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2012

The role of institutional agents and social capital in the experiences of minority college students

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SELECTEDWORKS™

Delineating the Ways That Key Institutional Agents Provide Racial Minority Students With Access to Social Capital in College

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This study focuses on the characteristics of institutional agents who can and do facilitate racial minority student success by providing them with access to social capital in college. Individual semi-structured interviews with 60 Asian American, Black, and Latino undergraduates reveal that key institutional agents who positively influence those participants' success and provide them with access to social capital share four common characteristics: They (a) Share common ground with those students, (b) provide holistic support for those students, (c) humanize the educational experience, and (d) provide proactive support for those students. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Racial minority students* continue to suffer from noticeable racial disparities in baccalaureate degree attainment. For example, according to data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 59% of White students who begin higher education at a 4-year college complete a bachelor's degree within 6 years, compared with 40% of Black and 47% of Hispanic students (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Whereas Asian Americans complete bachelor's degrees at relatively high rates in the aggregate (65%), disaggregated data suggest that some ethnic subgroups within the Asian American population hold college degrees at rates lower than any other racial group (Museus, 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). For example, Pakistani Americans (57%), East Indian Americans (55%), and Chinese Americans (54%) hold bachelor's degrees at over twice the rate of the national population (28%), whereas their Vietnamese American (26%), Hmong American (14%), Cambodian American (13%), and Laotian American (12%), counterparts hold 4-year degrees at rates far lower than the national average (Museus, 2011; Jayakumar & Museus, 2012).

The relatively low rates of baccalaureate degree attainment among racial minority undergraduates pose negative consequences for individual students, institutions, and broader society (Baum & Payea, 2005; Swail, 2004). For example, the ramifications of these low rates of educational success for individual students include forgone wages during college enrollment, accrued debt that results from the costs of education, time invested in unsuccessful educational endeavors, and lower lifetime earnings. Addressing the low rates of attainment among racial minority students is a complex task, because a wide range of factors contribute to premature departure among students of color, including failure to connect meaningfully to their institutions, negative or unwelcoming campus environments, and an inability for some to pay for a college education

* For the purposes of this study, "racial minority college students" and "students of color" are used interchangeably.

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(Cabrera, Nora, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Hagedorn, 1999; Cabrera, Stampen, & Hansen, 1990; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008; Museus & Quaye, 2009).

In light of these low rates of degree attainment and the negative consequences that accompany them, it is critical for college educators to better understand how they can most effectively foster success among their racial minority students. Although evidence indicates that institutional agents connecting with racial minority undergraduates can be a critical factor in those students' success (Guiffrida, 2005; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Museus & Ravello, 2010; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000), there is limited understanding of how institutional agents foster such success. Indeed, the dominant paradigm that emphasizes students' role in determining their outcomes and lack of attention paid to the role of practitioners in determining the success of their students has been noted as a critical limitation of higher education research (Bensimon, 2007). In response, the purpose of the current inquiry is to increase existing levels of knowledge regarding how key institutional agents† can and do facilitate success among racial minority undergraduates by providing them with access to social capital in college.

SOCIAL CAPITAL, TRUST, AND CLOSURE AS A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF INSTITUTIONAL AGENTS

The concepts of social capital, trust, and closure can be useful in understanding the impact that institutional agents can and do have on the experiences and outcomes of college students of color. Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital in the following way:

> Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a credential which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (p. 248–249)

Bourdieu also posited that the volume of capital possessed by an agent was a function of two factors: (a) the size of the social networks to which one is connected, and (b) the volume of capital possessed by the various agents belonging to those networks. Social capital has been associated with positive educational experiences and outcomes both at the K-12 and college levels (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Museus, 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Palmer & Gasman, 2008).

Institutional agents can connect racial minority students to social capital (i.e., information and support) in the broader social networks at an institution and, in turn, facilitate their success (Museus, 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Stanton-Salazar has highlighted the salience of institutional agents and social capital in the experiences of racial minority students at the K-12 level. He asserts that agents who are committed to the success of students of color can provide them with social capital by offering them various funds of knowledge (e.g., information about social norms and cultural nuances), serving as human bridges between them and social networks, and providing them with opportunities to engage in educational activities, programs,

† For the purposes of this article, "institutional agents" and "agents" refer to college faculty, administrators, and staff. We recognize that peers also can constitute important institutional agents, but we focus on individuals who work as postsecondary educators herein. Alternatively, the term "key institutional agent" or "key agent" refers to faculty, administrators, and staff that participants identified as having a positive impact on their success.

and opportunities across their organizations. Finally, Stanton-Salazar notes that institutional agents can advocate for students, role model behavior, provide emotional and moral support, and impart evaluative feedback, advice, and guidance.

