students' interpretation of their organization's mission and values influenced how they carried out their responsibilities. Though they had varying interpretations of their organization's mission, no student lacked motivation to fulfill his or her leadership role. Students' personal values often aligned with their perceived values of their respective campus governing board. This alignment channeled students' achievement of their position's goals.

Students expressed that working with diverse populations benefitted their personal growth. Harper and Quaye (2007) found similar findings in their research where interactions of African American students outside of their racial group provided

opportunity for them to branch outside of their "cultural comfort zone" (p. 140). For example, Henry described working and interacting with diverse populations as beneficial to his current role and future career.

Overall, students articulated benefits and problems associated with the social climate of their student organizations. The students' most salient needs and their perception of the organization's willingness to meet those needs influenced their experiences. Regardless, students still fulfilled and excelled in their leadership roles.

### **LIMITATIONS**

This study had two main limitations. First, many of the researchers had regular interactions with the students involved in the study. This knowledge provided a closer insight, but also may have influenced students' responses as well as our interpretations of their experiences. To lessen this effect, researchers who had frequent contact with particular students did not interview those participants or look for themes within their transcriptions. However, the other reviewer did not verify the codes assigned to a particular transcription. This additional step would have further validated the results. Second, due to the nature of our study, our time and resources were limited. For instance, the perceptions of six students may not be representative of the entire population's experience; however, because of the small number of Black student leaders on the campus, we found the sample size satisfactory. Phenomenological studies often include longer or multiple interviews with each participant, but due to the time constraints our interviews were limited to single, one-hour long sessions for each student. Though the data collection was

abbreviated, the information gathered served as a starting point for further research.

In addition, some findings may not be applicable to all student organizations or all PWIs. Factors such as organization and institution size, demographic of student population, or geographic location could affect the results of the study. For example, we felt the students' experiences might have been different if we conducted the exact study at an institution with a higher Black student population, in a different region, or student organizations organized around different missions. Despite the limitations, our study introduced the topic of the social climate of predominantly White student organizations and the influence of Black student leaders to the higher education conversation.

### **IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Student perspectives and experiences in this study provided useful recommendations for students and student affairs professionals at PWIs. We found that supportive relationships allowed positive experiences for students and provide a sense of belonging to the campus governing board. Student affairs professionals who work with Black student leaders in an advisory capacity should provide positive relationships and a climate of support, by building trust and facilitating open lines of communication between student leaders.

Students' personal values often aligned with the perceived values of their respective campus governing board. Student affairs professionals should recognize students' ability to interpret the mission and values of their student organization and how those align with their personal values. Harper & Quaye (2007) found that black male student leaders join both predominantly White and Black student

organizations as a way to support minority student interests. Their value of minority student interests could be aligned with the mission of a student organization by receiving assistance from student affairs professionals. By encouraging Black student leaders to incorporate the practical understanding of their value alignment within the organization, students can better fulfill their roles. When reviewing the performance of students, student affairs professionals should encourage unstructured, responsive reviews in conjunction with the use of structured performance reviews. These types of reviews help students to better understand their impact within their particular campus governing board.

This research is limited in scope in that it provides a segment of the students' experiences in their respective organizations. Our study should be replicated using different lenses, such as Black identity development, leadership identity development, or racial climate. Future research should extend interviews, conduct follow-up interviews and member check, and recruit more students and organizations in order to have a more in depth study to develop a model. A more comprehensive model of Black student experiences could be developed to help inform the field of student affairs on how to best cultivate nurturing and developmental student organizations for these students.

### **CONCLUSION**

We conclude that the social climate of student organizations can alter Black student leaders' experiences and influence on their organization. Understanding the alignment of the organization's values and mission influenced their personal growth. Supportive relationships within the organization helped

students develop a sense of belonging and contributed to positive experiences at the university. Not surprisingly, unsupportive relationships had a negative impact on students' perceptions. Regardless of the level of support, students were aware of how their involvement impacted the organization and how the organization shaped their development. With this information, student affairs practitioners should help Black student leaders recognize their impact and further their development. Considering that college campuses are more diverse today than ever, future research examining other student populations has the potential to provide further insight into the influences of social climate.

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- Cameron Beatty graduated from the HESA program in May 2010. He received a B.S. in Sociology from Indiana University, Bloomington in 2006. At IUB, Cameron served as the Program Advisor of the Indiana Memorial Union Board and was IUSPA 2009 Outreach Co-Director.*

*Antonio A. Bush received his master's in Higher Education and Student Affairs at Indiana University. He received his B.S. in Early Childhood Education from Albany State University in Albany, GA. He will be continuing his graduate studies as a doctoral candidate in North Carolina State University's Higher Education Program in 2010.*

*Eliza Erxleben graduated from the HESA program in 2010. She received a B.A. in Communication and Culture and Telecommunications from Indiana University in 2007. Eliza worked for the Groups Student Support Services as a graduate and research assistant. She also worked as a graduate intern for the 21st Century Scholars Program.*

*Tomika Ferguson received her master's from in Higher Education and Student Affairs at Indiana University, Bloomington. She received her B.A. in American Studies and African American and African Studies from the University of Virginia. She worked as a Student Development Specialist for Residential Programs Services in Foster Quad and the Graduate Intern for the Office of Scholarships.*

*Autumn T. Harrell earned a Master of Science degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs from Indiana University Bloomington in 2010. She received a Bachelor of Arts in English from Florida State University in 2007. Autumn served as the graduate assistant for the Community & Leadership Development Center and completed a practicum with the National Survey of Student Engagement.*

*Wanna K. Sahachartsiri received her master's in Higher Education and Student Affairs at Indiana University, Bloomington. She received her B.A. in Psychology with a minor in Education Studies from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). She worked as a Graduate Supervisor for Residential Programs and Services in Teter Residence Center.*

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Cameron Beatty at [ccbeatty@indiana.edu](mailto:ccbeatty@indiana.edu).*