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A Delineation of Asian American and Latino/a Students’ Experiences With Faculty at a Historically Black College and University

Robert T. Palmer   Dina C. Maramba

Research has shown that the enrollment of Asian American and Latino/a students are increasing at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Nevertheless, research on how these students experience the institutional climate of HBCUs is nonexistent. Hence, this study sought to explore the college choice process and perceptions of campus climate for Asian American and Latino/a students at HBCUs. One of the salient themes that emerged from this study was the participants’ perception of faculty as supportive and exhibiting care for their well-being. Despite this, there was a concern among some participants that faculty lacked knowledge about non-Black students and were culturally exclusive in their teaching. This article discusses those experiences and concludes by providing implications for future research and institutional practice.

One of the defining characteristics of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) is the supportive, nurturing, and family-like environment that it provides to students (Allen, 1985, 1992; Allen & Jewel, 2002; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Gasman, 2008a; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). This climate of support has been shown to be critical facilitators of psychological wellness, academic development (Berger & Milem, 2000; Kim, 2002; Kim & Conrad, 2006), and retention and persistence (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Given that HBCUs lack parity in resources with predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Gasman, 2008a; Kim, 2002; Palmer & Griffin, 2009), the support that these institutions provide to their students and its impact on their success is impressive and has played a critical role in the production of leaders focused on advancing societal changes, social justice, and equity (Gasman, 2008a; Gasman, Lundy-Wagner, Ransom, & Bowman, 2010).

Although research indicates that this family-like environment of HBCUs envelops the entire institutional community (Brown & Davis, 2001; Palmer & Gasman, 2008), evidence demonstrates that faculty–student interaction is a critical component of the nurturing community of HBCUs (Berger & Milem, 2000; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Gasman, 2008a; Gasman et al., 2007; Hirt, Amelink, McFeeters, & Strayhorn, 2008; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Wagener & Nettles, 1998). For example, in a qualitative study of 11 Black males at an HBCU, Palmer and Gasman (2008) noted how faculty used their social capital to go above and beyond their roles to support student success by serving as mentors, role models, counselors, and support agents. Wagener and Nettles (1998) echoed this finding by explaining that faculty at HBCUs push their students to their full potential and are reluctant to give up on them because they know they can succeed. Similarly, researchers (e.g., Flowers, 2012; Fries-Britt, Burt, & Franklin, 2012; Gary, 2012; Perna et al., 2009) have indicated that faculty in science, technology, engineering,
and mathematics at HBCUs work closely with their students by providing mentorship and involving them in research projects, which is critical to matriculating into graduate school and strengthening efficacy in research.

Though a small but burgeoning body of literature has focused on White students or “temporary” (Hall & Closson, 2005; Strayhorn, 2010) minorities at HBCUs, research has found their relationships with faculty to be positive (Hall & Closson, 2005). Specifically, in a mixed-method study on the social adjustment of 16 graduate students (five of whom were Black) at an HBCU, Hall and Closson (2005) found that students reported positive relationships with faculty. Similarly, in a qualitative study that Closson and Henry (2008) conducted with eight undergraduate students (five of whom were Black), they reported that White students characterized faculty as nurturing and student-centered and many of the Black students discussed having positive relationships with Black and White faculty at an HBCU.

In addition, in a quantitative study involving 215 White students attending HBCUs, Strayhorn (2010) reported that participants who engaged faculty more frequently had more satisfactory relationships with them than did their less-engaged peers. Furthermore, a study by Peterson and Hamrick (2009), which examined racial consciousness among seven White male undergraduate students at an HBCU, revealed examples of hypervisibility among the participants in the classroom. Though this study did not delineate the participants’ relationships with faculty, Peterson and Hamrick explained that this hypervisibility resulted in the professors being keenly familiar with the students and relying on them to be the spokespersons for the majority perspective, which, for some, created an uncomfortable classroom climate.

Indeed, although limited research has provided insight into the experiences that White students have with faculty at HBCUs, research is nonexistent about the experiences of Asian American and Latino/a students with faculty at HBCUs. This research is critical for at least two reasons. First, research has shown that HBCUs are attracting more Asian American and Latino/a students to their campuses (Gasman, 2009, 2012; Hernandez, 2009; Lee, 2012). According to research, although more Black students are opting to attend PWIs and for-profit institutions (Patton, 2012; Sissoko & Shiau, 2005), data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that the enrollment of Asian Americans has increased from 2,148 to 4,425 (106%) from 2000 to 2010. Similarly, Latino/a enrollment has increased from 6,412 to 12,205 (90%) during the aforementioned period (Lee, 2012).

