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Generating Ethnic Minority Success (GEMS): A collective-cross case analysis of high-performing colleges

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Less than one-half of all underrepresented racial and ethnic minority students who begin college at a 4-year institution with aspirations to earn a bachelor's degree achieve that goal within 6 years. The aim of this study was to identify and analyze the institutional factors that contribute to racial and ethnic minority student success at three predominantly White institutions with high and equitable underrepresented racial and ethnic minority student retention and graduation rates. Sixty-five individual interviews were conducted, and documents were collected across these three high-performing colleges. From the analysis of those interviews and documents emerged four common and salient elements of the institutional cultures that promote success among students of color at the three campuses. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: attainment, culture, environment, minority, student, persistence, retention, success

Among those who enroll in a 4-year college or university, approximately 59% of White students earn a bachelor's degree within 6 years, whereas that figure is only 47% and 40% for their Latino and Black peers, respectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Although Asian American students are usually noted for their relatively high rates of persistence and degree completion, disaggregation of national data on this population reveals that some Asian American subgroups receiving college degrees at rates far lower than the national average (Hune, 2002; Museus, 2009; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Teranishi, 2007). For example, Cambodian (9.2%), Hmong (7.5%), and Laotian (7.7%) Americans hold 4-year degrees at less than half the rate of the national population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Because racial and ethnic minorities will continue to comprise a growing proportion of the national population, if these racial and ethnic disparities persist, the projected result is a larger portion of the population failing to complete college and lower levels of attainment across the country (Kelly, 2005). These lower levels of success will result in decreased average income levels, lower average tax contributions, and an increase in professional jobs that go unfilled.

Given the negative ramifications that are projected to result from persisting racial and ethnic disparities in educational attainment, it is critical to better understand how institutions of higher education can foster success among students of color. The current inquiry is focused on discovering and examining the institutional characteristics that foster success among students of color. Specifically, the study is aimed at understanding the characteristics of institutional culture that contribute to retention and degree completion among college students of color at three predominantly White institutions (PWIs) that have exhibited high and equitable retention and graduation rates among underrepresented racial and ethnic minority undergraduates.

Although there is a dearth of empirical evidence regarding how the cultures of PWIs promote racial and ethnic minority student success, a small body of literature does suggest that particular elements of the cultures of PWIs might influence the experiences and outcomes of students of color. In the following sections, the term "campus culture" is defined. Then, literature on how elements of the cultures of PWIs can shape the experiences of students of color is reviewed. The remainder of the article describes a case study of

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three PWIs with high and equitable racial and ethnic minority student retention and graduation rates.

Defining and Delineating the Elements of Campus Culture

It has been asserted that culture is the normative and social glue that holds an institution together (Smircich, 1983), and culture shapes just about everything that happens on a college campus (Kuh, 2001/2002). Specifically, campus culture has been defined as the "collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in higher education and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions" (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, pp. 12–13). This definition is useful as it highlights and delineates the core elements of campus culture.

In addition to the aforementioned elements, campus ethos is an important aspect of institutional culture. Campus ethos can be defined as the essential character or spirit of an institution's culture and it functions to connect individuals within an organization together (Kezar, 2007). A campus's ethos can significantly influence the experiences and outcomes of students (Kezar, 2007; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005) Kuh et al. (2005), for example, analyzed 20 colleges and universities with higher-than-predicted engagement and graduation rates and found that an improvement-oriented ethos—that is, a spirit of commitment to improving their ability to foster success among students—was a key factor in those institutions' ability to foster success of among their students.

Connections to Campus Cultures

Evidence indicates that, when racial and ethnic minority students connect to the cultures of their campuses, they are more likely to succeed (Attinasi, 1989; Gonzalez, 2003; Guiffrida, 2006; Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus, 2008a, 2008c; Museus & Harris, 2010; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992, 1999). Specifically, students of color can connect to the cultures of their campuses by connecting with both individual (e.g.,

faculty, staff, and peers) and collective (e.g., academic departments, student organizations, cultural centers) cultural agents at their institutions (Museus & Quaye, 2009). And, those connections are associated with increased engagement and success (Guiffrida, 2003, 2005; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Kiang, 2002, 2009; Museus, 2008c; Museus, 2010; Museus & Neville, in press; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Museus & Ravello, 2010).

Unfortunately, many students of color experience difficulties connecting to the cultures of PWIs (Allen, 1992; Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000; Park, 2009; Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Museus and Quaye (2009), for example, used existing literature and the voices of 30 students of color at a PWI to generate an intercultural perspective of racial and ethnic minority college student persistence. Their perspective suggests that students of color who originate from cultures that are incongruent with those on their campuses can experience cultural dissonance, which can be defined as the tension that occurs from incongruence between a student's home and campus cultures (Museus, 2008a). This dissonance can make it difficult for students of color to connect to the cultures of their campus and inversely influence their likelihood of success. Indeed, a large body of evidence supports the notion that many students of color encounter challenges connecting to the cultures of PWIs, resulting in their feeling alienated, marginalized, and unwelcome in those cultures (Allen, 1992; Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000; Park, 2009). There is little empirical research, however, that examines which elements of the cultures of PWIs effectively facilitate racial and ethnic minority students' connections to their campuses and subsequent success.

