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# Toward an Intercultural Perspective of Racial and Ethnic Minority College Student Persistence

*Samuel D. Museus and Stephen John Quaye*

Over half of all students who enter higher education will fail to complete a bachelor's degree within six years (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002; Tinto, 1993). These high rates of failure are accompanied by a broad array of negative consequences for individual students and for society at large (Baum & Payea, 2005; Choy & Li, 2005; Swail, 2004). For example, on average, the annual individual income of high school graduates is only 62% of their college graduate counterparts (Baum & Payea, 2005). Additional negative implications of failing to complete a college degree for students include money spent on tuition and fees, accrued debt, and invested time in educational endeavors that do not result in the benefits that accompany a college degree (Baum & Payea, 2005; Choy & Li, 2005; Kelly, 2005; Swail,

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2004). The cumulative negative effects of lower levels of degree attainment on broader society are diverse and debilitating as well. Moreover, high school graduates contribute only 56% of what bachelor's degree recipients pay in local, state, and federal taxes. In addition to decreased tax revenues, those negative consequences include ramifications, such as higher total incarceration rates, lower levels of academic preparation among future generations, and lower rates of civic participation among American citizens (Baum & Payea, 2005; Swail, 2004).

In light of these considerations, fostering college student success has never been more important (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). In fact, forecasts suggest that, in the near future, approximately 80% of all high school graduates will need some higher education to achieve economic self-sufficiency and navigate the increasingly complex cultural, social, and political environments they will encounter (McCabe, 2000). Moreover, if current racial and ethnic disparities in educational attainment persist, projections indicate that the numbers of college-educated workers in the United States will fall far short of those needed to sustain current levels of economic and social growth, a reality which may have devastating consequences for the nation's economy (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003; Kelly, 2005).

Equally troubling as the low rates of attainment among the general college student population are the existing racial and ethnic disparities in college student departure rates. Although ensuring access and equity in higher education requires providing opportunity and support for increasingly diverse student populations to both participate and succeed in college (Kellogg Commission, 1998), many racial/ethnic minority college students continue to graduate at noticeably lower rates than their non-minority counterparts. For example, while approximately 33% of White students who begin their college career at a four-year college will fail to earn a bachelor's degree within six years, that same figure is over 50% for African American and Latina/o students (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002). Although Asian Americans are often excluded from conversations about minority students due to their relatively high rates of educational attainment, disaggregated data on various Asian American ethnic subpopulations reveal vast disparities in postsecondary degree attainment (Hune, 2002; Museus, 2009), with some Asian American ethnic groups completing postsecondary degrees at rates far lower than their non-Asian American peers and the national population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004).

For higher education policymakers and practitioners to effectively serve increasingly diverse student populations with limited resources, they must better understand how to foster success among students of color. Several perspectives have been offered to help understand minority student persistence (e.g., Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992, 1999; Tinto, 1987, 1993). One of those perspectives, Kuh and Love's

(2000) cultural perspective of college student departure, is promising because it focuses on the important role of students' precollege and campus cultures in shaping their college experiences and outcomes. The purpose of the current inquiry is to use the voices of students of color to examine and revise that cultural perspective to generate a new intercultural<sup>1</sup> framework that can inform future research on and understandings of minority student persistence.

### THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN MINORITY STUDENT PERSISTENCE

One result of the aforementioned low rates of degree attainment is that scholars have invested a great deal of time and energy in increasing knowledge of the processes by which students successfully adjust to and persist through their respective institutions and the higher education system altogether (Braxton, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 1987, 1993). While the large and growing body of research on the factors that affect college student adjustment and persistence has greatly expanded current levels of understanding about this process, researchers have underscored the need to move beyond existing culturally biased frameworks for examining student departure and adopt new perspectives for studying persistence that apply to more diverse college student populations (Braxton, 2000; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1999).

Over the last 30 years, scholarship on college persistence has disproportionately focused on applying and testing Tinto's (1987, 1993) theory of student integration. Tinto's model posits that undergraduates' levels of integration into the academic and social systems of their respective campuses shape those students' commitments to their goals and institution, which, in turn, determine their likelihood of persistence. While empirical research employing Tinto's (1987, 1993) model as a conceptual framework has typically focused on testing the validity of the hypothesized relationships between students' academic and social integration into campus communities, commitments to their institutions and goals, and persistence, Tinto's integration theory is partly based on cultural foundations originating in the field of anthropology.

Tinto's integration theory (1987, 1993) is, in part, based on Van Gennep's (1960) stages of cultural transition. Specifically, Tinto's work builds on Van Gennep's theory that individuals go through three stages when transition-

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<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of this article, "intercultural" refers to the interaction among multiple cultures. "Intercultural framework" refers to the new framework that emerged from this study and focuses on the interactions between students' cultures of origin and cultures of immersion.

ing from one status to another within a culture: separation, liminality, and incorporation. *Separation* includes a detachment from their former selves, *liminality* encompasses the transition from one status to the next, and *incorporation* includes the adoption of the cultural values and norms associated with the newly acquired status. Building on Van Gennep's (1971) three-stage process, Tinto (1993) asserted that students must "physically as well as socially dissociate from the communities of the past" to fully integrate into academic life (p. 96). Thus, an assumption that underlies Tinto's theory is that students who fail to sever ties with their communities of origin and integrate into their campus cultures are less likely to persist (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Tierney, 1999).

### PERSPECTIVES ON MINORITY STUDENT PERSISTENCE

Although Tinto's (1987, 1993) theory has helped advance knowledge regarding the persistence process for college students, including students of color, researchers have critiqued the underlying assumptions of Tinto's integration theory for their cultural bias and inadequacy in explaining the departure of students of color (Attinasi, 1989; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992, 1999). Receiving particular scrutiny is the assumption that students must dissociate from their home cultures and adopt the values and norms of the dominant campus culture to succeed. Accordingly, researchers have begun to offer alternative explanations of racial/ethnic minority student persistence at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1999). In this section, we offer three important alternative cultural frameworks for understanding the experiences and persistence of students of color: (a) the concept of cultural integrity, (b) a cultural perspective of student departure, and (c) the concept of cultural agents and how they foster bicultural socialization.