The second reason that it is salient to examine the experiences of Asian American and Latino/a students with faculty at HBCUs is that, since court cases such as Adams v. Richardson (1972) and United States v. Fordice (1992) compelled public HBCUs to increase the racial diversity of their student bodies, the number of non-Black students enrolling in HBCUs may continue to increase (Brown, 2002; Gasman, 2009, 2012; Gasman et al. 2007; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009). Specifically, given that data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2012) indicate that Asian Americans and

* In this study, we use the terms Asian American as a general term that refers to persons who trace their origin to Asian and Pacific Islander ancestry. We also use the terms Latina and Latino, or the abbreviation Latino/a to refer to persons who trace their origin to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Spanish-speaking Central and South American countries, and other Spanish cultures (Fry, 2007). Although we recognize the complexities associated with both of these socially and politically defined racial categories, we acknowledged and preserved the essence of how the participants identified themselves racially and ethnically in this study.
Latinos/as comprise two of the fastest growing minority groups in the United States, more students from these populations may continue to increase in enrollment at HBCUs.

This study sought to better understand the college choice process, perceptions of campus climate, and factors critical to the success of Asian American and Latino/a students at HBCUs. A number of themes emerged from this study; however, this present paper focuses on the Asian American and Latino/a students’ perceptions and interactions with faculty at an HBCU.

METHODOLOGY
Geographic Location
This study was conducted at East Coast University (ECU; a pseudonym), a public HBCU located in a mid-Atlantic state. We selected this university because of professional relationships with administrators and staff, who helped gain access to the student population. Approximately 6,711 students were enrolled when the data were collected. Approximately 82% of the students were Black, and their White, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American counterparts comprised 3.2%, 2.5% 0.7%, and 0.2%, respectively, of students enrolled.

Using in-depth interview methods, 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). Given that Charmaz (2000) recommended that grounded theory strategies can be incorporated into other qualitative perspectives, tenets of 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). To this end, this study did not employ a pure grounded theory approach.

Participants
To recruit participants, we sought the help of staff, administrators, and graduate students at ECU to purposefully select students who met the study’s criteria of identifying as an Asian American or Latino/a student. We recruited additional participants through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is the process of asking those who have participated in the study to refer others who meet the study’s criteria (Creswell, 2009). The sample consisted of 12 students, six of whom were Asian Americans and six of whom were Latino/as. The participants’ cultural backgrounds included Bengali, Chinese, Dominican, Filipino, Mexican, Panamanian, Puerto Rican, Nepalese, and Vietnamese. The majority of

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the participants were women; specifically, the study included seven women and five men. The participants’ ages ranged from 19–26 years, and their majors consisted of Education, Electrical and Computer Engineering, Business Administration, Nursing, Sociology, Family and Consumer Science, and Political Science. Eleven students reported that they were first-generation college students. Six lived in urban cities, four were from suburban cities, and two were from rural environments. Information about the participants is provided in Table 1.

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 $20 gift certificate for their participation. Prior to beginning these interviews, participants signed a consent form and completed a brief demographic form. The completion of the consent form was necessary to allow the participants to engage in the study, and the demographic form enabled the researchers to collect basic demographic information.

During the interviews, participants were asked about their reasons for attending ECU, their perception of the campus climate, and factors critical to their retention and persistence. Although a standard interview protocol was used to conduct the interviews, discussions often became conversational, which allowed the researchers and participants to mutually share experiences relevant to the topic of discussion, encouraging deeper reflection among participants. Examples of questions included: (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 an Asian American or Latino/a at this institution?” and (e) “How have you been able to deal with or overcome that challenge?” Additional questions from the interview protocol are included in the appendix. Observations regarding the ways in which participants responded to questions and their willingness to engage in the interview were recorded throughout the process of data collection.

According to Creswell (2009), recording descriptive and analytic field notes are a vital part of data collection and analysis. Specifically, notes were made about observations of participants’ body language, ease of answering the questions, and willingness to provide depth to their responses. We also conducted follow-up phone interviews with participants. Conducting follow-up interviews is a standard procedure in qualitative research and is often done to clarify participants’ responses or present them with new questions that may have emerged from data analyses (Creswell, 2009). Specifically, we conducted separate phone interviews, which ranged from 15 to 25 minutes, with four participants. Phone interviews were conducted in lieu of face-to-face interviews because the researchers and the participants had difficulty scheduling a subsequent interview when the researchers returned to ECU to conduct interviews with additional students. Follow-up interviews were completed during the data collection phase of the study after consulting field notes and listening to participants’ audiotapes. These interviews did not contain any new questions; however, they were conducted to have participants clarify responses or to provide an example of their experience in order to enhance the rich descriptive nature of the data.