Collectivist Campus Cultural Values

One element of campus culture that scholars have asserted might be associated with the success of students of color is collectivist cultural values (Guiffrida, 2006; Museus & Harris, 2010). Whereas individualist cultures tend to value independence, competition, and emotional detachment, collectivist cultures typically value interdependence, group harmony, and emotional attachment among group members

(Phinney, 1996; Triandis, Chen, & Chan, 1998). Also, although research on whether racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to come from collectivist cultures is mixed (Asante, 1994; Gaines, 1994; Oyserman, Gant, & Ayer, 1995; Triandis, 1989; Xi, 1994), a review of this literature indicates that students of color may be *more likely* than their White peers to espouse collectivist values (Guiffrida, 2006). Thus, it can be hypothesized that racial and ethnic minority students might be more likely to connect to campuses that espouse more collective values and to succeed at those institutions.

There is some evidence supporting the hypothesis that more collectivist cultures might positively influence racial and ethnic minority students' success. For example, research indicates that individualistic and overly competitive values within academic departments can contribute to early departure among students of color (Seymour & Hewitt, 1997). Evidence also suggests that academic support programs with collectivist values can foster success among students of color (Fullilove & Treisman, 1990; Treisman, 1992). However, whether the extent to which a campus values collectivism influences racial and ethnic minority students' success is unclear. And much remains to be learned about how other campus values impact success among students of color.

Cultural Integrity and Cultures of Responsibility

Another aspect of campus cultures that might contribute to success among students of color is cultural integrity, which refers to culturally relevant institutional programs and practices that engage students' cultural backgrounds (Deyhle, 1995; Tierney, 1999; Tierney & Jun, 1999). Whereas early perspectives of college student departure were based on assumptions that students of color must sever ties with their cultures of origin to integrate into the cultures of their campuses and succeed (Tino, 1987, 1993), more recent perspectives emphasize the importance of racial and ethnic minority students' connections to their cultural heritages in facilitating their engagement and success (Deyhle, 1995; Museus, 2008c; O'Connor, 1997), as well as the importance of institutions engaging those heritages to facilitate positive outcomes among students of color (Museus & Quaye, 2009; Tierney, 1999; Tierney & Jun, 1999).

Also relevant is the fact that, although earlier perspectives of student success contribute much to our understanding of how involvement and engagement influence racial and ethnic minority students' success (Astin, 1984, 1999; Tinto, 1987, 1993), researchers have argued that they can contribute to self-deterministic views that overemphasize individual students' abilities to become connected to their campus's cultures and succeed, while downplaying institutional responsibility for facilitating those students' success (Bensimon, 2007; Rendón et al., 2000). Moreover, self-deterministic views can place an especially unfair burden on students of color who originate from cultures that are very different from those at PWIs (Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Alternatively, more recent student success perspectives emphasize the notion that institutions also have a responsibility to foster success among their students of color (Museus & Quaye, 2009; Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 1999). Much remains to be learned, however, regarding whether campuses that espouse an institutional responsibility for student outcomes actually do have an impact on success among students of color.

Purpose of the Study

The current inquiry is part of a larger collective case study designed to identify and understand the institutional factors (e.g., culture, climate, programs, and practices) perceived to help generate racial and ethnic minority student success at PWIs that have exhibited high and equitable retention and graduation rates among underrepresented college students of color (for description, see Museus & Liverman, 2010). The current analysis is focused on how the cultures of those institutions shape racial and ethnic minority student success. One overarching research question guided the examination: What elements of campus culture, if any, are perceived to affect success among racial and ethnic minority students at three institutions that have demonstrated effectiveness at Generating Ethnic Minority Success (GEMS)? Throughout the remainder of this manuscript, these three institutions are referred to as the GEMS Colleges or GEMS Institutions. Three additional research questions were developed and

utilized to guide the current analysis: (1) What, if any, cultural values are perceived to affect success among students of color at the GEMS Colleges? (2) What, if any, cultural assumptions are perceived to influence racial and ethnic minority student success at the three institutions? And, (3) what, if any, cultural beliefs are perceived to affect success among college students of color at the three GEMS Colleges?

Conceptual Framework

The "Campus Cultural Framework for Minority Student Success" was constructed using the aforementioned literature and provides the conceptual lens for the current examination, and it is comprised of four distinct components: campus culture, campus cultural agents, cultural connections, and racial and ethnic minority student success. First, the framework posits that various elements that comprise campuses' cultures influence campus cultural agents' practices, the extent to which students of color feel connected to the cultures of their campuses, and, ultimately, those students' success. It also suggests that various aspects of the campuses' cultures, as well as campus cultural agents, influence racial and ethnic minority students' success via their impact on the level of connectedness that students of color feel to the campuses' cultures.

