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Cross-Cultural Faculty-Peer Mentoring Programs: Bridging Cultural Gaps at Black Colleges

The experiences of White faculty members at four historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and their lack of adjustment to their minority status are utilized as the impetus for HBCUs to develop faculty-peer mentoring programs. The study examines the long history of HBCUs in the United States and the equally as long presence of Whites at these very important institutions. Unlike minorities, whose experiences have been researched more extensively, White individuals in minority stations have not been extensively explored. This issue becomes increasingly important as America becomes closer to minority-majority population (Frey, 2012). Thus the creation of Black-White cross-cultural faculty-peer mentoring programs is one approach to bridging cultural gaps on these campuses. The study utilized a phenomenological approach, and narratives from twenty-seven White faculty members. This analysis yielded a greater understanding of the struggles of White faculty members at HBCUs. Counter-storytelling as a form of critical race methodology (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) was the core for the methodological approach. In a relevant yet unorthodox fashion, the researcher implemented Critical Race Theory as the framework for the study; specifically because the White faculty members, as participants, were in a subdominant position with respect to power and influence at their respective Black college. The development of Black-White cross-cultural faculty-peer mentoring at HBCUs may hold the key for increasing White faculty adjustment. However, the mentoring process must hinge on the transference of cultural knowledge, cross-cultural translation and acquisition of social capital.

Prior to the Emancipation Proclamation Act of 1893, African Americans and their advocates for freedom developed institutions of education for the enslaved and disenfranchised African. These institutions today are known as historically Black colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and count more than one hundred (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). These institutions have birthed the leadership core of the Black community in America (Betsey, 2008; Willie, Reddick, and Brown, 2006). Most African Americans who earn terminal degrees acquired their bachelor's degree from an HBCU (Betsey, 2008). Hubbard (2006) purports HBCUs continue to produce the majority of African Americans who enter the faculty ranks; and without these graduates the landscape of the university would be abysmally different. HBCUs provide African Americans with access to the graduate school pipeline. And although it is not widely publicized, White faculty have been present since the inception of HBCUs.

White faculty members at HBCUs historically have always faced great challenges gaining the trust and confidence of their Black faculty peers, administrators and even students. Warnat (1976) delved into the negative typologies of White faculty members on HBCU campuses. These typologies portrayed them as hypocritical, academically inferior, guilt-riddled individuals who did not have a proper place at the HBCU. Later Smith and Borgstedt's (1985) was one of the first pieces to qualitatively examine, via self-reporting, the adjustment of White faculty to the HBCU environment. Because racial issues are very relevant at the Black college, White faculty members who have not experienced racism, discrimination or marginalization are required to confront prejudices, personal and societal. (p.146) Louis (2008) built upon their framework and found that twenty years after the aforesaid study, White faculty remain maladjusted to the HBCU environment; regardless of rank, gender or length of time at institution. Both studies defined adjustment as a White faculty member's level of satisfaction and comfort with their current employment at an HBCU; and their ability to cope and adapt to a minority status. The studies concluded that White faculty members were ill prepared because they had not previously experienced being in a sub-dominant position. Prior to Louis (2008) Cooper, Massey and Graham (2006) examined the sentiments and experiences of White faculty members at HBCUs and one participant openly expressed, "I was not prepared for an identity crisis when I accepted a faculty position at a historically Black university..." (p. 117). It is within this personal cultural crisis that examination, comprehension and action must take place.

This current study explores the experiences of White faculty members at four historically Black Colleges and universities (HBCUs) and their lack of adjustment to their minority status, utilized as the impetus for HBCUs to develop faculty-peer mentoring programs. The responses from the participants can be utilized in the development of Black-White cross-cultural faculty-peer mentoring at HBCUs; which may hold the key for increasing White faculty adjustment.

Methods

All data collection and analysis for this study are based on qualitative research methods (Creswell, 2008; Patton, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Individual interviews of White faculty at four Black colleges were conducted. The purpose of the interview data is to gain an emic perspective of the group of faculty members and deepen the understanding of their shared experiences at Black colleges. Besides some initial demographic data, ten (10) open-ended questions were developed that addressed (a) the participants' perception of their interactions with Black administrators, faculty members and students at the HBCU (b) the participants' positive experiences and interactions at the HBCU (c) the participants' negative experiences and interactions at the HBCU and (d) participants' suggestion for ways to enhance the experiences of White faculty members at the HBCU. Follow-up questions were asked in individual cases to bring clarity any answer that may have been deemed unclear or not descriptive enough by the interviewer.