Whereas Stanton-Salazar (1997) was primarily focused on the influence of institutional agents on racial minority students in K through 12 schools, this perspective can be applied to supporting students of color in higher education as well. Rendón and colleagues (2000), for example, explained how institutional agents can facilitate the socialization and success of racial minority college students by conveying important cultural knowledge to and acting as role models for those undergraduates. Indeed, a substantial body of evidence suggests that agents do play an important role in shaping the experiences of college students in general, and racial minority undergraduates at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) in particular. Few scholars, however, have utilized social capital frameworks to systematically examine these relationships.

To understand how institutional agents can provide racial minority college students with access to social capital, it is important to understand the concepts of trust and closure, and these two concepts are central to the current study. Coleman (1988, 1990) asserts that social capital is embedded within interpersonal relationships, and the creation of social capital is related to the establishment of mutual "trust" among people involved in those relationships. Coleman also argues that "closure" (i.e., close connections between social actors) is important in maintaining and reproducing social capital among social agents within social networks. Thus, considering the work of Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988, 1990), it can be argued that the amount of social capital to which college students of color have access is a function of (a) their meaningful relationships with institutional agents (i.e., their strong ties with institutional agents that are based on trust), (b) the size of the social networks to which those agents belong, (c) the trust and closure that exists among agents within those networks, and (d) the amount of resources possessed by institutional agents within those social networks. As we note in the following section, the role of social capital, trust, and closure in agent–student relationships has received limited attention in research on minority student success.

THE IMPACT OF INSTITUTIONAL AGENTS ON RACIAL MINORITY COLLEGE STUDENTS' SUCCESS

Existing empirical research suggests that both White and racial minority institutional agents can and do shape the experiences of college students of color at PWIs (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt, 1995; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Guiffrida, 2005; Museus & Ravello, 2010; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Literature on the impact of White institutional agents illustrates how they can influence the experiences of racial minority students, both negatively and positively. On one hand, that evidence demonstrates how White faculty at PWIs can contribute to negative experiences among students of color (Feagin et al., 1996; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). For example, Feagin and colleagues (1996) qualitatively examined the experience of Black students at PWIs and concluded that many of those students perceived White faculty as difficult to interact with because they demonstrated insensitivity to African-American culture, made stereotypical comments, and expected Black students to represent their entire race. There is also evidence, however, suggesting that Black students value relationships with White faculty who exhibit genuine interest in

their college experiences and success (Fries-Britt, 1995). Existing research also highlights the importance of racial minority college students connecting with faculty and other institutional agents of color (Burrell, 1980; Guiffrida, 2005; Sedlacek, 1987). Guiffrida, for example, qualitatively examined the impact of faculty on the experiences of 19 Black undergraduates. He concluded that the vast majority of faculty members who were student centered and positively influenced participants' experiences were Black.

Indeed, a growing body of empirical evidence underscores a variety of ways that institutional agents, especially faculty, can have a positive impact on the experiences of college students of color (e.g., Cole & Barber, 2003; Guiffrida, 2005; Hernandez, 2000; Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 1986; Smith, 2007; Watson et al., 2002). These studies suggest that educators who validate the cultural backgrounds of students of color, go above and beyond their normal duties, and exhibit a high degree of concern, support, and advocacy for racial minority undergraduates can have a positive impact on their college experiences and outcomes. Museus and Quaye, for example, analyzed existing literature and the voices of 30 college students of color and concluded that individual institutional agents might positively influence the persistence of racial minority students to whom they are connected if those agents emphasize academic achievement, value educational attainment, and validate their students' cultural backgrounds.

Few scholars have examined the role of institutional agents in the experiences and outcomes of racial minority students using social capital frameworks (Benismon, 2007; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Smith, 2007). Researchers who do employ such frameworks offer findings consistent with previously mentioned studies that underscore the importance of agents in racial minority students' experiences, but they also add to that literature by highlighting factors that contribute to strong relationships between institutional agents and students of color. Smith, for example, concluded that a key element of the relationships between mentors and Black college students was the establishment of norms, such as maintaining regular contact and respecting each other's confidentiality. Indeed, such norms can contribute to the development of trust and closure between mentors and Black college students (Coleman, 1988, 1990). These studies make important contributions to the knowledge base, but they have important limitations, including their small sample sizes and focus on Black students at research universities. With regard to the latter limitation, researchers have not yet examined how institutional agents shape the experiences and outcomes of Asian American and Latino college students using social capital frameworks. Through the current examination, we aim to address some of those limitations and fill existing gaps in empirical literature.