This framework is particularly useful for examining how the cultures of a campus can influence racial and ethnic minority students' connections to the campus and subsequent success. Thus, in the current investigation, this framework is used to focus on identifying the elements (e.g., values, beliefs, assumptions) of the cultures of the GEMS Institutions that foster racial and ethnic minority students' connections to their campuses and eventual success. Of course, the framework is limited in that it focuses on elements of campus culture, but does not consider other factors that contribute to success among students of color, such as academic preparation, family influences, financial situations, employment, or living situations (e.g., on or off campus).

Methods

As previously mentioned, the current analysis is part of a larger collective case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2002). The larger inquiry generated a comprehensive explanatory model to explain the influence of various institutional factors (i.e., campus culture, targeted support programs, opportunities for educationally purposeful engagement) on racial and ethnic minority students' success at the GEMS Colleges (Museus & Liverman, 2010). From that larger inquiry have emerged more in-depth analyses of various components of the model, which include examinations of the influence of targeted support programs, academic advisors, and institutional agents (i.e., faculty, staff, counselors, and advisors) on success among students of color at the GEMS Colleges (Museus, 2010; Museus & Neville, in press; Museus & Ravello, 2010). The current study is an in-depth examination of the campus culture component of the explanatory model that emerged from the larger inquiry.

Institution Selection

Both institutions and participants were selected with the intention of achieving both intensity (i.e., information richness) and variation (i.e., diversity in the sample) (Patton, 2002). Accordingly, institutions that are most likely to offer insights into how campuses can and do effectively foster racial and ethnic minority student retention and degree completion and that represented a wide range of institutional characteristics were selected. Using data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the College Results Online (CRO) database permit users to compare the 6-year graduation rates of 4-year colleges with the rates of their peer institutions, as well as compare the 6-year graduation rates of different racial groups across institutions and within the same institution. For this study, the CRO database was used to select 4-year institutions that exhibited (1) graduation rates among underrepresented racial and ethnic minority (i.e., Black, Latino, and Native American) students that were appreciably higher than the national average, and (2) graduation rates among underrepresented students of color that were close to or higher than their White peers. Finally, because this inquiry was focused on PWIs, the selection of institutions was limited to colleges at which approximately 50% or more of total enrollees were White. One relatively large private doctoral institution, referred to as Research Univer-
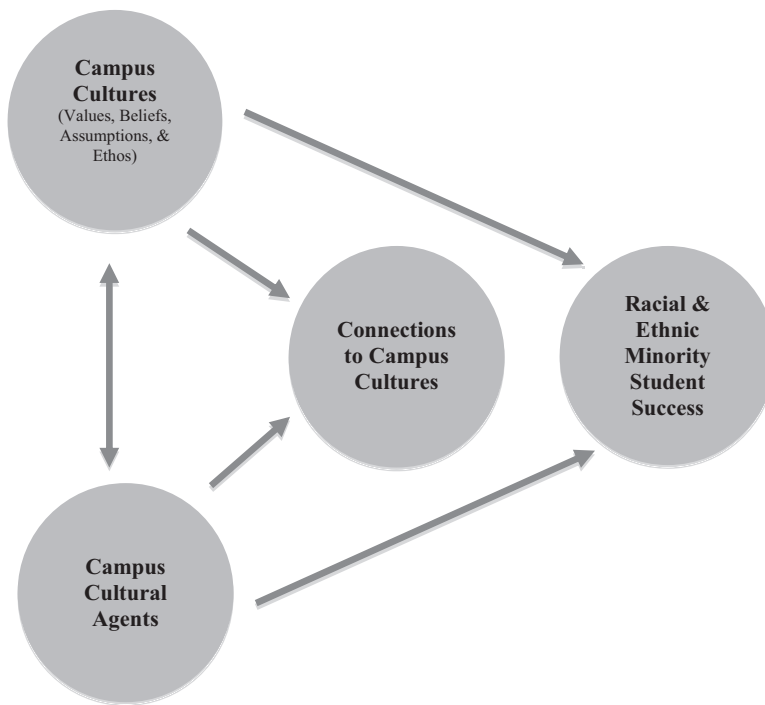
Figure 1. A campus cultural framework for minority student success.

sity (RU) in the remainder of this article, and one small public comprehensive state university, referred to as State University (SU), were selected using the CRO database.

