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Understanding the role of ethnic student organizations in facilitating cultural adjustment and membership among African American and Asian American college students

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The Role of Ethnic Student Organizations in Fostering African American and Asian American Students' Cultural Adjustment and Membership at Predominantly White Institutions

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Over half of all racial/ethnic minority students matriculating at 4-year colleges fail to graduate within 6 years. One explanation for those low graduation rates is minority students' inability to find membership in the cultures and subcultures of their respective campuses. This study was focused on understanding the role of ethnic student organizations in fostering minority students' adjustment to and membership in the cultures of a predominantly White institution. Data analyzed from individual interviews conducted with 12 African American and 12 Asian American students indicate that ethnic student organizations constituted critical venues of cultural familiarity, vehicles for cultural expression and advocacy, and sources of cultural validation for participants. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

Approximately half of all students who matriculate at a four-year college or university will fail to complete a bachelor's degree within 6 years (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002). These low rates of baccalaureate degree attainment are not trivial for individual students or society (Baum & Payea, 2005; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003; Tinto, 1993). Those who complete a bachelor's degree, for example, earn approximately 62% more annually than their high school graduate counterparts (Baum & Payea). Of course, as Davies (2001) articulated, the benefits of educational attainment extend far beyond individual economic gains:

Higher education has an enormous responsibility for our society's well-being. . . . Education determines not only earning capacity but also the very quality of human life. Even longevity is correlated with educational achievement. In the broad sense of how well we live our lives—both individually and collectively—higher education is a public health issue. (p. B16)

Moreover, vast disparities in degree attainment exist among different racial/ethnic subpopulations. Whereas 67% of White students who begin college at a four-year institution will earn a baccalaureate degree within 6 years, that figure is approximately 46% and 47% for their Black and Latina/o counterparts, respectively (Berkner et al., 2002). Moreover, although Asian American students, in the aggregate, exhibit relatively high rates of success in college, scholars have noted that the aggregation of data on this population masks drastic differences among Asian American subpopulations. Specifically, disparities in attainment persist among those groups, with particular ethnic subgroups receiving postsecondary degrees at rates far lower than their White peers and the national population (Hune, 2002; U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Recent assessments of the condition of higher education suggest that the continuation of these racial disparities may pose devastating consequences for American society (Kelly,

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2005). Note that in this article the terms Black and African American are both used, reflecting the language used by participants in this study and by authors of related studies .

A report released by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems highlighted the imminent economic crisis resulting from racial disparities in educational attainment (Kelly, 2005). The report asserted that, if current trends continue, the projected increases in diversity in the American population and persisting racial disparities in rates of educational attainment will lead to future declines in the average annual individual income, thereby threatening the nation's tax base and economic well-being. Given the potential devastating economic and social ramifications of persisting racial inequities, it is ever more critical for policymakers and practitioners to understand how institutional factors shape racial/ethnic minority student persistence and degree completion so they can effectively create conditions to foster success among these students. Evidence suggests that low graduation rates among minority students could be due, at least in part, to their inability to find membership in the cultures and subcultures of predominantly White campuses (Kuh & Love, 2000; Tinto, 1993). This study, therefore, is aimed at increasing existing levels of knowledge about the role that campus subcultures, specifically ethnic student organizations, can play in minority students' adjustment to and membership in the cultures of predominantly White institutions (PWIs).

Review of Literature

Existing literature suggests that campus environments exert an important influence on college students' experiences and outcomes (Cabrera, Nora, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Hagedorn, 1999; Eimers & Pike, 1997; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Museus, 2007, 2008, in press;

Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, in press; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). There is evidence, for example, that the cultures of PWIs can be problematic for undergraduates of color because they can convey messages of unimportance, devaluation, and exclusion to those students (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Gonzalez, 2003). For minority students who experience barriers as a result of the cultures of PWIs, institutional subcultures can be a critical factor in their ability to find membership on their campuses (Kuh & Love, 2000).

A small and growing body of research indicates that at least one type of subculture—ethnic student organizations—can play an important role in positively shaping the experiences and outcomes of racial/ethnic minority students (Gonzalez, 2003; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Kuh & Love, 2000; Murgíua, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001). Despite evidence of the salience of ethnic student organizations in the experiences of college students of color, however, much remains to be learned about the role those organizations play in shaping minority students' adjustment and membership at PWIs. Accordingly, the current study was focused on understanding how ethnic student organizations influence the cultural adjustment and membership of racial/ethnic minority students at a PWI.

The Role of Campus Cultures in Minority Students' Experiences

Culture is central to the study of educational organizations and affects, in some way, every aspect of the undergraduate experience (Kuh, 2001/2002). Culture is both something that an educational institution *has*, such as core values and rich history, and something that an institution *does* that affects both institutional and individual outcomes. Although campus culture has been given considerable attention

in the higher education literature (Gonzalez, 2003; Kuh, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Strange & Banning, 2001; Tierney, 1992, 1999; Whitt, 1996), understanding of the ways in which it shapes college student outcomes, such as adjustment and persistence, remains amorphous (Kuh, 2001/2002; Museus, 2007).