#### *Cultural Integrity and Minority Student Persistence*

Tierney (1992, 1999) asserted that expecting college students to sever ties with their traditional cultural heritages places an unnecessary burden on nontraditional (i.e., students who are not White, middle-class, and ages 18–24) college students to assimilate to their respective campus environments, rather than recognizing an institutional responsibility to facilitate those students' socialization. Further, building on the work of Deyhle (1995), Tierney highlighted the importance of "cultural integrity," which is focused on the affirmation of students' cultural identities and propelled by "programs and teaching strategies that engage students' racial/ethnic backgrounds in a positive manner toward the development of more relevant pedagogies and learning activities" (p. 84).

Empirical evidence supports the importance of cultural integrity by illuminating how racial/ethnic minority college students benefit from being secure in their own cultural heritages (Dehlye, 1995; Helm, Sedlacek, & Prieto, 1998; Museus, 2008b; Tierney, 1992). Museus (2008b), for example, conducted a qualitative examination of the experiences of 24 Asian American and Black undergraduates and found that ethnic student organizations facilitated the adjustment and membership of those students of color in college by functioning as spaces that provide cultural familiarity, vehicles for cultural advocacy and expression, and sources of cultural validation.

### ***A Cultural Perspective of College Student Departure***

Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) noted that, while Tierney's assessment of Tinto's theory held merit, he failed to move beyond his critique to articulate a more valid perspective of the persistence process. Kuh and Love (2000) subsequently offered a different cultural perspective of student departure by outlining eight culturally based propositions that appear to be especially instructive for understanding minority student persistence. They proposed that the level of incongruence between students' precollege cultures and dominant campus culture is inversely related to persistence, and students for whom there exists a high level of distance between those cultures must either acclimate to the dominant campus culture or become immersed in one or more enclaves (i.e., subcultures) to successfully find membership in and persist through college.

Particularly important to our inquiry is the need, highlighted by Kuh and Love, to empirically validate their cultural perspective. They note that such validation should be done using qualitative research methods. This cultural perspective and its propositions are central to our study and are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

### ***Cultural Agents and Bicultural Socialization***

One of the most consistent conclusions of empirical research conducted on college students is the importance of their establishing connections with cultural agents (e.g., faculty and peers) on their campuses. Those cultural agents can be grouped into two different, but not mutually exclusive, categories: collective and individual (Bourdieu, 1986; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). For the purposes of this article, "collective cultural agents" refers to groups (e.g., academic programs, informal peer groups, cultural centers, and student organizations) in the campus cultures with whom students can connect.

Tinto (1987, 1993) and Kuh and Love (2000) stressed the importance of collective cultural agents in predicting the persistence of college students. Evidence supports the significance of such collective cultural agents as ethnic student organizations and ethnic studies departments in the adjustment and retention of students of color (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Gonzalez,

2003; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Kiang, 2002; Mallinckrodt & Sedlacek, 1987; Murguía, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991; Museus, 2008b). Collective agents provide students with smaller and more manageable environments within the larger campus, offer a conduit for socialization into the larger campus community, and provide a venue in which students can maintain and express a sense of racial/ethnic identity on campus (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Murguía, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991; Museus, 2008b; Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez, & Trevino, 1997).

Alternatively, researchers have placed less emphasis on the role of individual cultural agents in the aforementioned perspectives of student persistence (Kuh & Love, 2000; Tinto, 1987, 1993). This term refers to individual faculty, administrators, staff, and other students who can function as cultural translators, mediators, and models. Cultural translators, mediators, and models are individuals in the campus culture who can help racial/ethnic minority students navigate their home and campus cultures simultaneously (de Anda, 1984). Translators can offer advice about the socialization process based on their own experiences. Mediators are members of the dominant culture who provide information to the minority person about successfully navigating mainstream cultural norms and practices. Models can be from either the minority or dominant culture and expose individuals to specific behaviors they can emulate to promote their socialization. A small body of empirical research indicates that such agents are important in the experiences of students of color (e.g., Gonzalez, 2003; Guiffrida, 2005; Smith, 2007) and are a critical consideration in understanding minority student persistence.

In sum, emerging perspectives of minority student success and existing evidence both suggest that the relationship between precollege cultures and campus cultures influences the persistence of racial/ethnic minority students (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Gonzalez, 2003; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Kuh & Love, 2000; Mallinckrodt & Sedlacek, 1987; Murguía, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992, 1999; Tierney & Jun, 1999). Kuh and Love's cultural perspective provides an especially useful framework for understanding the minority college student persistence process because it takes into account students' precollege cultures and their current campus cultures, as well as the interactions between them. With few exceptions (e.g., Museus, 2008b), however, those propositions have yet to be systematically examined using empirical data. Our investigation contributes to the on-going discussion about racial/ethnic minority college student persistence by examining and refining those cultural propositions using empirical data to more accurately explain the experiences and persistence of students of color.

### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The current examination is part of a larger qualitative investigation designed to understand the role of campus cultures in the experiences of college students of color. We designed this analysis to examine and revise Kuh and Love's (2000) cultural propositions using empirical, qualitative data from that larger investigation to generate a new intercultural perspective of racial/ethnic minority college student persistence. Our hope is that this new perspective will help guide future empirical inquiries into and understandings of racial/ethnic minority college student persistence processes.

The following research question guided the examination: Does Kuh and Love's cultural perspective explain minority college student persistence at predominantly White institutions? We also explore three additional research questions: (a) Does the cultural perspective explain the persistence of racial/ethnic minority students? (b) How do minority students' actual experiences and thoughts about departure differ from the propositions delineated in the cultural perspective? And (c) how can the voices of students of color help refine our understanding of minority student persistence processes?