PURPOSE

The current investigation contributes to existing literature on racial minority college students' experiences and outcomes in two primary ways. First, it is the first empirical analysis to utilize the concepts of social capital, as well as the related concepts of trust and closure, as a framework to examine the impact of institutional agents on the experiences and outcomes of Asian American, Black, and Latino undergraduates. Second, our inquiry adds to existing research by using the concepts of social capital, trust, and closure to examine the role of institutional agents in the experiences of college students of color across a range of institutional sizes, controls, locations, and classifications.

One overarching question guided this inquiry: What are the characteristics of key institutional agents who provide racial minority students with access to social capital in college? Three additional questions were explored: (a) What are the characteristics of institutional agents that foster trust in their relationships with racial minority undergraduates? (b) What are the characteristics of institutional agents that create closure (i.e., close bonds) in their relationships with college students of color? (c) What are the characteristics of institutional agents that provide racial minority students with access to important resources (information and support)?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our conceptual framework was based on Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualization of social capital and Coleman's (1990) perspective regarding how social capital is created and maintained through trust and closure. As mentioned, Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 248). In addition, Coleman (1990) asserts that social capital is embedded within interpersonal relationships, and it is created through the establishment of mutual "trust" among people in those relationships. Coleman also argues that "closure" (i.e., close connections between individuals) is important in maintaining and reproducing social capital among actors within social networks. Together, the perspectives of Bourdieu and Coleman can provide a useful framework for understanding how agents can provide students of color with access to social capital by providing them with access to important resources, as well as cultivating meaningful relationships that are based on trust and closure with those students.

METHODS

We employed qualitative techniques in the current investigation. We chose to utilize qualitative methods in this study because qualitative techniques allow for the exploration of a topic or concept through the use of detailed information and are most appropriate for answering "how" and "what" research questions (Creswell, 1997). Phenomenology is a useful approach for understanding an individual's or a group's lived experience (Moustakas, 1994), and it was the methodological approach initially employed to guide data collection in an effort to understand how students of color experience the cultures of PWIs. However, in this analysis, we focused on identifying characteristics of institutional agents who provide students of color with access to social capital, rather than the lived experiences of students, so we employed general qualitative thematic analyses techniques to examine the data (Aronson, 1994).

Study Sites and Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling procedures were employed in site and participant selection to achieve intensity and variation in the sample. Whereas intensity focuses on the acquisition of information-rich cases, variation is aimed at identifying themes that cut across diversity within samples (Patton, 2002). Thus, we sought institutions that spanned a wide range of institutional characteristics and students of color from a variety of racial groups to maximize the applicability of our findings to different types of institutions and racial minority undergraduates. With regard to site selection, four PWIs were chosen to serve as sites for this study, which varied on a wide range of institutional characteristics. The four institutions included two research universities, one comprehensive university, and one community college. Three of the participating institutions were rural and one was urban. The campuses also included a small institution (total enrollment under 8,000),

two medium institutions (total enrollment of just over 12,000 and 17,000 students), and one large (total enrollment over 45,000) institution.

Purposeful sampling was utilized to achieve intensity and variation in the participant sample as well (Patton, 2002). In selecting interview participants for the examination, intensity and variation were utilized to choose participants who could provide rich insights into the environments at the four institutions and represented three different racial minority populations (e.g., Asian American, Black, and Latino). Specifically, administrators and staff members at the four participating institutions were asked to recommend racial minority students who were knowledgeable about the wide range of environments across their respective campuses. The final participant sample consisted of 60 students of color—20 Asian American, 21 Black, and 19 Latino—across the four PWIs. With one exception, all students were traditional college age (18–24 years old). The sample included 39 women and 21 men. Participants were involved in a wide range of academic and social environments on their campuses (e.g., ethnic organizations, cultural centers, equal opportunity programs, transfer support programs, and mentoring programs).

Data Collection

Each student in the sample participated in a 60- to 90-minute, face-to-face, individual interview. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach to allow for flexibility and responsiveness to the emergence of unexpected themes (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The interview protocol consisted of a list of concepts and general questions about the impact of various institutional factors on participants' experiences. One concept included in the protocol was institutional agents. Questions that corresponded to that concept and that were designed to solicit the participants' perspectives regarding agents who positively shaped their experiences included the following: (a) Are there specific people who have been instrumental in your ability to adjust to college? (b) Are there any other people who have played a critical role in your college experience? (c) What are some of the things those individuals have done to help you adjust during your college experience? The semi-structured approach permitted participants' responses and subsequent probing questions to guide the remainder of the discussion about the role of institutional agents in their experiences in college.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began immediately after the first interview was completed, and was conducted using methods prescribed by Moustakas (1994) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). First, the NVivo Qualitative Research Software package (QSR International, Cambridge, MA) was used to organize and code the data. Textural–structural descriptions were constructed to gain a better understanding of each student's experiences, as well as how various institutional agents influenced those experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Then, open- and axial-coding were used to inductively generate themes in the interview transcripts. First, open-coding procedures were used to identify 15 invariant constituents across the individual interview transcripts. After those invariant constituents were identified, they were clustered into five thematic categories. Finally, axial coding was utilized to deductively illuminate the various components of each category. Those final five categories and their ten corresponding properties are presented and discussed in the following sections.