Several researchers have attempted to unravel the complex nature of organizational culture (e.g., Kuh & Hall, 1993; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Schein, 2005; Schoenberg, 1992; Whitt, 1996). Kuh and Whitt, for example, reviewed existing literature focused on culture and developed a comprehensive definition of *campus culture*:

> persistent patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that shape the behavior of individuals and groups in a college or university and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off the campus. (pp. 12-13)

This definition highlights the complexity of campus culture and its utility as a framework for understanding students' experiences in college.

There is evidence that the dominant campus cultures of PWIs can pose challenges for minority students (Gonzalez, 2003; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000; Museus, 2007). Lewis et al., for example, interviewed 75 African American, Asian American, Latina/o, and Native American students at a PWI and concluded that those students were marginalized and faced contradictory pressures to represent their race and assimilate to the majority culture of their campus. Participants in Lewis et al.'s study also reported feeling excluded from campus social networks to which their White peers had access.

Moreover, evidence indicates that the

cultures of PWIs may present similar challenges for Asian American and Black students. For example, in addition to the aforementioned barriers, research suggests that pervasive assumptions about the academic abilities of students from these two groups may cause pressures that hinder those students' engagement in learning processes at PWIs (Museus, 2007, in press). Specifically, pressures for Asian American students to conform to assumptions that they are academically superior, and pressures for Black students to disprove stereotypes that they are academically inferior can constitute serious barriers to those students' engagement both in and out of the classrooms at PWIs. Moreover, there is overwhelming evidence that these two groups report the most negative assessments of the environments at PWIs (Cress & Ikeda, 2003; Feagin et al., 1995; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Kotori & Malaney, 2003). It is not surprising, then, that data from the National Survey of Student Engagement indicate that African American and Asian American students are the least satisfied with their overall college experience when compared to other racial groups (Kuh, 2005).

Although institutions can perpetuate a dominant culture that spans the wide range of environments that exist across an entire college campus, smaller subcultures within that broader dominant culture create and perpetuate their own cultural products as well, albeit on a smaller scale. Bolton and Kammeyer (1972) defined such a *subculture* with the following description:

> normative-value system held by some group or persons who are in persisting interaction, who transmit the norms and values to newcomers by some communicated process, and who exercise some sort of social control to ensure conformity to the norms . . . the normative-value system of such a group must differ from

the normative-value system of the larger, the parent, or the dominant society. (pp. 381-382)

Existing evidence suggests that campus subcultures are important in understanding the experiences of college students. Attinasi (1989), for instance, found that Hispanic students at a large university coped with the overwhelming size of their campus by scaling the university down into smaller and more manageable environments. Moreover, institutional subcultures can be created and perpetuated by a variety of different groups on college campuses, such as students of similar racial and ethnic backgrounds, students who share an academic major, students of a specific religion, or members of a formal student organization. These subcultures constitute particularly salient aspects of the campus environment for groups that are historically marginalized at PWIs (Murguía et al., 1991).

The Role of Ethnic Student Organizations

Although research is clear and consistent in confirming the importance of social integration into the cultures of campus on White students' educational outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), studies regarding whether such social integration into campus cultures is a significant predictor of racial/ethnic minority student persistence are mixed (Cabrera et al., 1999; Fox, 1986; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). These conflicted findings could be due, at least in part, to the traditional operationalization of the social integration construct. Specific types of social involvement common among racial/ethnic minority students (e.g., activism, ethnic dance, and arts) have typically been excluded in measurements of social integration (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). This is an important point because it has been noted that minority students choose nontraditional settings, such

as ethnic student organizations, as their primary venue for involvement at PWIs (Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001).

In light of the importance of student organizations in racial/ethnic minority college students' experiences, scholars have studied minority student involvement and leadership in those organizations (Cokley, 2001; Flowers, 2004; Fries-Britt, 2000; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper, Byars, & Jelke, 2005; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Inkelas, 2004). This body of literature highlights the reality that ethnic student organizations offer a critical venue for the social involvement of minority students at PWIs (Guiffrida; Harper & Quaye). For example, Guiffrida found that, regardless of mission or type, such organizations worked to facilitate the social involvement of African American students at a PWI. African American students in Guiffrida's investigation also reported that the most important reasons for participating in those organizations were the opportunities that the organizations provided for establishing connections with faculty members, giving back to the African American community, and connecting with African American peers.

Additionally, scholars have provided evidence that racial/ethnic minority students express their cultural and racial identities through their participation in ethnic student organizations (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Inkelas, 2004; Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995; White, 1998). Harper and Quaye, for example, qualitatively examined the role of Black undergraduates' membership in student organizations and found that those organizations provided an important venue for students' identity development and expression. Additionally, using a single institution sample and regression analysis techniques, Inkelas (2004) concluded that participation in ethnic student organizations exhibited a positive impact on students' commitment to their

own racial and ethnic communities. Although the aforementioned literature highlights how organizations provide opportunities for particular types of involvement and development, much remains to be learned about the role that those organizations play in shaping racial/ethnic minority students' adjustment to and sense of membership in the cultures of PWIs.