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,
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2006). This research was conducted by one Black male and one Filipina American, both of whom were affiliated with a PWI when data were collected. Our scholarly interests are similar in that they involve assessing campus climate across institutional types, investigating factors that promote the success for students of color, and examining racial/ethnic disparities in college student outcomes. As researchers, we are passionate about HBCUs and frequently advocate for their continued relevancy to society and the higher education community.

We were motivated to explore the experiences of Asian Americans and Latino/as at HBCUs because research had shown that more students from these populations were beginning to attend HBCUs. Despite this, no published empirical research existed on their campus experiences. As such, we wanted to provide a voice for these students that would help HBCU administrators better understand the experiences of Asian American and Latino/a students so they could more effectively recruit and retain these populations.

Collectively, we believe our identities and experiences in higher education, particularly as racial minorities who attended, were affiliated with, and/or conducted research on HBCUs, created a unique lens and position to understand the experiences of Asian American and Latino/a students in a familiar context. Although our experiences and research may have helped us to better understand the contextual environment of HBCUs and the experiences of students at these institutions, they may have biased how we structured the questions and our interpretation of the data. Nevertheless, we allowed the findings to emerge independent of our biases. Member checking and peer debriefers also helped to make certain that the findings were accurately reflective of the participants’ voices.

As researchers investigating the experiences of underrepresented minorities, we believe an increased level of trust and comfort was established immediately with participants. Another factor we believe facilitated the establishment of trust was our self-disclosure during the interviews. Specifically, we were able to relate to participants by sharing our experiences of being students at diverse institutional types (e.g., PWIs and HBCUs). We believe such disclosure motivated participants to provide further depth regarding their experiences on campus. Research has shown that members of marginalized groups, to some extent, have an insider advantage of soliciting more detailed, candid responses (Baca Zinn, 1979).

Data Analyses

We engaged in the constant comparison of data, including reviewing memos, observations, and interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns (Jones et al., 2006; 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). We read through the research notes and made reflective remarks in the margins to help form initial concepts. 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 initial concepts and categories related to each phenomenon. The line-by-line coding allowed for themes to emerge from the data and be aggregated into response patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We then performed axial coding procedures, which involves reconnecting the data after open coding, to further develop themes and categories (Jones
et al., 2006). Selective coding was then used to understand the relationships among the various themes and categories (Jones et al., 2006). Memo writing allowed us to not only refine the categories but also to understand the relationships among them.

Throughout this process we sought data saturation, which is achieved when no new and relevant insights emerge from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In discussing the findings, we present excerpts from the participants’ responses verbatim to preserve the essence of the participants’ voices. We use pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of each participant.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

To ensure the data’s trustworthiness, we also conducted member checks by returning the transcribed interviews to all participants following the interviews so they could review transcriptions for clarity (Jones et al., 2006). Specifically, participants were invited to add, delete, or otherwise comment on the transcriptions. We used their feedback to enhance the integrity and preserve the authenticity of the participants’ voices (Jones et al., 2006). Finally, we used feedback from five peer debriefers, who were well versed in in-depth interview methods and active HBCUs 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).

Limitations

There are several limitations in this study. This study was conducted at one HBCU with 12 participants. Nevertheless, we provided thick description of the institutional context to allow readers to assess the transferability of findings to similar contexts. Moreover, interviews may not be an effective way to collect reliable information when the questions pertain to matters the participants perceive as personally sensitive; thus, a degree of caution should be exercised when interpreting these findings.

Another limitation is that the initial intent of this study was to investigate the college choice progress, perceptions of campus climate, and factors critical to the success of Latino/a and Asian American students at HBCUs, As noted, one of the themes that emerged was the participants’ perceptions and interactions with faculty at an HBCU. However, had the original intent of this study been to provide an in-depth examination of the participants’ interactions with faculty, we could have possibly collected more nuanced data on how the participants interacted and perceived faculty at ECU. In addition, although ECU had a racially and ethnically diverse student body and was burgeoning, it is still quite small. Perhaps if we conducted a study at an HBCU with a more robust racially and ethnically diverse student body, this study might have yielded different findings. Finally, the accuracy of the findings is contingent upon how well we analyzed the data, although this is true for all research studies.