Conceptual Framework

Counter-storytelling as a form of critical race methodology (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) is the theoretical foundation upon which the study is based. In a relevant, yet unorthodox manner the author decided to adopt Critical Race Theory as a framework for the study, since the population being examined is (a) a cultural minority in the environment in context of a Black college (b) a numerical minority in the context of Black college campuses and (c) they are in a subdominant position with respect to power and influence at a Black college. The utilization [Page 480]

of the voices of White faculty employed at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the United States legitimately highlights the shared lived experiences of this numerically population. Stories and narratives many times can offer deep insight into the experiences of individuals and groups and can speak to other interconnected and invested groups (Reddick & Saenz, 2012). Thus, an approach which would utilize the voices of White faculty at HBCUs in today's Academy became central in the method the author decided to use to best highlight their lived experiences.

Participants

Twenty-seven (27) faculty members (11 women, 16 men) were interviewed about their experiences at Black colleges. To ensure that the experiences of the White faculty members were not simply a reflection of a particular institution, region or state, faculty from four universities located in three different states were interviewed. This also assisted in the triangulation process, since data was collected from different sources at completely different institutions. With respect to rank, males ran the gamut from instructors to full professors and the majority held the rank of full professor. Female participants ranged in rank from assistant to full professor and the majority was assistant professors.

Positionality

The positionality of the researcher is a significant element of the study. The researcher was a Black male who is an alumnus of an HBCU graduate and former HBCU administrator who worked closely with White faculty at HBCUs. Takacs (2003) states "Only I have lived my life; only you have lived yours. This encourages me to listen to you and you to me, as we each have a unique perspective. (p. 29). Thus the positionality of the researcher as a Black individual affiliated with HBCUs is important in the "listening" component of this research piece. Listening to the perspectives of another

minority group in which the majority is Black can result in the development of a new minority status perspective.

Data Analysis

Data collected were analyzed using a phenomenological approach, intended to comprehend the experiences, perspectives and perceptions of the White faculty members'. The data collected were the narratives responses to the non-directive, broad questions posed by the researcher. After collecting the responses, data were coded into a set of themes which were analyzed to determine their meaning. The researcher highlighted pertinent statements, common quotes, and similar sentiments of the participants. Thus common features emerged to describe the White faculty members' experiences as employees at Black colleges. Utilizing the interviews transcriptions the researcher identified themes and patterns. An open coding approach was used to identify recurrent themes and patterns, which were then sorted into categories.

Summary of Results

The following is a brief summary of some themes that emerged from the interviews and analyses:

1. White faculty members felt that they are integral elements of their respective institution's diversity. The major of faculty expressed (a) their ability to contribute to discourses on campus and lend their perspectives to enrich conversations (b) their belief that they experienced personal growth and (c) that they developed heightened awareness of social inequity.
2. The participants perceived that African Americans/Blacks did not want Whites to be part of the university or college.
3. Whites were not readily promoted or accepted in positions of influence and power.
4. Many White faculty members experienced social isolation.

Conclusion

Charles V. Willie (2000) states "...some Whites can be mentors for Blacks and some men can be mentors for women. [However] research is needed on the outcomes of people of color serving as mentors for Whites..." (p. 258). The narratives expressed in this study call for the Black faculty at HBCUs to serve as mentors to a White faculty population that (a) practically and theoretically does possess the "greater societal experience" to cope with minority status and (b) truly do not understand the nuances, history and importance of cultural reinforcement for minority populations and institutional differences that exist at HBCUs.

Stemming from the results the researcher examines the ideas of (a) participant willingness (b) trust (c) psycho-social paradigm assessment (d) ethnorelativism (e) privilege and power dynamics and (f) individual outcomes. These elements are essential to consider when developing Black-White Faculty Peer Mentoring dyads at HBCUs. Faculty members of influence, Black faculty members, should lead the charge of creating a more open environment for their White faculty colleagues. Faculty-peer mentoring may hold the key for initiating institutional change. Mentoring can be either formal or informal, but the basis of it must hinge on the transference of cultural knowledge and social capital that can assist White faculty members adjust and become integral community members within the HBCU environment.

The development of faculty-peer mentoring at Black colleges may assist White faculty members develop a greater understanding of the Black college environment including its history, and its importance to the Black community. With this knowledge White faculty may better understand their Black faculty peers, administrators and students. Acquiring this knowledge can undoubtedly impact their beliefs and socio-cultural paradigm subsequently increasing their adjustment to the Black college environment. The creation of intentional cross-cultural faculty peer mentoring dyads could be guided by a trained faculty development specialist which could benefit both parties. The specialist can [Page 481]

share and disaggregate feedback from both White and Black faculty members, collect data and offer suggestions for future action. In many ways a cross-cultural faculty peer-mentoring program can be a paradigm changer for the Black college environment.

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