Cultural Perspectives of Minority Student Adjustment, Membership, and Persistence

Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory of student integration is the most widely cited theoretical perspective of student departure, but has received much criticism from higher education scholars regarding its cultural bias. An underlying assumption of Tinto's (1993) theory is that students who come from cultures incongruent with the culture of their college campus must detach themselves from their cultures of origin (i.e., precollege cultures) and adopt the values, assumptions, and norms of the cultures of immersion (i.e., dominant campus cultures) to succeed. This assumption has been criticized for the burden it places on students to assimilate to the dominant cultures of their campus. Tierney (1999) called requiring students to sever ties with their precollege cultures a form of cultural suicide and advocated an alternative perspective, cultural integrity, which emphasizes programs that foster cultural validation by engaging students' racial and ethnic backgrounds. Tierney's notion of cultural integrity challenges traditional assimilation perspectives of individual cultural adaptation and is based on the belief that colleges can shape their dominant campus cultures to engage the diverse precollege cultures from which racial and ethnic minority students come.

Although existing literature examining the role of various cultural factors in shaping student outcomes is sparse, there is some empirical evidence suggesting both that elements of the campus cultures of PWIs are associated with challenges for minority students and that colleges possess tools to engage the cultural backgrounds of those students (Deyhle, 1995; Gonzalez, 2003; Murguía et al., 1991; Museus, 2007, in press; O'Connor, 1997; Tierney, 1992, 1999). Gonzalez, for example, identified three elements of the campus culture, including the exchange of knowledge, physical structures, and social interactions, that conveyed messages of unimportance, devaluation, and exclusion to the Chicano students at a PWI and identified five sources of cultural support that aided those students in navigating the cultures of their PWI, including Chicano student organizations, cultural symbols, faculty, and literature. Despite evidence of the ubiquity and salience of campus cultures in racial/ethnic minority undergraduates' experiences, knowledge of how those cultures shape the experiences of students of color is limited (Kuh, 2001/2002).

Another perspective that has been offered as an alternative to Tinto's student integration theory is Kuh and Love's (2000) cultural perspective of student departure. Kuh and Love outlined a set of propositions delineating the role that campus cultures play in college student persistence. They postulated that persistence is inversely related to the distance between a student's cultures of origin (i.e., precollege cultures) and cultures of immersion (i.e., campus cultures). They also proposed that students from cultures incongruent with the dominant culture of their campus can either acclimate to that dominant culture or seek membership in one or more subcultures in order to increase their likelihood of success. The current study is designed to shed light on how minority students' membership in subcultures facilitates their adjustment to and membership in the campus cultures of PWIs.

Significance and Purpose of the Study

Two limitations of the existing literature on ethnic student organizations provided a justification for the current study. First, empirical research focused on analyzing the experiences of minority students using a cultural framework (e.g., Gonzalez, 2005; Ibarra, 2001) has focused on Latina/o undergraduates, with little attention given to other racial/ethnic minority groups, such as Asian American and Black students. Although different racial/ethnic minority groups share common struggles and experiences, one cannot automatically assume that students from different racial/ethnic minority backgrounds experience the cultures of PWIs in identical ways. Thus, empirical studies using a cultural lens to examine the experiences of Asian American and Black students are warranted. Second, prior inquiries have contributed a great deal to our knowledge of the impact of ethnic student organizations on students of color; however, studies employing a cultural perspective and focused on understanding the various ways in which ethnic student organizations foster minority students' adjustment to and membership in the cultures of PWIs while maintaining critical ties with their ethnic heritages are virtually nonexistent.

Thus, much remains to be learned about the different ways in which ethnic student organizations facilitate racial/ethnic minority students' adjustment to and membership in the campus cultures of PWIs. Accordingly, the current study was designed to increase understanding of the role of ethnic student organizations in fostering minority student adjustment to and membership in the cultures of a PWI. This inquiry is part of a larger study designed to gain an in-depth understanding of the role that campus cultures play in minority students' experiences at PWIs. One overarching research question provided a foundation for this examination: What role do ethnic student organizations play in the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students at PWIs? Moreover, two additional questions guided the inquiry:

1. How, if at all, do ethnic student organizations facilitate the cultural adjustment of Asian American and Black students?

2. How, if at all, do ethnic student organizations influence African American and Asian American students' sense of membership in the cultures of a PWI?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that guided this examination is a convergence of Kuh and Love's (2000) cultural perspective of student departure and Tierney's (1999) concept of cultural integrity. As previously noted, Kuh and Love's (2000) cultural perspective suggests that greater distance between students' home and campus cultures is associated with greater likelihood of experiencing difficulty finding membership in and persisting through the cultures of their campus. Their perspective implies that, for students who traverse a long cultural distance, immersion in one or more campus subcultures positively influences the likelihood of those students' successful adjustment to, membership in, and persistence in college. Alternatively, Tierney's (1999) concept of cultural integrity provides a rationale for analyzing the ways in which colleges can engage minority students' cultural backgrounds in the college experience. Together, these two perspectives can be used to examine the ways in which campus subcultures, such as ethnic student organizations, can help facilitate minority student adjustment to and find membership in the cultures of PWIs by engaging minority students' cultural backgrounds.

METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

The current inquiry was conducted using a phenomenological design and was aimed at understanding and describing racial/ethnic minority students' experiences navigating the predominantly White cultures of their campus. The phenomenological tradition is an invaluable tool for understanding the lived experiences of individuals and groups (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, phenomenology was employed in this study to generate an understanding of the essence of racial/ethnic minority students' experiences in the context of the campus cultures and subcultures of a predominantly White institution. The subset of data on which this article is based focuses on understanding those students' experiences in the context of one particular type of subculture: the ethnic student organizations to which participants belonged.

Site Selection

A predominantly White rural public research university enrolling over 36,000 under-graduates was selected as the site for this study. It is located in the Mid-Atlantic region and will, therefore, be referred to as Mid-Atlantic University (MAU). Approximately 85% of undergraduates enrolled at MAU are White, and their Asian, Black, and Hispanic counterparts comprise 6%, 4%, and 3% of the undergraduate student population, respectively. Approximately 87% of White students matriculating at MAU complete a baccalaureate degree within 6 years, whereas that figure is 82% for their Asian and 72% for their Black and Latina/o peers.

Because of the ambiguity and complexity inherent in campus cultures, even the actual faculty, staff, and students who belong to a particular institution can have difficulty identifying and understanding the nature and impact that cultural factors have on their experience (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). Thus, in choosing the site for this study, the intention was to purposefully select an institution at which race and culture have relatively recent and salient social significance in hopes that it would increase the likelihood that students have thought about and could sufficiently articulate the role of cultures and subcultures in their experiences. Accordingly, MAU was chosen as an ideal site for the current study because it is predominantly White and had recently been home to several events that sparked racial tension on campus. Racial-tension-inducing incidents occurring during the 2 years preceding this study include a racially themed party, during which White students dressed as Ku Klux Klan members and Black slaves, and death threats issued to Black student leaders.

Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was used to achieve intensity and variation in the participant sample. *Intensity* refers to the selection of information-rich cases, whereas *variation* refers to the identification of themes that cut across diversity in subsamples (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling, therefore, yielded participants who provided both a wealth of insight into the role of ethnic student organizations in their experience and represented a variety of student characteristics and ethnic organizations across the campus. Administrators were asked to refer the researcher to undergraduates who had been at MAU for at least one year, were involved in ethnic organizations, and were knowledgeable about the cultures of the university. The final participant sample consisted of 12 Asian American and 12 Black students. These two groups were chosen because, as previously mentioned, there is a need for research regarding these populations using a cultural perspective and existing evidence indicates that these two groups share

similar difficulties at PWIs and are least satisfied with the college experience (Kuh, 2005; Lewis et al., 2000; Museus, 2007). Thus, the participant sample was limited to these two groups based on the presumption that they might share noticeable similarities in their experiences with predominantly White institutional cultures and ethnic minority subcultures at MAU.

All participants were traditional-age (i.e., 18 to 24) students involved in ethnic organizations, but varied by sex and year at MAU. Involvement was defined as holding a position of leadership or contributing 10 or more hours per week to an ethnic student organization. Thus, all participants included in the sample met one of these two criteria. Female students were overrepresented in the sample, which consisted of 16 women and 8 men. The unequal distribution across the sexes was a function of the fact that women were disproportionately involved at MAU and willing to participate in the study. Finally, participants were widely distributed across the years in which they were in college; there was 1 fifth-year student, and 9 fourth-year, 5 third-year, and 7 second-year students in the sample.

Data Collection

Each student in the sample participated in a single individual face-to-face interview lasting between 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted using a semistructured approach to ensure the collection of data necessary to understand the phenomenon under investigation and to provide flexibility to address unexpected emerging themes (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The protocol for the interviews consisted of a list of concepts and questions central to understanding the impact of institutional culture. One of those focal concepts was participation in ethnic student organizations. Thus, participants were asked about the role that those organizations played in their adjustment to and membership in the cultures of their campus. Specifically, the students were asked:

1. How did you get involved in ethnic student organizations?
2. Why did you get involved in ethnic student organizations instead of more mainstream student organizations?
3. What, if any, role did ethnic student organizations play in helping you bridge the gap between your home culture and MAU's culture?
4. How, if at all, has your involvement in ethnic student organizations helped you connect with faculty and staff?
5. What role did the ethnic organizations play in your adjustment to MAU?

Given the semistructured approach, participants' responses and probing questions guided the remainder of the discussion about the role of ethnic organizations in their experiences at the university.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted throughout the study using several methods that Moustakas (1994) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) prescribed. The NVivo® Qualitative Research Software package was used to organize and code the data. Open coding procedures were used to identify 40 invariant constituents. Additionally, textural-structural descriptions were created to describe the essence of each student's experience, including what phenomenon was experienced by those students as well as how those participants experienced the phenomenon. Finally, the textural-structural descriptions and invariant constituents were used to cluster those constituents into 14 thematic categories. Only the three categories relevant to illuminating participants' experiences in the context of ethnic student organizations are presented in this article.