Researcher Subjectivity and Reflexivity

Although some qualitative researchers have attempted to minimize the impact of researcher

subjectivity on qualitative inquiry (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), others have adopted a constructivist perspective and advocated for a recognition of the importance of researcher reflexivity, or the identification and understanding of biases and assumptions that can affect researchers' decisions and interpretations (Charmaz, 2005). The latter approach, which we employ here, allows one to embrace their subjectivity and incorporate it into the discourse of research. The lead researcher identifies as a multiracial, racial minority and was once an undergraduate at a PWI. His experiences as a racial minority student and scholar studying the experiences of students of color shape his biases. The second co-researcher identifies as a White student affairs educator and doctoral candidate conducting research on the impact that faculty of color have on the experiences of racial minority students, which has shaped her perceptions and biases. At the time this study was conducted, both researchers believed that low rates of persistence and completion among students of color is problematic and institutional agents have the power to facilitate success among this population.

Quality Assurance and Trustworthiness

Although internal and external validity are important considerations in the measurement and generalizability of results in quantitative research, quality assurance and trustworthiness in qualitative research are generally determined by the degree of credibility and transferability of findings. Credibility refers to the congruence of the findings with reality, while transferability refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to situations outside of the cases being studied (Merriam, 1998). First, as mentioned, purposeful sampling procedures were utilized to acquire samples across a range of racial groups and institutional types to maximize the transferability of our findings to different contexts (Patton, 2002). Several additional methods prescribed by Lincoln and Guba (1986) were utilized to maximize trustworthiness of the findings. Triangulation (i.e., the convergence of multiple data sources) was employed to analyze interview transcripts, code reports, textural–structural descriptions, and researcher notes to cross-check and verify emergent themes. In addition, member checks were conducted with 12 students, or 20% of the sample, to ensure congruence between researcher interpretations and students' perceptions. Specifically, those participants were sent textural–structural descriptions of their experiences and asked to provide feedback. Two peer debriefers, who are knowledgeable about racial minority college students' experiences, also engaged with the lead researcher in discussions regarding the meanings of the interview data. Finally, throughout the analysis, discrepant data were sought and examined to help identify alternative hypotheses and continuously question and examine our theoretical presuppositions.

Limitations

Despite efforts to ensure quality in the current investigation, there are at least three limitations that warrant consideration when interpreting the findings. First, the following findings are context bound and cannot be generalized to colleges and universities outside of the four institutions that participated in the inquiry. However, as discussed in the previous section, qualitative researchers are more concerned with credibility and transferability of findings than with generalizability. Second, selection bias constitutes another limitation to the current inquiry. That is, if interviewed, other students of color at the four institutions included in this study might have given very different perspectives with regard to how institutional agents help to foster success among students of color on those campuses. Finally, a third

limitation is related to researcher interpretation of the data. As discussed in the section on subjectivity and reflexivity, it can be argued that bias can influence the analysis of data in all qualitative research (Charmaz, 2005). It is likely that our own experiences with faculty, administrators, and staff during college, as well as our experiences working with students in higher education, have shaped our own biases with regard to what makes an effective educator. As mentioned, efforts were made to question such biases and consider their influence on data analysis throughout the examination.

FINDINGS

In this section, we describe four important characteristics of the key institutional agents who students in our sample reported had a positive impact on their experiences and success by providing those participants with access to social capital through cultivating trust and closure within their relationships with participants, providing participants with resources (i.e., information and support), and connecting participants with larger information and support networks across their campus. First, participants underscored the importance of key institutional agents with whom they shared common ground, such as racial background or similar educational experiences, which allowed them to develop trust in those agents. Second, participants highlighted the importance of key institutional agents who provided them with holistic support. Third, participants discussed the positive impact of key institutional agents who humanized the educational experience, which permitted the development of closure in their relationships with students of color. Last, participants underscored the importance of key agents who espouse proactive philosophies, which enabled them to connect racial minority students with important information and support. We acknowledge that the four themes are not mutually exclusive. In fact, participants often underscored how two or three of the themes manifested in their relationship with a single agent on their campuses.