An alternative method—IPEDS in conjunction with one state database—was used to identify the 2-year institution for inclusion in the study for two reasons. First, the CRO database only contains data on 4-year colleges. Second, whereas IPEDS can be used to select institutions with high 3-year associate's degree completion rates, degree attainment alone does not provide an adequate benchmark for success at 2-year colleges because many students at these institutions seek certificates or short-term training (Dougherty, 1994). First, IPEDS was used to identify 2-year colleges that exhibited relatively high racial and ethnic minority student associate's degree completion rates. Because the identified 2-year colleges were in California, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Data Mart was used to compare those institutions' within-semester retention rates (i.e., within-semester course completion rates) with those of other California community

colleges. This allowed me to avoid relying on 3-year associate's degree completion rates and take into account course completion rates as well. One 2-year institution, which will be referred to as Community College (CC) was selected for this study because it exhibited (1) high retention rates among all racial groups compared to other California community college, and (2) virtually equal retention rates among all major racial groups (i.e., Asian American, Black, Latino, Native American, and White).

Participant Selection

As previously mentioned, purposeful sampling was utilized to achieve intensity and variation in the participant sample (Patton, 2002). Selecting participants based on a combination of these two purposes permitted the acquisition of a sample that both provides a wealth of insight into the phenomenon under investigation and a representation of the various individuals that function in a range of environments throughout the three campuses. Accordingly,

the faculty, administrators, staff, and racial and ethnic minority students who participated in the study were selected for their affiliation with various campus environments and knowledge of the experiences of racial and ethnic minority students on their campuses. To identify administrators and staff for participation in individual interviews, a thorough analysis of each institution's website was conducted. First, each institution's homepage was reviewed as a starting point and they led to websites of administrative offices and programs across their campuses. Then, websites linked to each homepage were reviewed until all of campuses' office and program websites that could be found were exhausted. This led to a participant population of all faculty, administrators, and staff who supervised or worked in academic advising offices, counseling offices, cultural and multicultural centers, targeted support programs, and student affairs offices across the three campuses.

Contact with persons at the top of the institution's organizational chart (i.e., campus presidents) was initiated via email and telephone. Then, administrators at the next level of the organizational chart, such as vice presidents of student affairs and provosts, were contacted. This process continued until a wide range of faculty, administrators, and staff members who oversee or work in offices and programs across the institutions agreed to participate in the inquiry. The final participant sample included faculty members, a campus provost, a vice president of student affairs, directors of student activities and student life, directors and assistant directors of cultural centers, directors of support programs, counselors, and academic advisors. Next, administrator and staff participants were asked to identify racial and ethnic minority students who were enrolled in first-year seminars and ethnic studies courses or participated in cultural centers, mentoring programs, and targeted support programs on their campuses for participation. Then, those students were contacted via email and asked to participate in individual interviews.

The final sample consisted of 65 faculty, administrators, staff, and students of color across the three colleges. The sample included 34 faculty, administrators, and staff members (i.e., 3 Asian American, 12 Black, 3 Latino, and 16 White) and 31 students of color (i.e., 9 Asian American, 9 Black, and 13 Latino students).

White students were excluded from the sample because research suggests that their assessments of the experiences of their racial and ethnic minority peers are different from those minority students' assessments of their own experiences (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Native Americans were also excluded from the sample due to the difficulty in acquiring participants from this population, as they comprise only zero, one, and three percent of students at the GEMS Colleges. Although Asian American graduation rates were not considered in selecting the three focal institutions, they were included in the sample, given evidence that they share common struggles with their Black and Latino peers (Lewis et al., 2000) and that some Asian American subgroups also suffer from disparities in degree attainment (Museus, 2009; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Teranishi, 2007). It should be noted that, although the sample size is small compared to the size of the institutions, a point of saturation—a point at which no new findings emerged from the data—was achieved on each campus.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data collection consisted of two components—individual face-to-face interviews and the collection of documents. One- to 1.5-hr individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with faculty, administrators, staff, and racial and ethnic minority student participants. A semi-structured approach was used to ensure that the interview data provided information necessary to understand the phenomenon under study while providing flexibility to address emergent themes (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). This approach included the specification of a set of issues and broad questions to be explored throughout the course of the interview (Patton, 2002). The semi-structured approach also allowed me to build conversation with the participants through establishing a conversation style and engaging in spontaneous questioning for clarification and deeper understanding of participants' responses. Thus, using an interview guide systematized the interviews and ensured that all relevant topics were covered, while also allowing for considerable flexibility in probing. Probes were not preplanned but emerged during the interviews in response to interviewees' answers to questions on the interview guide.

All interview participants were asked to describe the cultures of their respective campuses and explain how those cultures, as well as institutional policies, programs, and practices, shape racial and ethnic minority students' engagement and persistence at their respective institution. Examples of questions that were posed to faculty, administrators, and staff participants include the following: (1) Is there anything about the culture of [institution name] that contributes to its effectiveness at fostering success among students of color? (2) Is there anything about the culture of [institution name] that facilitates the engagement of racial and ethnic minority students here? (3) Are there specific institutional values that you would say contribute to racial and ethnic minority students' success here? What, if any, assumptions do faculty, administrators and staff make about students of color here? Examples of questions that racial and ethnic minority student participants were asked include (1) How would you describe the community here at [institution name]? (2) What do you think people here at [institution name] value the most? (3) Do you think that there is anything about the culture here at [institution name] that contributes to the success of students of color here? If so, what? Those interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. At the end of each individual interview, descriptive institutional and program documents were collected to further illuminate themes emerging during the interviews.