Trustworthiness and Quality Assurance

Trustworthiness of the findings emerging from this examination was ensured using several methods suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1986). First, triangulation, or the convergence of multiple data sources, was employed using interview transcripts, code reports, textural-structural descriptions, and researcher notes to cross-check and verify emergent themes. Second, member checks were conducted to ensure congruence between researcher inter-pretations and students' perceptions. Speci-fically, 8 students, or 33% of the sample, were sent textural-structural descriptions of their experiences and asked to provide feedback. Third, two peer-debriefers who are knowledge-able about issues relevant to racial/ethnic minority college students engaged with the researcher in ongoing discussions regarding the meanings of the interview data. Finally, discrepant data were sought and examined throughout the study to help identify alterna-tive hypotheses and question theoretical presuppositions.

FINDINGS

Ethnic student organizations served similar functions for Asian American and Black participants at MAU. In fact, the ethnic student organizations in which participants were involved served three main purposes for both groups. Ethnic organizations facilitated the cultural adjustment and membership of minority student participants by serving as sources of cultural familiarity, vehicles for cultural expression and advocacy, and venues for cultural validation. Although these three concepts are not mutually exclusive and are likely to overlap, as most cultural phenomena do, they are fundamentally different. *Cultural familiarity* refers to how the ethnic organizations provide a place for students of color to connect with peers from similar cultural backgrounds, thereby helping foster a venue where those students can feel connected to like-minded peers on campus. *Cultural expression and advocacy* are focused on how the organizations provide a tool for minority students to express their own ethnic identities and advocate for their ethnic communities. Finally, cultural validation refers to how the organizations validate students' cultural backgrounds by providing them with a subculture in which they feel accepted and supported. This section is organized under three overarching themes that illustrate how those ethnic organizations can function as a campus subculture that facilitates minority student adjustment to and membership in the cultures of a PWI.

Cultural Familiarity

The ethnic organizations to which the partici-pants of this study belonged provided those racial/ethnic minority students with sources of cultural familiarity, or scaled-down environ-ments that function as spaces where students can connect with peers who share similar cultural backgrounds and understandings on campus. The concept of cultural familiarity described herein consists of three components. First, the ethnic organizations provided a venue at which students could connect with peers who came from similar cultural backgrounds and with whom they shared common cultural knowledge or common ground. Second, those shared cultural backgrounds or common grounds allowed participants and their peers in the ethnic student organizations to understand each other's experiences and struggles. Third, participants described how that common ground allowed them to connect on a deeper level with their peers in the ethnic student organizations to which they belonged.

Participants described the importance of student organizations providing them with opportunities to connect with peers who

shared similar cultural backgrounds and experiences. One fourth-year Black student, for example, described how African American students at the university with similar cultural backgrounds shared important common ground:

> They already come in and know a lot about each others' neighborhoods. They have a lot in common, like catching the subway, or the school they came from, or their rival schools, and things like that. I think you can talk about stuff like that . . . that's like common ground.

Participants noted that those common cultural backgrounds allowed them and their ethnic minority peers to understand one another's college experiences and struggles. For example, when one fourth-year Chinese student was asked why she joined predominantly Asian American instead of mainstream organizations, she explained how she wanted to use the shared cultural backgrounds and understandings among Asian American students, and that this common ground and understanding was absent in her relationships with her White peers:

> I thought I would take advantage of the fact that there were a lot more Asians now in my environment. You know, people who were like me . . . people who were from China . . . who had experienced a culture like I had with experiences that my Caucasian friends might not have understood.

Associated with those common cultural backgrounds and understandings were participants' feelings that they could connect with their peers in the ethnic student organizations on a deeper level than students in other organizations and environments throughout campus. A third-year Black student explicated this point when she described how those cultural connections allow minority students on campus to identify with each others' struggles:

> We relate to each other. We tell each other about our hardships and how we got over them. It helps us get over them in a sense. And, I guess, they want to pursue the same goals as I do, and so we share the same goals and we're striving for the same things. And, being with people who are also minorities helps create community.

Cultural Expression and Advocacy

The second purpose served by ethnic student organizations is that they constituted important tools that students used to plan and engage in acts of cultural expression and advocacy. The concepts of cultural expression and advocacy are discussed simultaneously because they were intertwined to the extent that it was difficult, if not impossible, to separate them. The cultural expression and advocacy theme consisted of three components. First, students explained how the organizations allowed them to express their cultural identity by educating each other about their own cultural heritages. Second, ethnic student organizations' provided a vehicle for students to advocate for cultural change at the university. Third, these two elements manifested in initiatives designed to allow students to engage in acts of cultural expression by advocating for institutional change at the university.

Minority participants explained the importance of how ethnic student organizations act as vehicles for cultural expression. When speaking about the importance of ethnic organizations in his undergraduate experience, for example, one second-year Black student explained how those organizations provided African American students and their peers with different ethnic identities with tools to express themselves and educate each other to be more knowledgeable about their own and others' ethnic and cultural heritages:

> We just need to come together and educate each other on what has happened

in the past instead of just taking our classes and learning individually. We need to come together and at least get involved with the Black student organizations. Those organizations are big on getting back to our heritage and stuff. This goes for the Latino organization too. We just need to come together. . . . At least enough of us to educate one another would be great.