Sharing Common Ground: "She Knows My Situation"

First, key institutional agents who help minority participants to cultivate social capital share common ground with those racial minority students. That common ground helps agents to establish trust and closure with participants, which are two factors that are critical in the creation and maintenance of social capital in relationships between social actors (Coleman, 1988, 1990). Although there are many types of commonalties that key agents and students can share, we discuss and provide examples of three of the most frequently mentioned types of common ground herein: Common cultural backgrounds, common experiences, and common knowledge about the student's experiences. Participants' quotations highlight how these commonalties contribute to their establishment of trust and closure in relationships with those agents.

When asked about key institutional agents who had a positive impact on their experiences, most of the participants in our study mentioned agents who are also people of color. The quotation from the following student provides an example:

> I love my counselor, to tell you the truth. I don't know about the other counselors, but I guess I got the right one. At first, I didn't even know that she speaks Spanish, so I was talking to her for a year or two in English and sometimes I would forget a word, until one time she was hearing Spanish music and I was like, "Do you understand that?" She was like, "Chicana." Knowing that she was Hispanic, I began to talk to her more often because I felt more confident. [Latino engineering major]

As this student illustrates, participants described how sharing racial and cultural backgrounds with agents helps them cultivate an increased level of trust with those agents.

Several participants also noted other commonalities that contribute to their increased comfort with both racial minority and White institutional agents on their campuses. As the following quotation demonstrates, shared experiences can allow institutional agents to develop stronger bonds or closer relationships with their students of color:

> At the end of my freshman year, I was taking O-Chem. I got a C–. It was a tough transition period, once I got to college and saw other people that were of my caliber and saw my grades drop. I look back and I really appreciate my advisor being there for me. . . . He basically told me that he experienced the same thing back in college. He told me the steps he took and he said, "I can't decide for you. Only you can decide for yourself. However, I can show you what I did and you can decide whether you should go my route or not." Just having academic advisors that have gone through it is important. This academic advisor has gone through what I've gone through. He had a bad grade in O-Chem as well. He decided not to become a doctor because he didn't want to do it for a lot of reasons. But he said, "If you want to become a doctor, then you still can do it." I was just really struggling the second semester in that class. He just reaffirmed the fact that I can do it, as cheesy as it is. Having an academic advisor that has gone through the same things—it really helps. [Vietnamese American male biochemistry student]

This quotation demonstrates how the primary reason that common backgrounds and common experiences facilitate higher levels of trust among students and agents is because it contributes to those agents' increased understanding of the experiences of participants. The following quotation illustrates how some students highlighted this common understanding of the students' experiences as being an important characteristic of institutional agents:

> If I have a problem or question, I go to my advisor because I know her. I talk to her. She knows my situation. I don't have to re-explain a bunch of stuff and she can give me the best answer, even if it means telling me to go speak with someone else. I definitely talk to her first. [Korean American female advertising major]

These quotations underscore the importance of racial minority students connecting with key agents who understand their experiences, but they also highlight how common ground allows students of color to develop a heightened trust that those key institutional agents will be able to help them if they have a problem that must be addressed.

Providing Holistic Support: "I Can Go to Her for Anything"

The second theme that emerged from the analysis is the provision of holistic support, which is a salient form of social capital that institutional agents can provide racial minority students. Participants underscored how key agents provide them with holistic support that manifests in two ways: Understanding that minority students' problems are rarely isolated to one aspect (e.g., academic, financial) of their college experience and an assumed responsibility for ensuring those students access to the support they need, regardless of their problems.

First, participants described how key institutional agents transcend their professional roles to be involved in multiple aspects of their lives. For example, faculty members who are key agents speak to the participants about more than curricular topics and academic advisors who were identified as key institutional

agents address more than academic issues with the students. As the following illustrates, participants identified agents to whom they feel they can discuss a variety of aspects—whether academic, cultural, social, or psychological—of their experience:

> Sometimes, you have this special relationship with them. They get into you. For example, my counselor really helped me a lot . . . not only in school, but my personal stuff too. She got into, you know, caring, like into my life. I was really like "Wow. This is better." She's not just like "How are you doing in school? How is school going?" She also talks to me about not getting involved in gangs and all this kind of stuff. I like that they get into my life, instead of just into my school work. [Latino engineering major]

Another participant described a faculty member who has a positive impact on her experience and, in doing so, underscored the importance of her conversations outside of the classroom with that instructor. She also explained how the faculty member gives her advice and provides her with support in nonacademic areas during these interactions:

> I was struggling in all my classes, and I would go in and just talk to her about making up tests. I felt really comfortable with her, so I could talk to her about what was really going on, and she was very supportive of me, and she was very helpful. We could talk about different things, like how I was planning on going to Korea and she would be very supportive and give me advice. She was easy to talk to. When I see her now, even though I'm not in a class with her, I still talk to her. I really cared about that class too . . . because of her. I just really liked her. [Korean American female education major]

The second way in which key agents provide participants with holistic support is by addressing the diverse challenges of participants through bridging the students to larger campus support networks to help solve their problems. One student demonstrated the importance of this bridging to support networks as she described her relationship with her academic advisor:

> I can go to her for anything. Like yesterday, I had a problem and she just solved it in seconds. She said, "Okay, just take this upstairs and you're done," and that's it. And, she called up to find out and everything. So, regardless, I can go to her for anything, and she's always going to be there [Latina engineering major]

This bridging to campus support networks allows agents to connect students with necessary information and support that they may not otherwise be able to provide. Moreover, as the previous quotation demonstrates, racial minority participants often expressed that they trust that they can go to key institutional agents with their problems.

Humanizing the Educational Experience: "He's More Than a Teacher . . . More Like a Friend"

The third theme emerging from the data was the fact that key institutional agents who have a positive impact on participants humanized the educational experience. This theme consisted of two components. First, participants explained how key institutional agents could be seen as authentic human beings, rather than just another instructor or administrator. Second, key institutional agents were noted for actually and genuinely caring about their racial minority students' success. The authenticity of institutional agents contributed to closure in relationships between those agents and participants in our sample. One participant, for example, stated the following when she described the authenticity of a faculty member who she finds encouraging:

> She was encouraging. She always talked about values and ethics, and she put things in layman's terms so that you understood, whereas a lot of teachers don't. They like to use big words and they like to impress you with all the things they've done. She would just come into class with her motorcycle helmet on still. She was out of the ordinary [Latina policy major]

Similarly, another participant described how the authenticity of one key institutional agent who had a positive impact on his experience:

> He is always laughing, and he makes jokes too. We know that he is the boss, and we can't really cuss or do anything bad in front of him. We feel confident with him because he isn't perfect either. Sometimes he cusses too. Somehow, we see him as one of us. We don't see him as a director or think that we should do homework and be scared of him because, if he wants, he can kick us out. We have confidence to talk and joke with him and stuff like that, but we respect him. [Black male engineering major]

As these quotations demonstrate, participants associate that perceived authenticity of key institutional agents with feelings of encouragement, confidence, comfort, and respect for those agents. Thus, they also show how the authenticity of those institutional agents allowed them to develop closer bonds with their students of color.

Participants also described how key institutional agents cared about and are committed to their success. A quotation from the following student demonstrates this:

> I think they honestly get to know you one-on-one. I know that, when I was in high school, they said that college is not going to be the same as being in high school and teachers won't even care. But, these teachers, if you are gone, they will ask you, "Is everything OK? Were you sick?" It seems like they do care. [Latina undeclared major]

The fact that participants perceived key institutional agents as genuinely caring for their success was associated with closure, or close agent–student relationships. This is illustrated by several participants, such as the following student, who referred to these agents as friends:

> I met my math teacher. He was the one who taught me engineering. He said, "I see something in you and you're really positive and you can do all this stuff." He got me into some program that I didn't even know existed, so he really motivated me. Now when I see him he is always telling me to come to his office and he advises me about what things to do and how to do them better. He's more than a teacher to me, more like a friend. [Latino engineering major]

Indeed, the description of institutional agents who humanize the educational experiences as friends illuminates the close ties that exist between those agents and our participants.

Espousing Proactive Philosophies: "He's Always Checking on Me"

The fourth and final theme emerging from the data was related to the philosophies espoused by key institutional agents. Participants described how key agents' espoused proactive philosophy led to them providing their students with access to social capital by connecting them with important information and support. This philosophy is characterized by two components: A behavioral component in the form of agents taking initiative to proactively provide students with information and support, and an affective component in the form of those agents demonstrating a personal investment in the success of their students. Several participants discussed how agents who had a positive impact on their experience were always checking in and proactively engaging them, thereby proactively bringing social capital in the form of information and

support to them, as illustrated by the following student's comment:

> The Director of [support program] has been an important person in my experience. I see him every day. And, every time I go into his office, he's asking "You're doing your homework right?" And, I have to say "Yeah." If I'm not doing it, then sometimes I start doing it because he reminds me that I should. He's always checking on me. [Latino business major]

This participant expressed that he had made the choice to transfer to Community College because of his experience with the institutional agent.