Data analysis consisted of elucidating the cultural characteristics that participants' perceived to contribute to racial and ethnic minority students' success at their respective colleges. The NVivo© Qualitative Software Package and open- and axial-coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were used to code each individual interview transcript to identify and gain a more in-depth understanding of the most salient cultural characteristics that participants perceived to help foster racial and ethnic minority student success. During this process, 13 invariant constituents were identified (see Table 1). Then, those constituents were used to inductively generate themes that describe the most significant cultural factors that influence success among students of color at the GEMS Colleges. For example, the invariant constituent labeled "high levels of communication" and four other constituents were used to inductively generate the "strong networking values" theme. Finally, each theme was compared to the documents that were collected to verify or modify those themes.

Credibility and Transferability

In qualitative research, credibility refers to the congruence of the findings with reality, whereas transferability refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to situations outside of the cases being studied (Merriam, 1998). For the purposes of this study, credibility and transferability were maximized using three methods prescribed by Lincoln and Guba (1986). First, data from the following three sources were triangulated to cross-check, ver-

Table 1
Themes and Invariant Constituents

Themes	Invariant constituents
Networking values	High levels of communication
Networking values	High levels of collaboration
Networking values	Intentional maintenance of networks
Networking values	Formal networks across offices and programs
Networking values	Informal networking between agents and students
Commitment to targeted support	Commitment of resources for targeted support
Commitment to targeted support	Integration of targeted support programs into campus networks
Commitment to targeted support	Key cultural agents in targeted support programs
Belief in humanizing the educational experience	Care for and commitment to students
Belief in humanizing the educational experience	Meaningful relationships between agents and students
Ethos of institutional responsibility	Agents' philosophy of holding selves accountable
Ethos of institutional responsibility	Belief in the importance of proactively reaching out
Ethos of institutional responsibility	Intrusive institutional policies

ify, and modify emergent themes: (1) faculty, administrator, and staff interviews, (2) racial and ethnic minority student interviews, and (3) institutional and program documents. Second, discrepant data were sought and examined throughout the analysis to ensure the consideration of alternative hypotheses and questioning of underlying theoretical presuppositions. Finally, member-checks were conducted with three individuals at each of the three GEMS Institutions to ensure that researcher interpretations were congruent with participants' perceptions and realities.

Findings

Each of the three GEMS Colleges has a distinct campus culture and houses unique subcultures. Despite those differences, four common cultural characteristics that participants' perceived to facilitate racial and ethnic minority students' success at those institutions emerged from the data—they include strong networking values, a commitment to targeted support, a belief in humanizing the educational experience, and an ethos characterized by an institutional responsibility for student success. Those cultural elements manifested in different ways and to varying degrees on each campus, but they interacted to create a culture conducive to racial and ethnic minority college students' success at all three institutions.

Strong Networking Values

One salient and noticeable aspect of the cultures of the GEMS Colleges to which participants attributed racial and ethnic minority students' success is the strong valuing of networks on those campuses. For example, those networks are so salient at RU that faculty, administrators, staff, and racial and ethnic minority students use terms like "family network" when referring to their campus community. One Asian American student at RU, for example, utilized this term when he explained how the family network at RU was so discernible that he felt immediately connected, even before he enrolled at the institution:

> Here at Research University, that family network is a very real thing. So, coming in, even at my first orientation, when I wasn't even a student here yet, I already felt that sense of connection. . .which is why people

find it so much easier to transition into whatever niche or whatever organization on campus they want.

Participants noted how those who work with large numbers of students of color at the GEMS Colleges appear to value networking a great deal and use it to their advantage in meeting those students' needs. This theme consists of two major components: (1) high levels of communication and collaboration (2) formal and informal everyday networking as a norm on campus.

First, the networking values at the GEMS Colleges appear to manifest in the high levels of communication and collaboration across the campuses. For instance, when one academic advisor at RU was asked what contributes to success among students of color at his institution, he highlighted the important role of networks of communication and collaboration:

> I would definitely say it would be our connections. Many of us [academic advisors] serve on different committees, we're connected with the Center for Academic Support, and we're connected with the cultural centers and the offices under the Division of Student Affairs. I think it's these relationships that we formed that kind of make us stick out.

Both formal and informal networking was noted as critical in promoting success among students of color at the GEMS Colleges. One faculty member at SU, for example, underscored the importance of formal networks when she described how her academic department, the Career Resource Center, the Scholar's Mentorship Program (SMP), and the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) collaborate to administer a first-year seminar for underrepresented students:

> The EOP program counts on us to help sustain their student population too. If they come to us and ask us to create a particular kind of course, then we will do it. For example, the course called "Key Issues in the Education of Underrepresented College Students" is the one that they use as their first-year seminar and our program uses it as ours as well.