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Kuh and Love's (2000) eight cultural propositions provided the primary conceptual framework employed in the current study. Their eight propositions included: (a) Students' college experiences and decisions are mediated by a student's cultural meaning-making system; (b) Students' precollege cultures determine the importance they associate with attending or graduating from college; (c) Knowledge of both students' precollege cultures and campus cultures is necessary to understand their abilities to navigate the campus cultural milieu; (d) The likelihood of persistence is inversely related to the incongruence between students' precollege and campus cultures; (e) Students who travel a long cultural distance must either acclimate to the dominant campus culture or join one or more cultural enclaves (i.e., subcultures) to succeed; (f) The amount of time students spend in their cultures of origin during their college career is positively associated with cultural stress and eventual student departure; (g) The extent and intensity of students' connections with their academic program and affinity groups are positively related to persistence; and (h) Students are more likely to persist if they belong to one or more cultural enclaves, especially if those enclaves value achievement and persistence.

While testing existing theoretical propositions is conventionally an aim of quantitative educational research, we did not seek to test a theory in this study. Rather, we chose to analyze Kuh and Love's cultural perspective using qualitative research methods to both critically examine and refine their eight

propositions. We chose to use the unconventional method of employing qualitative research methods to examine and revise an existing perspective because, as previously noted, Kuh and Love's (2000) propositions fail to emphasize important concepts that are central to other viable perspectives of minority student success, such as individual cultural agents (Bourdieu, 1986; de Anda, 1984; Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and cultural integrity (Tierney, 1992, 1999; Tierney & Jun, 1999). Thus, we pursued this study based on the assumption that using qualitative techniques and the voices of students of color might help us improve our understanding of the utility of Kuh and Love's propositions, while permitting the consideration of other concepts (i.e., individual cultural agents and cultural integrity) that better inform future research on minority college student persistence and departure.

## METHODS

As mentioned, our investigation is part of a larger qualitative inquiry aimed at understanding the role of culture in the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students at a predominantly White institution. For this analysis, we juxtapose data from 30 students of color with the eight cultural propositions and use qualitative data from the interviews conducted as part of the larger study to validate and refine Kuh and Love's cultural propositions. The result is a new set of intercultural propositions to help guide future research and understandings of racial/ethnic minority student persistence processes.

### *Site and Participant Selection*

Our study site is a large, rural, public, research university (designated Mideastern University). We chose this campus for two primary reasons. First, Mideastern University is predominantly White; students of color comprise only 15% of the student body. Second, in the past decade, several incidents have stimulated and perpetuated racial tension on campus. As Whitt (1996) has noted, campus culture is a deeply embedded aspect of the institution, and the relationship between aspects of culture and students' experiences can be difficult for even the students themselves to identify and understand. Thus, our selection of Mideastern University was based on the assumption that the relatively recent and visible social significance of race and culture in the campus environment would maximize the likelihood that students could identify, comprehend, and articulate how campus cultures shaped their college experiences.

We used purposeful sampling to identify 30 racial/ethnic minority undergraduates at Mideastern University. Purposeful sampling allows a researcher to achieve intensity and variation in the sample (Patton, 2002). While "intensity" focuses on identifying and examining information-rich cases, "variation" refers to the discovery of themes that cut across diverse

subsamples. Accordingly, the use of purposeful sampling allowed us to find involved participants who could offer valuable insight into Mideastern University's culture and also allowed us to identify themes across an array of student characteristics (e.g., racial/ethnic backgrounds, sexes, years in college, and student organization types).

To achieve intensity, we solicited the participation of 30 students who held a leadership position in or devoted five or more hours per week to a registered student organization. With regard to variation, we selected participants to construct a sample of students from disparate racial/ethnic backgrounds, sexes, and years in college. The final sample consisted of 12 Asian, 12 Black, and six Latina/o students. Although we made an attempt to solicit the participation of 12 participants in each racial group, only a small number of Latina/o students volunteered for the study. The participant sample also included 18 female and 12 male undergraduates, as well as students who were in their first (2), second (9), third (6), fourth (12), and fifth (1) year in college.

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

We collected our empirical data in individual face-to-face interviews, lasting approximately 1.5 hours, which were conducted using a semi-structured approach (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The semi-structured questions enabled us to acquire data necessary for understanding the intersection between home cultures, campus cultures, and student experiences, while providing flexibility to acquire data on unexpected emerging themes. The questions were designed to solicit participants' descriptions of their home and campus cultures and their articulation of how those cultures shaped their experiences.

### ***Data Analysis Procedures***

We examined each of their eight cultural propositions using the qualitative interview data and employing phenomenology and case study data analysis procedures. We conducted this analysis in three separate phases. In Phase 1, we used open coding to identify invariant constituents in each interview transcript, and then we clustered those constituents into themes (Moustakas, 1994). After the identification of themes, we created textural-structural descriptions to illuminate participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. In Phase 2, we compared those individual textural-structural descriptions to each of Kuh and Love's eight propositions. If the data and the proposition were congruent, the proposition was maintained. If there was a discrepancy between the data and the proposition, the proposition was modified. The result of Phase 2 was a new set of refined intercultural propositions that might be used to explain the persistence of racial/ethnic minority students at predominantly White institutions.

During Phase 3, we cross-checked each individual interview transcript with each new revised intercultural proposition. This last phase was intended to confirm congruency between the propositions and the individual interview data, to further clarify obscure elements of the propositions, and to elucidate and explicate the factors that shape minority student persistence. To accomplish this task, we used Yin's (1994) explanation-building techniques. Analysis in Phase 3 began with comparing the first revised cultural proposition emerging from Phase 2 against the fact of each individual interview. As a result of each comparison, we confirmed or revised the theoretical proposition of focus, then compared the proposition to the next interview. We repeated this process until all interview data had been cross-checked with each of the eight propositions, and the final set of intercultural propositions emerged.

### ***Quality Assurance and Trustworthiness***

In addition to cross-checking propositions with data in the third phase of data analysis, we improved the trustworthiness of our findings by using two methods recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1986). First, we conducted member-checks with eight of the 30 participants to ensure congruence between researcher interpretations and participants' perceptions. Second, we sought discrepant data throughout the analyses to question the theoretical presuppositions inherent in Kuh and Love's (2000) propositions. Whenever we found such discrepant data, we questioned the relevant cultural proposition and checked it against the data to consider its refinement.