FINDINGS

In this section, we summarize the two themes that emerged from the interviews. The first theme centers on the positive interactions and support the participants experienced with faculty at ECU. The second theme focuses on some of participants’ classroom perceptions of faculty. Specifically for this theme, some participants perceived faculty as lacking knowledge about non-Black cultures and being culturally exclusive in their teaching. In the following section, we delineate both themes and present quotes from participants to preserve the essential aspects
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of their experiences.

“Support Never Waivers”: Supportive Faculty at an HBCU

There was consensus among participants that faculty at ECU were supportive and student centered. Participants explained that faculty went above and beyond their professional duties to help students and that they cared deeply about student success. This sentiment, for example, was echoed by Omar, a Puerto Rican student. He explained that most faculty at ECU were helpful and understanding and wanted to see students achieve success. He underscored that most of the faculty at ECU cared more about students than their actual jobs:

I love the faculty at [ECU]. I enjoyed them; they’re very student oriented, very helpful, very understanding. I would say at least 90% of the faculty are that way. It’s the student first; the student is the reason they come to work. So the faculty is great here; they want to help, they want to see change. They care more about the students than their actual job.

Omar provided a compelling story that illustrated the commitment that faculty displayed to students, which extended beyond the classroom. He noted that, when one student was having car troubles, a faculty member helped the student. According to Omar, this faculty member also helped students who needed diapers and a babysitter. He explained:

I’m part of the student government association this year, so I have met a lot of faculty this year. And we had to attend a retirement reception for [Dr. Smith]. And like during his retirement banquet they were talking about the things he did for students. There were times he went to help one of his students with a jump. If students needed diapers or a babysitter, he would help them. So it’s like seeing that the faculty are willing
to take so much time from their personal lives to help us is really like motivating and inspiring to actually do what we need to do cause we’re their future as well. Omar’s narrative suggests that faculty at ECU build rapport with their students and try to be critical agents of support, not just with academic issues, but also with personal circumstances. Indeed faculty of this nature are strong advocates of student success. Jack, a Bengali student who transferred to ECU from a community college, supported Omar’s perspective about supportive faculty at ECU. In particular, Jack explained that one of his professors gave an assignment that he failed to fully complete. Instead of deducting points, she spoke with him to gain a better understanding of what caused him not to complete the assignment in its entirety. As a result of listening to him, the professor encouraged Jack to allow her to look over future assignments before he officially submitted them. Jack explained:

Well, if I made a mistake or something, they would tell me. Like, one time I did a report and I was supposed to talk about the whole chapter. I talked about half the chapter. The [professor] was like, “You’re supposed to talk about the whole chapter.” I was like, “Oh, I didn’t really know.” She said, “Okay, but whenever you write something . . . just show me first.

Steward, a Nepalese student who transferred to ECU from a community college, explained the openness and willingness that his computer science professor was willing to provide. He felt his professor, who is Nigerian, was very patient in re-explaining a computer concept that was difficult for him to understand. Specifically, Steward noted that his professor dedicated extensive time after class to make sure that he thoroughly understood the concepts. He shared:
So she was really helpful and supportive. . . . There were some [computer] concepts that we had to learn and I was having trouble learning [them]. The professor was always willing to help . . . and she would always go beyond her office hours to work with me. She wanted me to learn the information . . . not for a grade, but because she wanted me to be successful in life.

Marc, a Puerto Rican student, provided additional context about the student-centered nature of faculty at ECU. Specifically, he noted that he has had professors of different racial backgrounds, and when he went to their office hours, they were interested in talking with him, not just about academics, but about life. Marc reflected:

I've had Asian professors, Chinese professors, Japanese professors, African professors, Black professors, Caucasian professors, one lady was Hawaiian. It's been diverse; you learn different things. . . . So it's like when I go to their office hours, it's just not so they can explain the homework; we talk, we talk about life. We talk about their kids.

The fact that Marc's professors were inclined to share aspects of their personal lives with him indicates their interest in students and that they wanted to establish meaningful rapport with them. Marc explained that, regardless of race, his professors took a personal interest in him that extended beyond the classroom. His statement may signify that faculty members who elect to work at HBCUs do so because they want to support students in a way that supersedes academics.

Similar to the other participants, Laura, a Chinese American who transferred to ECU from a community college, provided further evidence of the supportive faculty at ECU. Laura shared that one faculty member, a Black male, not only helped schedule her classes in her major, but also he encouraged her to continue her education beyond the baccalaureate level. He also was helpful by writing letters of recommendations for scholarship opportunities. She broached,

There is a professor at [ECU] who helps me not only with just the classes I need in the education department but encourages me to consider my masters and my doctorate later on. He has talked to me about all the paths that I should take after getting my bachelor's [degree] in Education. He has been extremely helpful. He wrote me a lot of recommendations, too, for scholarships.