The participants of the study described how their ethnic student organizations served as tools with which minority students at MAU could advocate for their own racial/ethnic cultures and communities. Participants, for example, explicated how they were empowered by student organizations to express discontent with the campus environments and effect change for the betterment of the racial/ethnic minority student communities of which they were a part. Participants used the organizations to advocate for a variety of changes. Among the most important political issues for the Black student organizations, as one Black student explained, were increasing representation of African American students and increasingly exposing the university to Black culture on campus:

> I think the main purpose is to try to get more Black folks to come to the university. We also try to inform the community a lot—the Black, Latino, and Puerto Rican student associations—they all have programs that try to kind of introduce the community, which is predominantly White, to our cultures.

The Asian American student organizations were also focused on advocating for institutional change, which included fighting for the incorporation of Asian American Studies courses into the university curriculum. One male third-year Cambodian American students explained how this was an important issue:

Last semester, the Asian Caucus was trying to get a course on Asian studies at the university and now we got one. I think they should continue doing that because I think it's a good way for people to know more about Asian culture.

Minority student participants' expression of their ethnic identities, through their participation in ethnic student organizations, was inextricably linked to their advocacy for the betterment of their minority communities. That is, students used their organizations to advocate for cultural change at the university via acts of cultural expression. Perhaps the most common way in which the organizations simultaneously served as a vehicle for cultural expression and advocacy, for example, was by providing students with a method of spreading cultural awareness and understanding on campus through the planning and hosting of various ethnic and service activities and events. One fourth-year Chinese American student, for example, explained how the main focus of her sorority was engaging in community service and promoting awareness of issues relevant to the Asian American communities on campus:

> One of the goals in our sorority is to promote Asian awareness, and I know with other Asian organizational groups that's one of their goals too. I don't think we do a good *enough* job of representing the Asian community, but we do a lot of good work . . .

Another second-year Chinese student described how her Asian cultural organization tries to create awareness and build community by collaborating and integrating with other non-Asian racial/ethnic groups and organizations:

> The organization does promote Asian awareness, because a lot of the places we show up, we are the only minorities there. So, it's like we're trying to integrate with

them, trying to work with them, trying to create a better community.

Cultural Validation

Ethnic student organizations also served as sources of cultural validation by functioning as environments that send signals to minority students indicating that they are accepted and supported at the university. This validation, therefore, consisted of two components. First, ethnic student organizations constituted campus subcultures where students felt automatically accepted by their racial/ethnic minority peers. Second, participants expressed how those organizations and their members provided them with critical sources of support. Some participants actually went as far as referring to their organizations as a family, home base, or home away from home.

Although several participants expressed that they did not always feel like a member of their campus communities and initially suffered from isolation and exclusion at MAU, they asserted that ethnic student organizations provided critical subcultures in which they felt accepted despite their minority status. One Thai student explained how the Asian communities and organizations at the university were very welcoming. In fact, he described members of those Asian subcultures as having "open arms":

> I'm very happy with the Asian community here. I think it's really nice and there are a lot of Asian organizations out there. They invite people with open arms and I think, for a freshman coming to the university, it's definitely going to be a good experience in terms of the Asian community.

The cultural similarities and understandings that members of these ethnic student organizations shared were associated with the comfortable environment those organizations provided for their members. A second-year Korean American student described how, because of the cultural similarities she shared with other members of the ethnic student organization to which she belonged, she felt accepted and validated: "I'm more comfortable with them. These are my brothers and sisters. These are fellow Koreans that I already share a certain bond or a certain relationship with . . . I feel comfortable like just laying things out there."

Associated with the accepting environments provided by ethnic organizations was the critical peer support those organizations provided their members. One third-year Black student, for example, explained how members of his Black student organization provided him with an important source of emotional support:

> They did provide me with emotional support. That was because of the bonding around academics and people being like me. You feel like you can relate more to a person who is like you, and you feel like you can open up to them more.

Thus, although participants spoke of pressures to conform to the predominantly White cultures of their campus, they also expressed how the ethnic student organizations to which they belonged provided them with critical sources of academic, social, and emotional support. When explaining the importance of the support provided by the Asian student organization in which she was a member, for example, one second-year Chinese American student described the organization as her "home base":

> In the organizations, the members are there to support me even if I fail, and they encourage me to go do whatever I want. Yeah, they're like a base—a home base— where I could fall back if I feel really overwhelmed by school or work.

In sum, ethnic student organizations, by providing students with venues of cultural familiarity, vehicles for cultural expression and advocacy, and sources of cultural validation, functioned to facilitate racial/ethnic minority students' adjustment to and membership in the predominantly White campus cultures at MAU.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the current study make a significant contribution to the higher education literature by supporting several propositions about the importance of subcultures in the form of ethnic student organizations and employing a cultural perspective to further clarify the role that those organizations play in the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students at PWIs. First, the findings of this inquiry provide support for earlier assertions about the importance of campus subcultures in facilitating minority student adjustment. Specifically, students' voices in this study illuminate how ethnic student organizations can engage minority students' cultural backgrounds and aid them in maintaining strong ties with their own cultural heritages while facilitating their socialization into the campus cultures of their PWI.