### **LIMITATIONS**

At least three limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, this examination is context-bound, and findings must be transferred to other institutional contexts with caution. Moreover, we do not offer this new set of intercultural propositions as an empirically validated set of statements about racial/ethnic minority student persistence and success. Rather, we have two intentions in using the voices of students of color: (a) to examine and refine an existing set of cultural propositions, and (b) to generate and offer a new set of refined and testable intercultural propositions for future research on racial/ethnic minority student persistence.

The study's second limitation of this investigation is selection bias. All 30 interview participants were involved in registered student organizations at Mideastern. Thus, these participants' behaviors, experiences, and perceptions may differ from those of students who are not similarly engaged in formal student organizations on campus.

Finally, our analysis is based on the perceptions of persisting minority college students—only one student dropped out and returned to college—so

we cannot draw general or firm conclusions about the causes of minority student persistence. Indeed, our qualitative data allowed us to develop new intercultural propositions based only the perceptions of persisting minority students. We believe, however, that persisting minority students' perceptions about the environmental and experiential factors that contribute to their own persistence are a valid and valuable source of information that can help develop a better understanding of the minority student persistence processes.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We present our findings and discussion simultaneously in eight consecutive sections, with each of those sections focused on one of the eight intercultural propositions that emerged from the analysis. Intercultural propositions 1, 3, and 4 are similar to Kuh and Love's (2000) corresponding first, third, and fourth cultural propositions. We do, however, illustrate how these propositions can manifest in racial/ethnic minority students' experiences on predominantly White campuses using the voices of participants of color at Mideastern University. The other five intercultural propositions are modifications of Kuh and Love's (2000) corresponding cultural propositions based on existing literature and the data collected in our study.

We refer to the new emergent revised propositions as an intercultural perspective of minority student persistence. The term "intercultural" is often used to refer to interactions across multiple cultures. We, therefore, refer to the revised propositions that emerged from our analysis as an "intercultural perspective" of minority student persistence. We find this term suitable because (a) multiple cultures—cultures of origin and immersion, as well as dominant campus cultures and subcultures—are central to this emergent perspective, (b) the emergent intercultural perspective focuses on the interactions between those cultures of origin and immersion, and (c) the term "intercultural" distinguishes our new perspective from Kuh and Love's (2000) original set of cultural propositions. In addition, while Kuh and Love's (2000) perspective did not focus specifically on college students of color, given that our sample was limited to racial/ethnic minority colleges students, our new set of propositions is offered as a potential explanation of persistence among minority students in college.

*Proposition 1: Minority students' college experiences are shaped by their cultural meaning-making systems.* Students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds can experience the same environment in different ways (Eimers, 2001; Hurtado, 1992; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Moreover, students from similar racial/ethnic backgrounds who come from different precollege cultures may experience similar campus environments in disparate

ways (Guiffrida, 2003; Torres, 2003). Thus, racial/ethnic minority college students' experiences in various precollege cultures will partially shape the dispositions, perceptions, and experiences they have during college.

One example of how different cultures of origin can shape students' perceptions and experiences is our finding that students from predominantly minority and those from predominantly White cultures of origin perceived the diversity of Mideastern University in different ways. Students of color at Mideastern University from predominantly White cultures of origin tended to perceive the campus as diverse, while those from predominantly minority or racially mixed cultures of origin were more likely to view the campus as racially and culturally homogenous. The quotations below use the concept of institutional diversity to illuminate how the makeup of precollege cultures can shape the perceptions and experiences of students attending the same PWI. When asked whether the university valued diversity, one Latino student from a predominantly White culture of origin explained how, in his view, diversity was an enacted value of the institution:

Mideastern University values diversity, and I think that has opened the door for people to come here like myself and a lot of my friends. The university's values and a lot of the diversity initiatives have enabled us to come here, but what happens here is largely among ourselves. (Fourth-year Latino male student)

Similarly, an Asian American participant at Mideastern University expressed his appreciation for diversity on campus:

I'd say the Mideastern University community is pretty diverse. I've never seen some of these people, like, I've never met many Korean people at all. I only know a handful of Indian people. Being here, I met people from Malaysia. I've seen other people that are actually from Thailand, international students. It's very diverse. And you would think just where Mideastern University is, just the location, it would seem more dominated by White people, but it's totally opposite. I see a lot of Black people, a lot of Asians, and there are Hispanic people. (Fifth-year Asian American male student)

This student's perception of the diversity of Mideastern University was shaped, in part, by his origin in and experience with precollege cultures that were primarily White.

In contrast, a fourth-year Black female participant who came from a predominantly Black culture of origin viewed the campus as lacking in diversity. When asked whether Mideastern University valued diversity, she responded, "They lie. They say diversity, but they call me being the only Black kid in class diversity. I don't think so." These quotations illustrate how participating students' different cultures of origin, which were incongruent

with the dominant cultures found on Mideastern's campus, shaped their perceptions of the campus environment in a different way than those who came from predominantly White home cultures.

*Proposition 2: Minority students' cultures of origin moderate the meanings that they attach to college attendance, engagement, and completion.* Students' cultures of origin mediate the importance of college attendance and degree completion (Kuh & Love, 2000). Participants in this study also indicated, however, that those precollege cultures partially shape the types of engagement minority students expect and desire to pursue in higher education. Indeed, the characteristics and perceptions with which students come to college determine what type of engagement they perceive as most meaningful and effective in improving their college experience. For example, if the entering students' most important expectations and values are meeting diverse groups of people and maximizing professional development, they tend to seek opportunities to fulfill those expectations. In contrast, students who do not consciously seek cultural diversity but who are sensitive to racial issues may search for and gain more benefits from membership in racial and ethnic minority enclaves.