She continued,

He had this night class. I actually do not like night classes, but he had this night class. And I was just motivated to go to class all the time, even though I was sleepy at night. He inspired me to rise above and just do more than study the textbook because I'm gonna need to know [the information] later.

Maria, a Dominican student, explained that she felt many of her professors go out of their way to be accommodating. She shared that, on some occasions when she is not able to afford a book for class, her professors let her borrow their own copy. She illuminated that “they’re very helpful as far as, like, I can’t afford the book, and you know I’ve had professors loan me their copy.”

Overall, the participants indicated that they have had positive encounters with faculty at ECU. Participants noted that faculty have been supportive, student centered, and understanding. Indeed, participants agreed that some faculty members have gone above and beyond their professional responsibilities to be supportive of students in and outside of the classroom.

**Participants Reflections of Faculty in the Classroom Context**

Although participants explained that faculty
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were supportive and student centered, some felt that faculty were not well informed about other racial and ethnic groups and were culturally exclusive in their teaching. These participants also delineated that faculty focused too much on the Black experience. A consensus among participants was that faculty at ECU need to learn how to be more inclusive in their teaching. For example, Rachelle, a Panamanian student who was recruited to ECU from California to play on the softball team, explained that when she was enrolled in a sociology course on religion, the professor was referencing a particular section of the Bible. Apparently, Rachelle was unfamiliar with this section because she was not an avid reader of the Bible and her religious background differed from her Black counterparts. Nevertheless, the professor assumed that everyone in the class had some familiarity with the section of the Bible. Rachelle explained:

I’m taking a religious class [at ECU] . . . like sociology religion. And I am Catholic, well nonpracticing and, you know so, most around here are Christian. And so [the professor] will be pointing things out from the Bible and stuff. You know she goes, “Of course ya’ll know that?” And it’s just like, “No.” You know it’s just like, I’m like the one person that needs the one explanation in groups and stuff. So you know.

Rachelle’s example is noteworthy, however one could argue that both parties—the professor and Rachelle—shared a responsibility in this example. Perhaps the professor should not have assumed that all students had the same grasp of the information and provided further context. Indeed, although Rachelle should have spoken up, she explained that she did not because of the professor’s assumption that everyone had some familiarity with the information. Therefore, she felt that if she broached her concern publicly, she would have faced embarrassment from her classmates. Rachelle shared that she received clarification about the Biblical section during the professor’s office hours. After speaking to her professor one on one, Rachelle shared that she felt she understood her professor better and felt more comfortable with her.

Similar to Rachelle’s experience, Michelle, a Mexican American student, explained that faculty at ECU need to learn to teach in unbiased ways and speak to a broader audience. To support this, she shared an experience that occurred in one of her history classes. Specifically, she indicated that the professor was explaining to the class how the term “Chicano” was interchangeable with “Mexican.” Michelle disagreed with this assertion and explained that Chicano is the appropriate term to use for Mexican Americans who are proud and stand for something. She shared:

I remember being in class, and the professor . . . was giving an example of something and she was talking about Chicanos and she mentioned, “Oh Chicanos, it’s the word for Mexican, Mexican Americans.” And I’m like [in my head], it’s not the word for Mexican Americans. It’s the label that Mexican Americans who are proud and who stand for something. It’s not the whole Mexican Americans. So like, I’m just like, [faculty] they need to be better grounded about things.

Along similar lines, Rachelle described an incident in which her political science professor talked about immigrants in a negative light, making it appear that all immigrants are illegal. Rachelle thoughtfully shared that teachers should be more cognizant of what they say because it makes an impression on how students learn and how they form their opinions. She shared:

Teachers fail to realize that when they make an opinion, they only speak to one
audience. And what they fail to realize I guess when they do speak in those ways is that we’re in college and a lot of students don’t have filters when they learn. They take all the opinions at heart and that becomes their own opinion. . . . Teachers need to speak, even if it is predominantly Black, they need to speak to a broad audience.