The findings also buttress earlier assertions about the importance of campus subcultures in the minority student adjustment, membership, and persistence process (Kuh & Love, 2000). Kuh and Love proposed that students who come from cultures incongruent with the dominant cultures of their respective campuses must acclimate to those dominant cultures or find membership in one or more subcultures if they are to succeed. These findings reinforce the notion that institutional subcultures can, in fact, be critical in facilitating minority student adjustment and membership. Speci-

fically, the findings support the conclusion that subcultures can be critical for students historically marginalized on a particular campus (Murguía et al., 1991). Although Gonzalez (2003) explicated the importance of various minority subcultures in supporting Chicana/o students at PWIs, this study was focused on and further clarifies the role and power of one type of subcultures, ethnic student organizations, in facilitating adjustment and membership among Black and Asian American students.

The experiences of students at MAU also confirm earlier findings that participation in ethnic student organizations is an important form of social involvement for African American students (Cokley, 2001; Flowers, 2004; Fries-Britt, 2000; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper et al., 2005; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001; Tinto, 1993). The current findings add to existing literature by confirming that ethnic student organizations play a salient role in the experiences of Asian American college students as well. Indeed, the significant role of ethnic organizations in the undergraduate experiences was very similar for the Asian American and Black students in the current investigation, in that they facilitate cultural adjustment and membership in similar ways for both groups.

These findings also provide mixed support for Guiffrida's (2003) conclusions that African American students valued membership in ethnic student organizations because they provided undergraduates with opportunities to spend time with peers who they perceived as similar to themselves, give back to their communities, and interact with faculty outside of class. Indeed, both African American and Asian American students in the current study highlighted the fact that their organizations allowed them to connect with peers from similar cultural backgrounds and advocate for

their communities. The students at MAU, however, did not indicate participation in ethnic organizations provided increased opportunities for faculty interaction. The discrepancy between Guiffrida's results and those found here could be due to differences in institutional size, considering MAU is approximately 3 times larger than the institution in Guiffrida's study. That is, students are likely to experience increased faculty interaction at smaller institutions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005), and it might therefore be hypothesized that faculty are also more likely to engage in activities with student organizations on smaller campuses.

The results of this study also provide partial support for those of Harper and Quaye (2007), which indicate that ethnic organizations provide venues for Black students' acquisition of cross-cultural communication skills, advocacy for disenfranchised groups, pursuit of social justice, and identity expression. Similarly, the findings of this study also illustrate how ethnic student organizations at MAU provided a vehicle for minority students to express their identity and advocate for their ethnic minority communities via advocating for institutional change and spreading cultural awareness. Moreover, the findings suggest that ethnic organizations function in this way for Asian American, as well as African American, students. Alternatively, participants in the current study did not indicate that ethnic organization membership facilitated the development of cross-cultural communication skills, but this could be a function of the fact that the acquisition of such skills was not the focus of the current inquiry and, therefore, conclusions about this relationship cannot be drawn.

Although cross-cultural communication skills were not a focus of this study, as part of the larger investigation, participants were asked about segregation on campus and among student organizations. Although some participants acknowledged limited cross-cultural collaboration and interaction, most participants noted that racial segregation, including the segregation among student organizations, was problematic. This could be an indication that the extent to which institutions support interaction and collaboration among student organizations may, in part, determine the extent to which it fosters cross-cultural skills among its minority students, but this requires further inquiry.

Limitations

At least three major limitations warrant attention during interpretation of the findings. First, these findings are context-bound and cannot be generalized to populations beyond the focal institution. Qualitative research is used for generating rich insights into particular phenomenon, rather than producing generalizable results (Patton, 2002). This investigation, therefore, was aimed at providing an in-depth understanding of how campus subcultures *can* shape the experiences of minority students at MAU. Selection bias constitutes a second limitation of this study, because participants included in this inquiry were, at least, moderately involved in formal student organizations. The behavior, experiences, and perceptions of these students may vary from those of students who are not involved in formal student organizations or other forms of structured organization on their college campus. Thirdly, although it is recognized that across- and within-group differences are critical considerations in attempting to fully understand students' culturally relevant experiences, they are not discussed herein. This is due to the fact that data specifically regarding the role of ethnic student organizations did not diverge between or among groups.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The findings of this study pose several important implications for future educational research, policy, and practice. With regard to research, the findings reinforce the notion that higher education scholars should recognize the value of using cultural perspectives in higher education research and support earlier assertions about the importance of ethnic subcultures in minority students' adjustment to and sense of membership in predominantly White campuses. Moreover, the current study gives rise to questions about the nature of the impact of such subcultures on both members *and* nonmembers. The findings also underscore the importance of studying cultural integrity and its utility in promoting minority student success. With regard to practice, these findings reinforce the importance of higher education administrators connecting students of color with subcultures, such as ethnic organizations, early in their college careers because those subcultures constitute venues and opportunities to share experiences, support each other, and work toward common goals. Finally, the findings highlight the fact that, although ethnic student organizations can primarily function as supportive environments for minority students, their potential for providing useful tools for facilitating educationally purposeful cocurricular engagement among, and improving the campus environment for, students of color should be emphasized.