One interview participant illustrates this pattern with her explanation of how racial/ethnic minority college students' cultures of origin can shape their perspectives regarding cross-cultural engagement in higher education:

I've been exposed to a lot when I was younger. Even though I didn't grow up with White people, I always had contact with people of other races. The culture here is different, but I expected it to be different. I wanted it to be different. But other people I have come in contact with did not like it. They were, like, "What is this?" It was too big for them. There were too many people not of their same race. So, they didn't like it. They wanted to leave. They wanted to go home. You know, when people don't like something, they get scared and they run away from it. That's how a lot of people react to things. (Fourth-year Black female student)

This student suggests that her experiences interacting with diverse groups of people in her precollege cultures shaped the expectations she held regarding the role of diversity in her college experiences. Because she expected a different environment, she was able to adapt more easily to the cultures of her campus than other students of color who were less prepared for the environments that they encountered.

Similarly, college students of color from different precollege cultures can hold varying viewpoints regarding the importance of engaging in racial/ethnic minority enclaves. One Latina participant explained that, while many of her peers from predominantly White precollege cultures chose not to participate in ethnic enclaves to avoid self-segregation, she understood the importance of engaging in those subcultures:

I think when a lot of people come to Mideastern University they see that it can become kind of cliquish to hang out with just your Hispanic friends, so they shy away from it. That is something that I want to see not happen anymore. It is beneficial to have a community where you can be representative and see what you can do for that community once you start engaging. (Fourth-year Latina student)

This participant, who came from predominantly minority cultures, decided to get involved in the Puerto Rican Student Association to be a positive representative of her community. Her decision reflected an awareness of the importance of engagement in ethnic student organizations that she explained was not expressed by her peers who originated from predominantly White precollege cultures.

*Proposition 3: Knowledge of minority students' cultures of origin and immersion are required to understand those students' abilities to negotiate their respective campus cultural milieus.* Knowledge of both racial/ethnic minority college students' cultures of origin and cultures of immersion is required to understand their abilities to negotiate their respective campus cultures (Kuh & Love, 2000). If the characteristics, dispositions, expectations, and perceptions of undergraduates of color are, in part, a function of their cultures of origin, administrators must comprehend those cultural heritages to understand the struggles of those students of color in adjusting to college. The following statement illuminates how an understanding of minority students' cultures of origin can be an important consideration in comprehending their college experiences:

If you're from more of an urban environment, then it's a little more difficult to come to Mideastern University where it's pretty rural. Then, to be African American on a predominantly White campus, it's kind of a culture shock. You have to get used to everything. You have to get used to seeing White people, Asian people, Hispanic people, and Indian people all the time on a daily basis. You have to get used to their habits and learn about their cultures. (Fourth-year Black female student)

This student explains the culture shock that can be experienced by racial/ethnic minority students from predominantly urban precollege cultures and the dissonance that may occur when those students are navigating unfamiliar cultures on predominantly White campuses for the first time. Knowledge of this process and how students' cultures of origin shape their perceptions of the institutional environment can help administrators understand how to arrange campus environments and programming to facilitate those students' success.

In contrast, another fourth-year student at Mideastern University explained how growing up in diverse communities and attending predomi-

nantly White schools prepared him for the environments that he encountered on the predominantly White campus:

Being in two communities was not foreign to me because I had to experience that when I was in high school. My church back home is extremely diverse—Indian, Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, and all sorts of cultures. That was like one community. Going to school that was predominantly White and having to juggle both was not difficult for me at that time. Coming here it was as though they melded [the two communities]. I thank God I have had the opportunity to meld both groups together. (Fourth-year Latino student)

This student did not experience culture shock when adjusting to the dominant culture of Mideastern University. Given his previous exposure to both racially diverse and predominantly White communities, he was able to transition with relative ease to the culture of the largely White campus. These quotations illustrate how knowledge of both students' cultures of origin and immersion can be critical to understanding their abilities to navigate their campus culture successfully.

*Proposition 4: Cultural dissonance is inversely related to minority students' persistence.* Differences between racial/ethnic minority students' cultures of origin and immersion can lead to cultural dissonance as those students navigate the cultures in which they are immersed (Museus, 2008a). Racial/ethnic minority students who come from predominantly White cultures and attend PWIs may experience lower levels of cultural dissonance because they have more experience moving in and out of predominantly White cultural milieus. Alternatively, for students who come from predominantly minority cultures of origin and attend PWIs, the cultural dissonance can be particularly vexing. Such dissonance can cause increased minority status stressors when adjusting to and finding membership in the cultures of a predominantly White institution (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus, 2008a; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993).

Cultural dissonance has been used to describe the tension students feel as a result of incongruence between their cultural meaning-making system and new cultural information that they encounter (Museus, 2008a). While Kuh and Love (2000) asserted that higher levels of incongruence between a student's cultures of origin and immersion are associated with an increased likelihood that students will leave their institutions, we have decided to focus on the concept of cultural dissonance because, although it may be likely, it is not always certain that cultural incongruence will lead to increased minority status stresses and barriers to persistence. It is possible, for example, for persons to come from cultures that are highly incongruent with the dominant cultures found on their campuses but experience low levels of stress and difficulty navigating their campus cultures because they

effectively assimilate, either consciously or subconsciously, to the dominant cultures of their PWI (Tinto, 1987, 1993).

The experiences of participants in our study suggest that such cultural dissonance does, in fact, increase adjustment difficulty and lead to thoughts about departure. One participating student, for example, associated his experience of cultural dissonance with thoughts about not wanting to be at the university any longer:

I came from an urban area where pretty much everyone I saw was African American. I mean, adjusting was just hard. I didn't want to be here. I like to get involved. I'm just the type of person that likes to get involved, but there were not a lot of opportunities when I first got to Mideastern University. That's why I started becoming involved in some of the African American clubs and activities. It was just really hard. (Fourth-year Black male student)

Students from urban areas and predominantly minority communities often expressed that the adjustment process was difficult and they had thoughts about leaving Mideastern University. Alternatively, as illustrated by the following quotation, students of color from predominantly White precollege communities experienced less difficulty adjusting to Mideastern's culture and were less likely to think about leaving:

Throughout high school, I was in a predominantly White high school also. So, there weren't many Hispanics. I would just throw that out there first so that you would know that there are not many Hispanic students here. But, it hasn't affected my integration into the culture here. I've made friends fine. One really nice thing was the National Hispanic Business Association. There are not many of us in the group, but it was nice to meet a couple of other Hispanic students. (First-year Latino student)

This student explains how his integration into the university environment was facilitated by his previous experience in a mostly White high school. Consequently, he did not experience much dissonance as he transitioned into the cultural milieu of the university.