When institutional agents take initiative to proactively bring information and support to their racial minority college students, they can convey to those students that they are invested in their undergraduate experience and success. This is the second manifestation of the espoused proactive philosophy of key institutional agents: Demonstrating a personal investment in the success of their racial minority college students. This is illustrated by the following comment:

> My counselor, he tells me "I know you can do it," then he gives me advice. He really tells you what he thinks and I like that. And, if I don't meet his expectations, sometimes he'll ask, "What happened? What's wrong with you?" It forces you think about what you did wrong. Then I'll say, "Oh, I messed up" and he'll ask, "But, why? Why did you mess up?" He tells me, "You know . . . this is serious. Show me how much you want stuff." He tells you what he thinks and, for me, it really works out. I'll be thinking to myself, "Man, he thinks that about me? I can do it." [Latino undeclared major]

This participant's quotation underscores how key institutional agents can convey that they are invested in the success of those students, but it also demonstrates how the proactive philosophy and behavior of institutional agents helps them cultivate closure in their relationships with students of color in our participant sample.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this investigation both confirm and build upon previous research in several ways. As mentioned, with the exception of a few studies (e.g., Bensimon, 2007; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Smith, 2007), higher education researchers have not utilized social capital as a framework for understanding the impact of institutional agents on the experiences and success of college students of color. This investigation adds to existing empirical literature by providing the first analysis that utilizes social capital, trust, and closure as a conceptual framework to understand the impact that institutional agents can have on Asian American, Black, and Latino college students. Moreover, this is the first inquiry that employs such a framework to examine the experiences of racial minority students across a wide range of institutional types—including 2- and 4-year, large and small, private and public, and rural and urban colleges. From the findings, we draw five conclusions that we outline in the remainder of this section.

First, findings of this inquiry reinforce earlier assertions about the importance of racial minority students connecting with faculty, administrators, and staff who share their racial and ethnic backgrounds (Burrell, 1980; Guiffrida, 2005; Sedlacek, 1987). Indeed, several participants spoke of the importance of agents who shared their racial and ethnic backgrounds in their educational experience. What our findings add to previous literature in this area is evidence that institutional agents' ability to share common experiences and knowledge with racial minority students might be as equally important as those agents'

racial and cultural backgrounds because it is another form of common ground that can allow trust to develop within those relationships. Although research has underscored the notion that shared experiences and trust are more important than racial and power differentials in mentoring relationships (Beyene, Anglin, Sanchez, & Ballou, 2002; Haring, 1997; Lee, 1999), our findings highlight the importance of these common experiences and trust in racial minority students' relationships with a range of minority and White agents, including faculty, cultural center directors, and academic advisors.

Second, our finding that underscores the importance of holistic support buttresses earlier assertions that institutional agents who transcend academic discussions and provide more holistic support for Black undergraduates may be especially effective at fostering success among those students (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Guiffrida, 2005; Smith, 2007). However, this phenomenon has not been explored in the experiences of other college students of color. Thus, the findings of our inquiry add to existing literature by illustrating how key institutional agents' willingness to provide their students with holistic support may be a critical factor in the success of Asian American and Latina/o, as well as Black, students in college.

Third, this holistic support finding also contributes to previous research by offering empirical evidence that institutional agents can increase racial minority college students' access to social capital by serving as bridges to the support networks that exist across their campuses and the resources existing within those networks. Bourdieu (1986) explained that the social capital possessed by an individual is, in part, a function of their connections to social networks. And, Stanton-Salazar (1997) described how institutional agents can serve as bridges to those social and support networks within K-12 educational organizations. Students in our study confirm that institutional agents can and do help them foster social capital by serving as a conduit to the support networks that exist across their campuses, allowing those agents to more effectively meet the needs of students of color via their increased ability to connect those students with appropriate resources and support. Our findings also suggest that holistic support might be critical because it can foster racial minority students' trust in the agent's ability and desire to help them to find the necessary information and support to resolve their issues.

A fourth conclusion that we draw from this investigation is that humanizing the educational experience may be a critical factor in creating academic environments that are conducive to racial minority student success. This is consistent with literature suggesting that institutional agents who show concern and genuinely care about their student's well-being can positively influence those students' experiences (Cole & Barber, 2003; Fries-Britt, 1995; Guiffrida, 2005; Hernandez, 2000; Jackson et al., 2003; Nettles et al., 1986; Watson et al., 2002). Our finding, however, adds to this literature by underscoring the importance of minority students perceiving agents as human beings and friends, which can be a critical factor in educators' abilities to cultivate closure in relationships with undergraduates of color.