Kelly, a Malaysian student who reported being recruited to ECU to play on the softball team, shared similar sentiments to her peers about her experience in the classroom with faculty. She shared an experience she had in her English class, where the topic of discussion was history and race. “We were playing the ‘blame game,’” she described. Kelly continued that instead of encouraging students to think impartially, faculty tend to be supporters of anger when it pertains to issues of social injustice among Black students. She expressed, “Like I said before . . . instead of being mediators of situations, they’re supportive of anger.” She made this comment when discussing Troy Davis, a Black man executed in 2011 for allegedly killing a White police officer. From Kelly’s perspective, aside from providing students a venue to vent their frustrations, faculty should have served as a facilitator rather than as an active participant, which can fester students’ anger. She stated, “Instead of the teacher being a referee, it was like the teacher was participating in it, sometimes making students angrier.” Nevertheless, Kelly shared that she feels like “it’s gotten a lot better though. . . . I don’t know if it is my mentality that has changed that. . . . I’m not so offended easily or I’m more immune to it.”

Other participants’ expressed views tantamount to the others about their experiences with faculty inside the classroom. For example, Steward stated that the curriculum is too focused on the Black experience and that if one happens to not have that background, one has to put more effort into learning the material. He shared the following:

Classes focus on what happened to the Black [people]. . . . For example, English, humanities, [and] American History—all the courses that we take here—are much more based on the Blacks. So it’s like we really have to study, and if we don’t have a [Black] background, it’s going to be really, really hard.

Laura, a Music/Education major, echoed Steward’s sentiment about how some of her professors at ECU seemed too focused on issues of the Black experience. Interestingly, she explained that the faculty who teach her music courses are very diverse racially and ethnically and are inclusive in their teaching. However, faculty, who teach her education courses are primarily Black, and she felt they were closed minded to other cultures in the classroom. Specifically, Laura shared:

Some of the professors in the music department, they’re very diverse. We have Asians, Caucasians, and [Blacks] teaching those classes. And I feel that they’re more open minded to different cultures and races. Yeah, and sometimes in my education class I feel that some of our professors, they’re a bit closed-minded to other cultures in the classroom. . . . Sometimes I feel that they’re biased.

Although Marc expressed a perspective similar to the other participants about faculty being exclusive in the classroom, he also explained that some faculty members displayed favoritism toward students who shared their racial and ethnic background in the classroom. Specifically he indicated, “There’re some students from the Middle East that Middle Eastern teachers cling onto them more, they’ll talk to them more directly in class, or they’ll ask them the question before they’ll ask anyone else.”

Despite participants’ perception of faculty
as supportive, some participants expressed some concern with faculty that centered on their lack of inclusivity in the classroom. In particular, participants explained that faculty placed too much emphasis on the Black experience and appeared to have limited knowledge about other racial and ethnic groups.

**DISCUSSION**

Many of the Asian American and Latino/a participants indicated that faculty at ECU were supportive and nurturing and went beyond their professional roles to champion student success in and outside of the classroom. Researchers have argued that students generally have close, supportive relationships with faculty at HBCUs (Allen, 1992; Berger & Milem, 2000; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Gasman, 2008a; Hirt et al., 2008; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Berger and Milem (2000) explained that faculty at HBCUs establish personal connections with students and teach behaviors and skills critical for success. Indeed, rather than impeding success, the relationships that students have with faculty at HBCUs help to facilitate academic success (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). According to Davis (2006), it takes the entire institutional community to ensure that students have a positive college experience and graduate with a core set of competencies. At HBCUs, the administration, faculty, staff, and alumni act as an extended family and become personally invested in students’ success in and outside of the classroom. Given the actions of the faculty in this current study, this study is consistent with literature (e.g., Closson & Henry, 2008; Hall & Closson, 2005; Strayhorn, 2010) that suggest that faculty at HBCUs are open to establishing nurturing, supporting, and mentoring relationships with both Black and non-Black students.

The concept of othermothering has been used to describe the relationships that students have with administrators (e.g., Hirt et al., 2008) and faculty at HBCUs (Hirt et al., 2008; McGaskey, 2012). According to Hirt et al. (2008), there are three tenets of othermothering: (a) the ethic of care, (b) encouraging cultural advancement, and (c) displaying qualities associated with an institutional guardian. The ethic of care is premised on forming meaningful relationships with students, which facilitate their academic and social integration. Relationships that encourage development among students, instill a sense of cultural pride, and promote racial uplift are ones that engender cultural advancement. Further, relationships that embody aspects of institutional guardianship are ones that act as an extended family, creating strong bonds and a nurturing environment that facilitate retention.