*Proposition 5: Minority students who experience a substantial amount of cultural dissonance must acclimate to the dominant campus culture or establish sufficient connections with cultural agents at their institution to persist.* Kuh and Love's (2000) fifth proposition posits that students who experience high levels of cultural incongruence must acclimate to the dominant campus culture or join one or more cultural enclaves to succeed. Indeed, acclimation to dominant campus cultures or immersion in cultural enclaves may be positively associated with positive experiences and success among racial/ethnic minority college students (Guiffrida, 2003; Museus, 2008b). Pressure to acclimate to certain aspects of the dominant culture, however, can cause

conflict and tension for students of color, as illustrated by a second-year Asian American female student: "Our group for a course project met the other night at the student union to talk about our project, and I felt as if I had to talk a certain way to fit in. I hate doing that." The conflict that this student experienced when assimilating to the dominant culture of her campus suggests that such assimilation may not be a desirable alternative for some racial/ethnic minority undergraduates.

Indeed, many of the participants in our study expressed the importance of remaining connected to their home communities. One fourth-year, Black student, for example, described the importance of cultures of origin for his peers participating in predominantly Black student organizations: "I think that the African American student organizations work for the betterment of the African American community—not necessarily for the university, but [for] the communities back home." Given the importance that some minority students attach to their cultures of origin, expecting those students to assimilate to the cultures of their respective campuses may be less desirable than increasing the quality and quantity of connections that those students share with various collective and individual cultural agents on campus to facilitate their success.

Although Kuh and Love (2000) emphasized the importance of campus subcultures in facilitating students' success, our revised proposition highlights the salience of collective cultural agents and the subcultures they engender, but our proposition also explicitly underscores the potential impact of individual cultural agents (de Anda, 1984; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000) on the persistence of racial/ethnic minority students. As described by one student, an individual cultural agent can have a critical and long-lasting impact on minority students' experiences:

There was one person who really changed my study habits. She's a person who I hold dear. She already graduated. She's in the same major as I am. She graduated on time. I'm still a little behind because I changed majors. She definitely was a big part of my life. Not only was she instrumental in changing my habits and helping me improve, she was a really good friend. And I studied a lot with her because we were in similar classes. This time I spent with her studying really helped me a lot. It helped me to be more motivated to study, to find more places to study, and to try harder to study. (Fifth-year Asian American male student)

Similarly, as illustrated by the following comments, collective cultural agents, such as ethnic student organizations, can also work to decrease cultural dissonance and facilitate the adjustment and persistence of racial/ethnic minority students:

My freshman year, I immediately became involved. I think that is so important. I can't stress that enough—that involvement, and seeing what the Puerto Rican

Association did that first year, and me wanting to get involved with it and to have that resource. That just really made me stay here. If people don't know that is available to them I can see why they would just want to leave and say, "This is not what I was looking for." (Fourth-year Latina student)

This student reveals the importance of cultural enclaves, such as ethnic student organizations, in the acclimation of racial/ethnic minority college students to predominantly White campus cultures.

Accordingly, our fifth revised proposition indicates that students of color can either acclimate to the dominant culture of their PWI or establish connections of sufficient quality and quantity with collective and individual cultural agents to facilitate their adjustment, engagement, and eventual persistence through college. The greater the quality and quantity of students' connections with various cultural agents on campus, the more likely they are to succeed. One participant illustrates this importance of connections to both types of cultural agents on campus:

My two mentors basically showed me the campus. They showed me how to sit down and make a time management plan for myself. They basically instilled those things into me and got me involved in campus and groups that I wasn't involved with. (Second-year African American male student)

The previous quotation supports the notion that cultural agents can also serve as translators, mediators, and models and provide racial/ethnic minority students with knowledge about how to navigate their respective campus cultural milieus successfully (de Anda, 1984; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000).

*Proposition 6: The degree to which campus cultural agents validate minority students' cultures of origin is positively associated with reduced cultural dissonance and greater likelihood of persistence.* Kuh and Love's (2000) sixth proposition focuses on the negative impact of students originating from pre-college cultures that are incongruent with their dominant campus cultures. As already noted, however, students' connections to their traditional cultural heritage can be positively associated with their likelihood of success (Helm, Sedlacek, & Prieto, 1998; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Tierney, 1992). According to previous research (Gonzalez, 2003; Guiffrida, 2003; Museus, 2008b) and the voices of racial/ethnic minority students at Mideastern University, what appears to be more important than detachment from their cultures of origin is the extent to which students' traditional cultural heritages are validated by their interactions with collective and individual cultural agents in the college or university environment.