Finally, our finding that proactive philosophies are an important characteristic of institutional agents both confirms and adds to previous research. The affective component of this proactive philosophies theme, or the conveyance of institutional agents' investment in racial minority students' success, is similar to the findings in earlier investigations (Cole & Barber, 2003; Guiffrida, 2005; Hernandez, 2000; Jackson et al., 2003; Nettles et al., 1986; Watson et al., 2002). The behavioral aspect of this component, however, adds to existing literature on the role of institutional agents by

underscoring a critical characteristic of agents: The ways in which they proactively reach out and bring information and support to racial minority students, rather than just effectively serve students once they have sought and found support themselves.

Implications for Research

The findings of the current study have important implications for future research and practice. With regard to future research, scholars should utilize frameworks that incorporate social capital, trust, and closure into the analysis of how institutions and institutional agents can and do have an impact on other underserved college student populations. Indeed, this inquiry provides evidence that employing such frameworks can yield valuable information about how institutions and individuals can help promote success among underserved populations. Of course, one limitation of the current examination is its focus on racial minority college students. Future empirical inquiries, therefore, could employ similar conceptual frameworks to examine how institutional agents can and do foster success among other underserved college student populations, which includes low-income students, first-generation undergraduates, and women who are underrepresented in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Second, future research on the relationships between institutional agents and college students should take into account heterogeneity and examine differential experiences across subpopulations. In the current study, no racial differences in participants' experiences emerged in our analysis of data. However, we focused on uncovering and highlighting themes that cut across three racial minority groups. We did not examine differences across racial groups, nor did we examine how experiences might have varied by gender or generational status (e.g., first-generation immigrants versus second-generation racial minorities). Accordingly, future research could explore how institutional agents might exhibit a similar or different influence on White and minority, first- or second-generation, and male and female college students.

Implications for Institutional Policy and Practice

The findings of this examination yield important implications for policy and practice in institutions of higher education as well. First and foremost, we echo earlier calls about the importance of hiring faculty, administrators, and staff of color (Fleming, 1984; Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, & Willson, 1999; Loo & Rolison, 1986). In addition, however, we underscore the importance of institutional leaders hiring White faculty, administrators, and staff members who are willing and able to go above and beyond normal duties to provide students of color with holistic, caring, and proactive support. Although these seem like obvious and overstated recommendations, the continuing reality is that such considerations are often not intentionally infused throughout faculty, administrator, and staff hiring process. Consequently, we believe this is the most important implication emerging from our analysis.

Second, postsecondary educators should make concerted efforts to understand the cultures from which their racial minority students come, the problems that their minority undergraduates face, and the needs of those students of color. Again, this might seem like an obvious recommendation, but it is also evident that educators do not always invest sufficient time and energy in understanding their students' cultural backgrounds or needs (see, for example, Suzuki, 2002). Only when institutional agents make such efforts can they ensure that they are effectively meeting the

needs of the students of color whom they serve.

College educators should also make efforts to provide racial minority students with holistic support and humanize the educational experience. Indeed, participants in this study saw the most important institutional agents in their lives as trustworthy because they could help those students to gain access resources and support to solve any problem, and they genuinely cared about the participants' success. Therefore, one way that postsecondary educators can effectively humanize the educational experience is by establishing multifaceted relationships with their racial minority college students. For example, faculty can engage students in discussions that transcend academics, and student affairs educators can engage in cultural activities with students of color to develop common knowledge and common experiences with their minority students.

Finally, by maintaining high levels of communication and collaboration across offices, programs, and institutional agents on their respective campuses, postsecondary educators can maximize their ability to effectively serve racial minority students. Specifically, such integration into campus networks can help to ensure that institutional agents are connected to the resources necessary to effectively provide holistic support for students of color. Racial/ethnic minority students face complex problems in college that can be at the intersection of multiple issues such as academic adjustment, financial strife, depression, and social isolation. In the face of such complex problems, it may be difficult for any one faculty member, advisor, counselor, or administrator to solve all of their students' problems. Thus, it is important for institutional agents to serve as bridges between minority students and the resources and support they require.

CONCLUSION

During her 2007 presidential address at the Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Estela Bensimon powerfully articulated the following point:

> In higher education, the dominant paradigm of student success is based exclusively on personal characteristics of students that have been found to correlate with persistence and graduation . . . if our goal is to do scholarship that makes a difference in the lives of students whom higher education has been least successful in educating, we have to expand the scholarship on student success and take into account the influence of practitioners—positively and negatively. (pp. 443-445)

We conclude this article by echoing Bensimon's call for more scholarship on the role of practitioners in positively and negatively influencing students' experiences and outcomes, including those of racial minority students. Our study makes a small contribution to knowledge regarding the useful ways of examining the impact that practitioners can have on students of color, but much remains to be learned about their influence. Such understandings, however, are absolutely essential if postsecondary educators are to maximize the extent to which they contribute to the success of their racial minority students.

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