In addition to formal and structured collaboration and communication, networking values manifest in the informal everyday behaviors of educators at the GEMS Colleges. One academic advisor at RU underscored this reality as he explained the methods that he and his colleagues use to connect students with faculty, ranging from taking advantage of fortuitous en-

counters with faculty and students in the lobby to inviting faculty to students' social events. He explained that, "When we see students out in the lobby area, we introduce them to faculty members or, if they have certain events . . . we may invite faculty members to some of those events."

A Commitment to Targeted Support

Another important aspect of the cultures of the GEMS Institutions is their clear commitment to providing a wide range of targeted support programs that reach large numbers of students of color and are explicitly linked to other programs and services across campus. This theme consists of three components: (1) the dedication of substantial resources to help sustain essential targeted support programs for historically underrepresented students, (2) the presence of key administrators and staff who have a profound impact on students of color within those programs, and (3) the integration of those programs into larger support networks on campus.

First, public policymakers and institutional leaders have committed a substantial amount of resources to create and sustain comprehensive targeted support programs for underrepresented student at the GEMS Colleges. At RU, for example, institutional leaders have established and sustained support for three very active cultural centers, a Scholar's Program for transfer students of color, a Center for Academic Success, a Center for Diversity in Engineering, and a federally funded Student Support Services program—all of which provide targeted support for underrepresented students. At SU, a federally funded TRIO Program, a state funded Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), a Scholar's Mentorship Program (SMP), and an AMP-CSTEP (AC2) Program are all designed to support students of color and other underserved populations. At CC, a state supported Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) office provides academic, financial, and counseling services for many students of color. CC also has a federally funded TRIO Program and the Transfer Center's Targeting Resources for Underrepresented Students (TRUST) Program, both aimed at supporting underrepresented populations.

As one student affairs administrator at RU asserted, the collective network of targeted and mainstream support programs contribute to success among students of color on his campus:

> What I would highlight is that it takes all of these things to make it work. It's not any one thing. As I say to parents and students, when you come to this campus, we're going to have lots of special things for you . . . you"ll have lots of support around you. But the main thing that you get when you come to this institution is that our goal is to make sure that, no matter where you go, you're treated with respect and you're treated with care.

Moreover, large numbers of students of color are served by one or more targeted support programs at the GEMS Colleges. At RU, the Black cultural center alone regularly serves over 600 students, which is approximately 70% of all Black students on campus. At SU, over 650 students participate in the EOP, SMP, and AC2 programs, which is equivalent to 10% of all students on campus. At CC, approximately 1,700 students receive support from EOPS and TRIO alone, which is equivalent to approximately 13% of all undergraduates on campus. However, due to the targeted support programs' foci on supporting underrepresented populations, students of color are overrepresented in them. Thus, it is likely that these programs serve much larger proportions of students of color on their campuses. Moreover, these numbers do not include the many students of color served by other targeted support programs at the GEMS Colleges.

Second, participants who underscored the importance of targeted support programs in their institution's ability to foster success among students of color repeatedly highlighted the administrators and staff working within those programs and the ongoing support they provide for large numbers of undergraduates of color from matriculation to graduation. An Asian American student at RU, for example, described how two administrators in the Asian American cultural center were instrumental in his adjustment to campus and beyond:

> The transition period, like I mentioned earlier about the Director and Assistant Director of the cultural center, I would always go in there and they were kind of like my unofficial mentors in a sense just because I would come in with a lot of questions about how to adjust from high school to college. They've been helping me throughout the process.

Finally, participants emphasized the importance of targeted support programs being integrated into the broader campus support networks. As a result, those programs serve as a conduit between students of color and campus support networks and function to cultivate stronger bonds between them. The Director of TRIO at CC highlighted how his program serves as a conduit and strengthens connections between students and support networks with this point:

> Everybody here works really close with all the other student services, whether it is disability services, EOPS, financial aid, orientation . . . If I think somebody could use those services, I walk them over and make sure that they can get them. we all work together.

A Belief in Humanizing the Educational Experience

Participants also attributed the effectiveness of the GEMS Colleges, in part, to a belief in humanizing the educational experience that permeates the cultures of those institutions. They noted that the cultures of the GEMS Institutions are cultures in which faculty, administrators, and staff are seen as human beings, as well as educators. One academic advisor at RU discussed his belief in the importance of humanizing his work with students:

> Humanizing the work. Sometimes, students will come in here stressed out and upset and you let them sit back and allow them to laugh at themselves. If you're serious with them all the time, they"ll go away not having had that opportunity to see that maybe they were a little too hard on themselves or maybe they were a little too tightly wound to deal with issues at hand. I think humanizing the work is a great thing.

Similarly, when explaining how faculty on his campus approach their work with a belief in humanizing the educational experience, a Black CC student made the following comments:

> Most of the teachers like to joke around. Before class starts, they start out with a joke, so, if anybody is having a bad day, they probably will laugh or something. But if they want us to wake up, they don't just come in and be like "Okay guys. Open the book." They always start with something like "How their day is going?" That's important.