Implications for Research

First, this study highlights the utility of using cultural perspectives in understanding the experiences and outcomes of racial/ethnic minority college students. Higher education scholars have noted that culture is both a process shaping the experiences of individuals therein and a conceptual lens that is useful for analyzing those experiences (Kuh 2001/2002, Whitt, 1996). For example, although higher education researchers often examine the impact of predefined measures of student involvement on persistence outcomes, those predetermined involvement constructs are often limited in their ability to capture important cultural contexts. In contrast, utilizing a cultural framework can allow for the acquisition of a deeper understanding of the complex and multifaceted ways in which various institutional subcultures can facilitate minority students' membership in the newly encountered cultures of their campus. Specifically, using cultural frameworks to examine phenomena, such as minority student adjustment and membership, educational researchers can excavate and illuminate the tacit influences that are rarely captured and usually ill understood.

The findings of this inquiry might also support the need for a different framework for understanding the measurement of the concept of social integration. Traditionally, researchers have operationalized social integration by measuring the frequency with which students participate in various types of activities in the social arena of college life. Although type and frequency of behavior may be important in understanding the membership of minority students, they might only be one part of a larger story. Equally important could be the extent to which students' cultural backgrounds are engaged as they exhibit those behaviors. Therefore, scholars should consider how they can measure the extent to which cultural familiarity, expression and advocacy, and validation are created by specific activities and experiences; only then can the institutions fulfill their responsibility to facilitate the cultural socialization of minority students.

This study also lends additional support

to the validity and importance of Tierney's (1999) concept of cultural *integrity* as a useful perspective for viewing how institutions promote the cultural adjustment and membership of racial/ethnic minority students at PWIs. Many questions remain, however, beyond the scope of examining ethnic student organizations. What other programs are effective, and which programs are *most* effective, at engaging and validating minority students' cultural backgrounds? Can cultural integrity be quantified and validated as a statistically significant predictor of minority student success? Can PWIs create dominant campus cultures that, similar to the ethnic organizations here, function to facilitate minority students' membership in their campus communities? Future research should help expand our knowledge of how such programs and subcultures can facilitate membership among students of color.

As mentioned, the findings of the current study buttress earlier assertions (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Kuh & Love, 2000) about the importance of institutional subcultures in the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students. One major limitation of this study, however, is that it was focused on minority students who were involved in one specific type of subculture, ethnic student organizations. Future research should use cultural frameworks to examine the role that other types of cultural subcultures, such as cultural centers and targeted support programs, play in minority students' adjustment to and membership in PWIs. Given the recent legal turbulence surrounding and political backlash against race-based initiatives, knowledge of the impact such programs have on student outcomes is particularly important in ensuring continued support for initiatives essential to fostering success among minority students.

Equally important as understanding the impact of campus subcultures on minority students' educational outcomes is comprehension of the influence that such campus subcultures have on the experiences of students who are not members of those subcultures. Heretofore, scholars have primarily focused on the role that student organizations and other ethnic subcultures play in the experiences of students formally engaged in those subcultures. However, much remains to be learned about the impact that diverse institutional subcultures have on broader institutional environments and the outcomes of students in those environments. Thus, it may be hypothesized that the existence of minority subcultures and their activities (e.g., advocacy for ethnic studies programs and efforts focused on spreading cultural awareness) influence, via environmental transformation, the educational experiences and outcomes of organization nonmembers in their respective campus environments. This a critical consideration and an important area for future research because, if minority subcultures serve such a purpose, those subcultures may not only be critical factors in the experiences of organization members, but might also be essential components to maximizing the benefits of racial and ethnic diversity on predominantly White campuses.

Implications for Practice

With regard to practice, the findings of this study underscore the importance of enclave (i.e., subculture) extension. That is, higher education administrators should focus on maximizing the extent to which they connect racial/ethnic and other minority students to venues where they can share their experiences with their minority peers, support one another, and work together to meet common challenges. In the absence or inadequate existence of such communities at PWIs, students of color might

be forced to either leave their college campus or dissociate with their traditional heritages and suffer negative consequences in personal development and academic performance. Thus, the fostering, maintenance, and expansion of such communities are critical components in validating racial/ethnic minority students' cultural backgrounds and fostering a sense of membership in the campus community among those students.

Also important is the implication that higher education administrators should acknowledge and emphasize the utility of ethnic organizations in facilitating educationally purposeful engagement among their students of color. Ethnic student organizations have long provided venues that allow minority students to connect with peers from similar cultural backgrounds. Providing a safe place for students of color to socialize with like-minded peers may be sufficient reason to support the creation, perpetuation, and expansion of such organizations,; however, the findings of the current and earlier studies suggests that involvement in such organizations holds potential for greater benefits. Indeed, this study highlights the role of ethnic organizations in engaging students in activities of cultural expression and advocacy that are educationally purposeful and productive. If administrators and staff are concerned about promoting educationally beneficial engagement that promotes development and fosters success among their students, they should consider the potential that ethnic student organizations have in helping promote such engagement.

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