As previously mentioned, Tierney (1999) advocated for educational programs that validate the students' cultural identities. Rendón (1994) defined such validation as "an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated

by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development” (p. 46). She posited that such validation was critical for racial/ethnic minority students’ continued involvement in college. Indeed, collective and individual cultural agents can play an important role in the experiences of student of color by validating those students’ traditional cultural heritages and decreasing the amount of cultural dissonance they experience. One student, for example, illustrated this point when he described how racial/ethnic minority faculty can validate minority students’ cultural backgrounds and experiences, thereby decreasing the cultural dissonance experienced by those students of color:

The professor is African American, and I guess her attitude is a little different. She is a little more open. I could talk to her suddenly about race out of nowhere. She would pick right up on it. Whereas, if I were to talk to some of the other White professors, they would just be like “What the heck . . . there’s a problem?” (Fourth-year Asian American male student)

Collective cultural agents in various forms (e.g., the multicultural center, racial/ethnic minority communities, and ethnic student organizations) can also function to validate diverse cultural heritages and were particularly important in decreasing cultural dissonance for many participants in this investigation. The following participant, for example, explicated the salience of cultural validation offered by the multicultural center on campus in her adjustment processes:

People in the multicultural center welcome everybody. I’ve seen White people. I’ve seen Asians. Everybody’s in the multicultural center, you know? That place is very welcoming to everybody. I don’t care who you are (Fourth-year African American female student)

Another participant described how cultural validation from an ethnic student organization was a source of critical support and facilitated her engagement in the cultures of Mideastern University:

The student organizations have definitely opened so many doors for me here on campus. It’s hard for me to explain sometimes. You know what I mean? How that has helped me in so many ways is hard for me to describe. There might be no one of color in class, but I’m definitely going to know somebody in that class just by networking, doing other things, and getting involved with different things on campus. It’s hard for me to explain. The student organizations just opened so many doors and so many opportunities that I didn’t know were possible. Each semester is just getting better and better. (Third-year African American male student)

This student’s involvement in an ethnic student organization positively influenced his college experience. He associated his participation in ethnic

student organizations with his increased access to opportunities and success in college.

*Proposition 7: The quality and quantity of minority students' connections with various cultural agents on their respective campuses is positively associated with their likelihood of persistence.* In their seventh proposition, Kuh and Love (2000) underscored the intensity and extent of cultural connections with academic programs and affinity groups as a key factor in the persistence process (Kuh & Love, 2000). In contrast, our intercultural revision of that proposition focuses on the quality and quantity of students' connections with both collective and individual cultural agents. Increased numbers of connections with campus cultural agents are associated with greater engagement and socialization into the cultures of their campus. For example, if a student contributes 10 hours per week to the activities associated with a student organization, the quantity of that student's connections with the collective cultural agents on campus will be greater than that of a student who attends a one-hour meeting monthly as a member of that organization. The following student commented on the absence of her connections with people on campus as one source of her adjustment difficulties. When asked whether she thought the differences between her precollege and campus cultures were the cause of challenges she faced during her college experience, she replied:

Yeah, I definitely think it is. I didn't feel at home at Mideastern University at first. And I'm kind of shy and don't just walk up to anybody and start talking. So it was hard to automatically think of these people as my friends. I didn't feel as if I had anybody to confide in or who I thought was with me, no matter what happened. So, it took some time. And I thought to myself, "Okay, Mom told me to stay so I need to start doing something where I won't feel left out or on the outside looking in." (Fourth-year African American female student)

Moreover, interview participants described how the connections that they developed with collective and individual cultural agents on their campus were not mutually exclusive. In fact, some participants explained how involvement in student organizations provided introductions to individuals with whom they developed important relationships, thus creating broad and significant social networks. Additionally, the following statement illuminates how particular individuals with whom participants connected were, in many cases, responsible for introducing them to opportunities to connect to collective agents, such as student organizations:

She was the one who introduced me to the student organizations. I feel that her inviting me helped. It opened a lot of doors. Then, after a while, I thought, "Why don't I invite myself?" And that's when I started to go to the events more often in my sophomore year. (Fifth-year Asian American male student)

While this proposition focuses on the quality *and* quantity of racial/ethnic minority students' connections to campus cultural agents, the preceding example primarily highlights the importance of the quantity of connections that students make with various campus agents. The quality, or nature, of those connections with collective and individual cultural agents is the focus of Proposition 8.

*Proposition 8: Minority students are more likely to persist if the cultural agents to whom they are connected emphasize educational achievement, value educational attainment, and validate their traditional cultural heritages.* Kuh and Love's (2000) final proposition is that students are more likely to succeed if members of the ethnic enclaves in which those students are integrated value achievement and persistence. One student highlighted this characteristic when responding to a question about how her peer groups had influenced her college experience:

For some of my friends, just by us knowing we're here for a reason and all of us wanting to see each other succeed are important. That's one thing . . . we really are committed to ourselves. Like I said earlier, a lot of students at the university don't want to see each other succeed. That's just one thing that my group of friends really wanted was for each other to succeed academically. (Fourth-year Black female student)

We do, however, make two modifications to Kuh and Love's initial eighth cultural proposition based on the analysis of our data. First, we include both collective and individual cultural agents in this proposition because, as previously mentioned, both appear to be important factors in participants' college experiences. Second, Kuh and Love's eighth proposition focused on the academic or educational values of ethnic enclave members, but our revised corresponding intercultural proposition acknowledges the importance of educational values but also underscores the significance of the extent to which cultural agents validate students' cultural identities. This modification of Kuh and Love's initial proposition is congruent with Tierney's (1999) notion of cultural integrity and Rendón's (1994) concept of validation.

Our eighth and final proposition, therefore, posits that racial/ethnic minority undergraduates are more likely to succeed if the campus cultural agents to whom they are connected emphasize achievement, value attainment, and validate their cultural heritages. Indeed, participants highlighted the importance of cultural agents who validate their cultural identities. One participant discussed the importance of collective cultural agents, in the form of ethnic organizations, validating his cultural heritage:

Since I'm Cambodian, I wanted to join the Cambodian Club, so that's why I did it. Where I'm from is mostly Asian, and all my friends are mostly Asian, so that's why I feel more comfortable in the Cambodian Club. I can be myself

in that club. So that's also why I joined the Asian fraternity. (Fifth-year male Asian American student)