The belief in incorporating a human element into the educational experience manifests in two ways: (1) the care and commitment with which faculty, administrators, and staff approach their work and (2) the meaningful relationships that those educators cultivate with their students.

Participants described how the faculty, administrators, and staff who humanize the educational experience care about and are committed to their students' success. One student support services administrator at CC illustrated this when he asserted that the caring and committed faculty and staff are responsible for the success of students of color on their campus:

> Our success is due mostly to the faculty and staff, because of how committed they are to their students and in making sure they get things done . . . We have a lot of faculty and staff mentors who are very committed to the students, who really are help them out.

The belief in humanizing the educational experience is also embodied in the meaningful relationships that faculty, administrators, and staff develop with their students. The Director of a Black cultural center at RU noted such relationships as the key to her center's success:

> How I made this place successful is I go where the students are. If someone is having a barbecue, I'm going to go and hang out. Before I got married, I was at everything. I was here until 10:00 p.m. at night almost 7 days a week. The students wanted me there. They would ask, "Are you going to be there?"

An Ethos Characterized by Institutional Responsibility

Finally, the ethos of the GEMS Colleges is characterized by an institutional responsibility for the success of racial and ethnic minority and other underrepresented students. One senior administrator at RU underscored this ethos of institutional responsibility on his campus:

> We're less laissez-faire than we used to be. So, now for example, if students have less than a 2.5 [GPA] we contact them. I don't care who you are. We get in touch with you and say . . . we want to offer you help . . . tutoring, counseling, whatever. And, I think it's harder to get lost . . . I think that is the biggest key . . . that you're reaching out and you're not saying "Well, sink or swim. You're on your own." There's help there, and we're not waiting for you to ask for it . . . Our motto is, "at RU a student has to run from help."

An administrator at CC explained how this philosophy is particularly important for students of color who may come from cultures in which seeking help is a sign of inadequacy:

> The problem is that minority students are not usually going to come in unless they are walked over here. At

some level, it may be considered a public shaming. At another level, they don't like to ask for help. Culturally, they are not that extroverted in terms of seeking those types of services.

There are two major ways in which this ethos manifests at the GEMS Colleges: (1) institutional policies that force students to fulfill certain expectations and (2) faculty, administrators, and staff who assume responsibility for their students' success.

Institutional policies that force connections among faculty, staff, administrators, and students take on many forms. For example, at SU, the EOP has a system of intrusive advising, in which students are required to meet with their advisors before they register for classes, are evaluated each semester by their instructors, and meet with their academic advisors a minimum of three times per semester. These policies help perpetuate an institutional responsibility to monitor and ensure the success of racial and ethnic minority students. In the following comment, one Latina student at SU described how EOP's policy requiring academic advisors to closely monitor their students' grades drove her to improve her academic performance:

> So, if you have somebody who is keeping track of how I'm doing it makes me want to do better, because I know she's going to have to see my grades. But, if you know your advisor and everybody else is going to see them then it makes you want to try harder.

Whereas all faculty, administrators, and staff at the GEMS Colleges may not assume responsibility for the success of their students of color, what *is* apparent is that the people at the GEMS Institutions who do identify with their institution's ethos espouse a sense of personal responsibility and help maintain a culture in which racial and ethnic minority students feel encouraged and sometimes pressured to engage and succeed. A Black CC student illustrated this as he described how his awareness of one administrator's investment in his success engendered pressure for him to be involved and utilize the resources available to him:

> He just bugs you until you do something. He'll be like "Come to TRIO," and you'll be like "Oh yeah." So, he just shoves it in your face and you go, because otherwise the next time he sees you he'll say, "Hey, why didn't you come?" and you're going to feel all bad.

Limitations of the Study

A couple important limitations of the current study should be noted. First, this examination is context bound. Although the institutional sample includes public and private, 2- and 4-year, and urban and rural institutions, the sample only includes three campuses that exist within their own unique political, cultural, economic, and geographic contexts. Selection bias constitutes a second limitation. Faculty, administrators, and staff at the GEMS Colleges volunteered to participate and were asked to invite racial and ethnic minority students who could provide valuable insights to participate in this study. Thus, faculty, administrator, and staff participants might hold more positive perspectives of the cultures at the GEMS Colleges than those who did not volunteer to partake in interviews. And, students of color who were invited to participate were likely to be involved in campus activities or connected to the administration in some other way, and may hold very different views to students who are disengaged from those campuses. Finally, the current study does not confirm the actual causal connections between any particular cultural element and higher success rates among students of color; to make such claims those relationships must be empirically tested using appropriate quantitative procedures. Rather, I have detailed how the participants *perceive and report* that these cultural elements influence their institutions' effectiveness at fostering success among students of color.