Some faculty in this current study embodied two of these characteristics—ethic of care and institutional guardianship (Hirt et al., 2008). For example, some participants discussed how faculty at ECU illustrated a deep ethic of care and concern for their well-being and academic success. Similarly, some faculty worked to foster meaningful relationships with students outside of the classroom. In a study of student-centered faculty at a PWI, Guiffrida (2005) explained that faculty who exemplify othermothering go above and beyond their prescribed roles to support the psychosocial and emotional development of students. Some behaviors of faculty in this current study are congruent with this characterization.

Aside from the participants’ positive perceptions and interactions with faculty at ECU, some participants noted that some faculty at this university lacked knowledge about non-Black cultures and were culturally exclusive in their teaching, which, to some extent, created an uncomfortable experience in the classroom. Indeed, according to Gasman...
(2008b) and Gasman et al. (2010), classes at HBCUs are taught with an Afrocentric perspective given that the focus of HBCUs is dedicated to the racial uplifting of Blacks. Furthermore, Guy-Sheftall (1997), the Anna Julia Cooper Professor of Women's Studies at Spelman College, a private, liberal arts HBCU for women, echoed Gasman’s supposition about the classes at HBCUs focusing heavily on issues and experiences inextricable to Blacks. In her article, *Teaching Diversity at a Historically Black College*, although acknowledging that the curriculum of HBCUs excluded or treated inadequately the histories and cultures of various groups, including Asian Americans and Latino/as, Guy-Sheftall explained that there needs to be more of a concerted effort to infuse more issues of diversity into the curriculum of HBCUs, especially as it relates to gender and sexuality. It is important to point out that, despite the Afrocentric nature of the curriculum of HBCUs, research has shown that the racial homogeneity of the curriculum as well as the environment of HBCUs has not hindered Black students’ openness to racial and cultural diversity (Flowers & Pascarella, 1999).

Interestingly, although there were major differences between the focus of this current study compared to Peterson and Hamrick's (2009) qualitative study of seven White male students attending an HBCU, there was a common theme of professors’ pedagogical strategies and their manifestation of an uncomfortable climate in the classroom for some participants. For example, some participants in this current study discussed how a professor’s lack of cultural inclusivity in his or her teaching engendered an uncomfortable classroom environment. Similarly, some of the participants in Peterson and Hamrick’s study provided examples of hypervisibility in the classroom. Indeed, Peterson and Hamrick confessed that, although overall the participants reported a comfortable classroom experience, some participants shared that because of the hypervisibility and expectations that they speak for the majority perspective they were reticent to share their viewpoint during certain discussions. Given these instances, more research is needed to gain a better understanding of non-Black students’ experiences with faculty in the classroom at HBCUs.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

The findings of this study have several important implications for research and practice. First, the study initially focused on examining the college choice and success factors of Asian Americans and Latinos/as at an HBCU and not necessarily on the participants’ experiences with faculty. Therefore, future studies might include examining specifically the experiences and perceptions of Asian Americans and Latinos/as at HBCUs and their interactions with faculty. Additionally, given that this study involved a sample of 12 participants at one HBCU, a larger number of participants from more than one HBCU may yield broader results and provide greater context to Asian American and Latino/a experiences at HBCUs. Furthermore, various methodological approaches will also expand knowledge in this area. Pursuing both qualitative and quantitative studies that examine the interaction of HBCU faculty with varied racial groups (e.g., Asian Americans, Latinos/as, and Native Americans) will also benefit from future research.

It is important to note that findings from this current study provide ideas for consideration to improve upon the important work that HBCU faculty and administrators are already doing at their respective campuses. First, addressing interactions between faculty and students is critical. The findings indicated many positive interactions with faculty,
especially with those who went above and beyond their duties. Focusing on the positive outcomes of these interactions with Asian Americans and Latinos/as is crucial, as these are important starting points to consider for best practices. Discussion about best practices among faculty can be brought to the forefront at faculty forums and orientations. For example, faculty orientation might encompass discussions about the changing demographics of HBCUs. The outcomes of these discussions might also encourage faculty to reconsider their pedagogical practices and to become more cognizant about classroom dynamics. Finding a meaningful way to balance these two aspects are essential because some stakeholders of HBCUs feel that if the critical aspects of racial uplift were drastically altered, it would negatively impact the culture of these institutions, which has served as a vital linchpin to student success (Brown, 2002).

Similarly some participants felt that some of their professors were not open to incorporating other cultures and ethnicities in their course topics. Perceptions and interactions such as these indicate that there is room for improvement in faculty interactions with their students. Discussions regarding how professors can improve their interactions with their students can also take place during faculty orientation or during ongoing faculty forums throughout the year. Further, HBCUs may also think about implementing “brown bag” lunches to serve as an additional outlet for faculty to engage in these vital discussions.