This student's experiences with ethnic student organizations is not unique and are congruent with earlier research findings that ethnic organizations play a key role in validating the cultural identities and facilitating the cultural adjustment and membership of college students of color at PWIs (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Guiffrida, 2003; Museus, 2008b). Thus, while students' connections with collective and individual cultural agents that value achievement and attainment may be important factors in and positively associated with their persistence (Kuh & Love, 2000), we posit that other characteristics of those cultural agents may be equally important. Congruent with prior research (Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendón, 1994; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992, 1999), our data suggest that the ability of students of color to find and connect with collective and individual cultural agents that validate their cultural heritages, in addition to how much those agents value achievement and attainment, is also associated with success in college. Indeed, the data here confirm earlier research suggesting that the validation of minority students' cultural heritages can facilitate their adjustment, engagement, and persistence (Gonzalez, 2003; Guiffrida, 2003; Rendón, 1994; Tierney, 1992, 1999). Moreover, our findings indicate that both individuals and organizations on campus have the potential of facilitating such cultural validation.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

The findings of this analysis and the emergent intercultural perspectives have several implications for future research and practice. With regard to research, our findings underscore that an increased understanding of culture can provide researchers with valuable insights into the process of minority students' persistence. Schein (1996) asserted that culture is "one of the most powerful and stable forces operating in organizations" (p. 231). In the context of higher education, culture influences almost everything that happens on college and university campuses (Kuh, 2001/2002). Yet despite the pervasive and powerful nature of culture in driving the behavior and shaping the experiences of college students, cultural perspectives are rarely employed in studying minority students. As colleges and universities experience rapid structural diversification, researchers should consider how campus culture will differentially shape the experiences of students from increasingly diverse cultural backgrounds. Therefore, we echo earlier calls (e.g., Kuh, 2005) regarding the importance of studying culture and its role in shaping the experiences of students, and especially students of color, in higher education.

A second implication of this investigation for future research is related to the differential experiences of racial/ethnic minority college students. If

minority students' cultural meaning-making systems moderate their college experiences and if it is essential for postsecondary educators to understand their students' precollege cultures to accurately appraise their ability to navigate their campus environments, then it is critical for researchers to pursue lines of inquiry that help develop a better understanding of how the experiences of students of color vary according to their cultures of origin. Future research, therefore, could focus on understanding how racial/ethnic minority students' perceptions of and expectations regarding their college experiences vary from those who emerge from different (e.g., urban and rural) precollege communities.

Third, future research should explore the role of individual cultural agents in the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students. Our findings suggest that the quality and quantity of connections that minority students develop with individual agents on campus are positively associated with their success. Yet with few exceptions (e.g., Guiffrida, 2005), researchers have neglected to illuminate how individual agents positively shape the experiences of college students of color. Thus, future research can help expand our understanding of what constitutes high-quality connections between students of color and individual campus cultural agents.

In this study, we utilize Kuh and Love's (2000) cultural propositions and empirical data to generate a new intercultural perspective of minority student persistence. This analysis, however, raises more questions than it provides answers. Does this intercultural perspective provide a valid and reliable explanation of the persistence process for students of color? In which settings might this perspective prove valid or invalid? Can this perspective help explain the college persistence process among other student populations? Accordingly, future inquiries could focus on using quantitative techniques to test whether these propositions hold true in the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students at different types of institutions. Researchers could also explore whether these propositions provide a valid lens through which to view the experiences of different types of students from cultures incongruent with those of traditional (i.e., 18–24 year-old, White, middle-class) college students, such as low-income and international students. Thus, while these findings constitute an important step in increasing current levels of understanding of minority student success, much remains to be learned about their utility in explaining that persistence process for diverse student populations.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

An important implication for practice emerging from this analysis deals with the degree to which postsecondary educators understand the cultural backgrounds of the students with whom they work. Our findings support

Kuh and Love's (2000) assertion that such understanding is important. We further emphasize the important role of faculty and staff of color, since they are more likely to share common cultural and racial backgrounds with minority students. Regardless of the race of college educators, however, those educators must understand the cultural challenges that minority undergraduates face in finding membership on their campus if they wish to effectively serve those students.

In addition to understanding students' cultural backgrounds, our research confirms the importance of supporting and nurturing cultural enclaves on college campuses. In an era when groups and programs focused exclusively on racial/ethnic minority students are being challenged and restructured to include students from majority populations (Schmidt, 2006), the need to consider the potential positive impact of ethnic student organizations is critical. Existing research (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Museus, 2008b) and students in this study underscored the positive impact of cultural enclaves, especially ethnic organizations, in their college experience. Consequently, postsecondary educators should use empirical data in advocating for the ways these organizations promote the persistence of racial/ethnic minority students, and they should also ensure that sufficient support to help such organizations flourish exists on their respective campuses.

Another implication for practice emerging from this examination concerns the role of individual cultural agents on campus. Often, racial/ethnic minority college students are expected to develop connections to campus on their own by becoming involved in various student organizations or affinity groups. While these factors are certainly important and positive for students of color, postsecondary educators should also keep in mind that the connections that individual faculty, administrators, and staff make with racial/ethnic minority students on campus might be equal in importance to connections with student organizations and peer groups.

The findings from the current investigation also reveal the importance of capitalizing on students' voices as a means of improving practice. Kuh and Love (2000) noted the need to validate their cultural propositions using qualitative methods. This is important because the nuanced understanding that can be attained through qualitative methods highlights the various ways in which campus cultures either contribute to or impede minority students' success. Those wishing to better understand the role of culture on racial/ethnic minority students' success should engage students in ways that enable their voices to be heard as a means of improving practice. Examples could be conducting ongoing cultural audits or assessments to understand how existing institutional environments, programs, and practices facilitate or hinder the adjustment, engagement, and persistence of college students of color.

Finally, we reassert and expand Kuh and Love's (2000) contention that administrators and staff should seek to make the strange seem familiar early in students' college experiences. Those authors highlighted the importance of enclave extension, in which administrators expose new students to various cultural enclaves to which those students can become attached. We echo that assertion, but add that our findings suggest that this practice should transcend a focus on ethnic enclaves to include fostering interpersonal connections, such as faculty and staff mentoring relationships, during the adjustment period. Moreover, if educators invest energy and resources in structuring opportunities to establish connections between new minority students and cultural agents, those educators might maximize their impact if those opportunities emphasize both educational purpose and validate students' cultural heritages.

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