Discussion

The current examination contributes to existing literature in at least four major ways. First, unlike extant research in this area, which highlights the negative impact that the cultures of PWIs can have on racial and ethnic minority students' experiences and outcomes (Feagin, 1992; Feagin et al., 1996; Gonzalez, 2003; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; Lewis et al., 2000; Museus, 2007, 2008b; Museus & Truong, 2009; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993), the findings of this inquiry shed light on how the cultures of some PWIs can contribute to success among students of color. Specifically, the findings provide an example of how certain cultural elements of high-performing

PWIs positively shape the experiences of racial and ethnic minority students. Of course, my intent is not to discount the challenges faced by students of color at PWIs. Even at the GEMS Institutions, which evidently foster success among students of color at higher rates than their peers, students of color encounter difficulties that they face as racial and ethnic minorities.

Second, the current investigation underscores the utility of studying high-performing colleges and universities to understand racial and ethnic minority student success. Although other researchers have examined high-performing institutions (e.g., Bailey et al., 2006; Carey, 2004; Kuh et al., 2005; Muraskin & Lee, 2004), the current study is the first inquiry that employs rigorous qualitative research methods to examine how institutions' cultural characteristics contribute to racial and ethnic minority student success across a diverse set of colleges and universities. The third contribution of this inquiry is that it reinforces the notion that institutional culture is a critical consideration in the study of racial and ethnic minority college students (Kuh, 2001/2002, 2005; Museus, 2007, 2008a, 2008b). Indeed, although several scholars have highlighted the importance of examining culture to understand the experiences of college students (Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Museus & Quaye, 2009), cultural frameworks are rarely used in examinations of college students of color. The underutilization of such frameworks limits our ability to understand how institutions can foster success among those individuals.

Implications for Educational Practice

The findings of this examination yield important implications. Before discussing those implications, it is important to note that efforts to change any institution's culture must be holistic. Indeed, efforts to change a campus's culture must go beyond implementing one policy, program, or practice. Moreover, some have questioned whether it is even possible to change an institution's culture (for discussion, see Kuh & Whitt, 1988). The implications discussed herein are based on the belief that campus cultures can be changed, and are offered as potential elements of more comprehensive plans to change

the cultures of institutions to better serve their student of color.

First and foremost, college and university leaders must consider and understand the role that the cultures of their campuses already play in promoting or hindering the success of racial and ethnic minority students. This might be more complicated than it sounds because characteristics of institutional cultures are often taken for granted by members of the college or university (Kuh & Whitt, 1988), making it difficult for those individuals to see or understand the very cultures that drive institutional policies, programs, and practices. Therefore, institutional leaders should make a concerted effort to utilize regular culture audits and assessments that "make the familiar strange" and make the taken-for-granted aspects of the campus culture apparent (Whitt, 1993), in order to understand which aspects of their cultures facilitate or impede success among racial and ethnic minority students on their respective campuses.

Institutional leaders should also consider the importance of cultivating a networking culture. This would require both developing strong networking values and creating structures to connect racial and ethnic minority students to those networks early in their college careers. Promoting and emphasizing communication and collaboration across campuses can help prevent the formation of silos, strengthen social networks, and increase racial and ethnic minority students' access to resources. Moreover, an important aspect of establishing a culture in which networking is highly valued and influences behavior may be immediately teaching new students, when they matriculate, that networking is an important component of the culture of their respective colleges and universities. Institutions could send this message by hosting networking events with explicit messages about the importance of networking to acculturate incoming first-year students.

Campus leaders should also allocate enough resources to ensure that targeted support programs reach a large proportion of students of color and that those programs are integrated into the larger networks of support programs and offices. Although targeted support programs exist on campuses across the nation, it is unclear how many of those programs are intentionally integrated into the broader institutional support networks at those institutions. This is an impor-

tant consideration because there is some indication that the effectiveness of targeted support programs could depend, in part, on the extent to which they are integrated into those larger networks (Museus, 2010).

In addition, institutional leaders should make efforts to cultivate cultures in which students see administrators, faculty, and staff as human beings. At institutions where it is normal for those institutional agents to send signals to students that they care about and are committed to the success of those undergraduates, racial and ethnic minority students might be more likely to perceive that the institution is invested in them and consequently be more motivated to succeed. Institutions could send such messages through the intentional organization of social events that allow faculty to interact with their students. Indeed, although such activity does occur at some institutions, many students can easily go through their entire undergraduate education without having any social interaction with faculty members on many campuses across the nation.

College and university leaders should also make concerted efforts to cultivate campus cultures in which faculty, administrators, and staff assume a responsibility to bring support services, opportunities, and information to racial and ethnic minority students, rather than expecting students to seek out, identify, and pursue those services on their own. Promoting an environment in which college personnel perceive it as normal not only to inform students of color about various academic, financial, and social support services, but also to pressure those undergraduates to utilize such services could be critical in efforts to increase success among racial and ethnic minority students. For example, institutional leaders could encourage support units across the university to develop plans—or expand existing ones—for intentionally reaching out to students who might not otherwise come seek their services.

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