In addition, HBCUs might also hold pedagogical workshops on their campuses to help provide faculty with different ways or ideas regarding how they might incorporate other cultures and ethnicities into their pedagogical activities. Given HBCUs’ lack of financial resources, which in many cases has worsened because of the economic downturn, perhaps they should consider partnering with important organizations, such as the United Negro College Fund, Thurgood Marshall College Fund, National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, and the White Initiative on HBCUs, to finance webinars that help to further discussions on this critical topic.

Although this paper focused on faculty, it is important to note that student affairs offices can play a role in helping to improve upon faculty–student interaction. Student affairs can be involved in helping to create opportunities for a student to learn to be a successful student, part of which involves effective communication and interaction with faculty. Similar to the case with faculty, these discussions can take place during student orientation and ongoing student forums throughout the year. Academic advisors as well as counselors can also be aware that these challenging interactions between faculty and students may take place. Therefore, they can provide ways to encourage students to feel more comfortable interacting with their professors.

Finally, the current study reinforces the important and valuable role that HBCUs play in higher education. HBCUs are in a unique position to address the issue of racial interactions—in this case, interaction with faculty and its growing and changing student demographics. At the institutional level, stakeholders can continue to address how the changing student demographics will have an impact on, for example, classrooms and HBCU campuses as a whole. Addressing these concerns can eventually serve as a positive conduit for reinforcing the value that HBCUs hold about the importance of inclusiveness on their campuses.
CONCLUSION

HBCUs have always welcomed diverse populations. In fact, the faculty at HBCUs are more diverse than most PWIs. Though the student bodies of the majority of HBCUs remain predominantly Black, as illustrated by this paper, the racial and ethnic diversity of the student bodies of HBCUs have gradually increased over the years. Although some research has provided a perspective on how White students experience the milieu of HBCUs, until now research that provided context on how populations such as Asian Americans and Latinos/as experienced the campuses of HBCUs was nonexistent. With this in mind, this study has ventured into uncharted territory and has helped to shed some light on Asian American and Latino/a students’ interactions and perceptions of faculty at HBCUs.

Indeed, this paper is important because, over the years, the population that once relied on HBCUs to gain access to postsecondary education has found other venues to do so. Consequently, there has been an ebb in the number of Black students enrolling in HBCUs. This, along with the implications for court cases [e.g., Adams v. Richardson (1972) and United States v. Fordice (1992)], requires HBCUs to be more intentional about recruiting and retaining a racially and ethnically diverse student population. This paper has provided salient recommendations that can be enormously helpful to HBCUs as they work to achieve this goal.

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APPENDIX: Interview Protocol

Background Information

• How would you describe yourself?
• How would you describe your racial, ethnic, or cultural group background?

HBCU specific

• What did you know about HBCUs before applying to college?
• How did you learn about HBCUs? What messages were given to you?
• What influenced you to apply to an HBCU?
• What challenges have you experience or currently experiencing since entering college?
• Would you recommend this HBCU to your friends? Please explain.
• What are your responsibilities at home?

How have these responsibilities affected your ability to focus on school?

Campus Environment

Peers

• How would you describe the racial/ethnic makeup of your friends?
• How are your relationships with Black peers?
• Describe your living situation? Residence halls? Off campus?

Faculty / Staff / Administrators

• How would you describe your relationships with faculty?
• Do you feel a strong sense of support from faculty, staff and administrators? Please explain.

Appendix continues
Asian American and Latino/a Students

- Do you feel Black students are treated better by faculty than non-Black students? Please explain.

Involvement
- Describe your involvement in student organizations/activities. How have they helped/not helped with your success here?

Pressures/Perceptions of Being Asian American/Latino/a at an HBCU
- How do believe others perceive you as an Asian American/Latino/a student at ECU?
- Given the lack of racial/ethnic diversity at ECU, do you see this as an advantage or disadvantage for you after you graduate?
- What are the pressures you have experienced about attending ECU (e.g., from home, school, family, friends, etc.)?
- What have your experiences been like as an Asian American/Latino/a student at ECU?
- What can HBCUs do to better recruit more Asian American/Latino/a students?
- What can HBCUs do to better support your success?
- What messages have you received about financing college?
- What were your initial impressions ECU?
- What concerns/perceptions did you have before coming here?
- How have they changed or not changed once arriving here?
- How have your peers helped with your concerns/perceptions about ECU?
- Are there other people who have helped you?
- Is there anything else that you would like to tell me that we haven’t talked about?

REFERENCES


