

Students speak: Academic, career, and sociocultural experiences of African American college students

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Abstract

This manuscript presents the outcomes of a qualitative research investigation centered on the experiences of African American college students in terms of their preparation for high school, college, and careers within a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) situated in rural southeastern Wisconsin. At the time of this research, the comprehensive public university had an undergraduate enrollment of 10,196 students. Among these students, 82.1% self-identified as White, 7.8% as Hispanic or Latinx, 5.4% as African American, 3.2% as Asian or Southeast Asian, and 0.9% as American Indian or Alaskan Native. Using semi-structured interviews with willing student participants, the primary objectives of this study were twofold: (1) to recognize the sociocultural and institutional elements that influence the career trajectories of African American students attending the institution and (2) to effectively capture the educational and career viewpoints and voices of these students as they navigate the complex sociocultural and institutional landscape. Key findings from the research highlight the students' perspectives on the substantial connections between their high school experiences, particularly those in and around a major urban center in the Midwest, and their subsequent college and career paths. Additionally, the study underscores the challenges these students encounter while navigating the physical and social spaces on a rural PWI campus. Recommendations are made for creating a more welcoming space for African American students and for supporting those engaged in the work.

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Introduction

A growing number of African American students are entering higher education institutions, yet the graduation rates for these students remain disproportionately lower. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2019), only 42% of African American students who enroll in colleges or universities manage to graduate within six years, in stark contrast to the 66% graduation rate for White students. The experiences of African American students within Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), where a significant majority of them choose to enroll, have garnered significant attention in scholarly circles, aiming to comprehend and address these disparities (Adams & McBrayer, 2020; Harwood et al., 2012). Research has consistently highlighted the marked differences between the experiences of African American and White students within PWIs (Rozek, 2020). These differences are influenced by several

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pre-college factors, including the communities in which students are raised (Benbow et al., 2020), the significance of familial connections (Newkirk, 2022), participation in bridge programs (Maldonado, 2022; Strayhorn, 2011), and even the racial composition of the high schools they attended (Offidani-Bertrand et al., 2022). Interestingly, a significant proportion of African American students have not encountered predominantly White environments prior to attending PWIs (Alvarez et al., 2009; Benbow et al., 2020). These new encounters in predominantly White settings can lead to feelings of culture shock, exhaustion, and isolation, fueled by exposure to both explicit and implicit forms of stereotyping and hostility (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Mills et al., 2020). The psychological stress arising from these experiences can significantly impact the overall well-being and academic success of African American students within PWIs.

The experience(s), specifically academic and career, of students identifying as racial minorities and African American students has been documented but much of the extant research that examines African American students in Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) does not use theoretical or conceptual frameworks that center on the needs of Black students (Gooden et al., 2018). The reason for this phenomenon is simple: communities of color live in a society where their cultures and/or experiences are “invisible” and disregarded respectively (Gooden et al., 2018). As such, the academic and/or career experience(s) of racial minority students can be skewed adversely despite having access to educational bridges or spaces that promote inclusivity.

To help facilitate equity and foster inclusivity in academic spaces and more specifically, in classrooms, “safe spaces” have been created by educators. Safe spaces entail creating an environment where people are respected and accepted (Lopez-Littleton et al., 2018) and serve as a place where students can seek refuge during times of difficulty in school. Consequently, safe spaces are not conducive to having difficult conversations centralizing race, racism, or equity because students must operate under constraints and conform to dominant ways of thinking and behaving (Lopez-Littleton et al., 2018). Simply, this means that students engaging in conversations centralizing social and racial equity may not be able to fully express their true sentiments despite being in a safe space because of pressures innate to the dominant environment that other students in the majority perpetuate (that may not support equity initiatives). Rather than a safe space, “brave spaces” have been suggested. This involves creating a learning space where risk-taking, discomfort, and fear are understood as fundamental elements (Lopez-Littleton et al., 2018). A brave space supersedes a safe space as its purpose is to create a medium where discourse around difficult topics can occur and more importantly, where students can be confident in their ability to engage in genuine discussions about controversial issues without feeling the need to conform to dominant behaviors (Lopez-Littleton, 2016). These brave spaces recognize the need for courage rather than conveying the illusion of safety, allowing for genuine dialogue regarding these challenging and controversial topics.

The delineation between ‘safe spaces’ and ‘brave spaces’ is necessary because the two are not synonymous contrary to popular belief, just as equity and equality are two different concepts that aim to achieve different goals. This is because these spaces shift classroom facilitation away from the traditional notion of attempting to create a classroom environment where all students are thought to feel safe (Boostrom, 1998), to one where students are confident enough

to vocalize their lived experiences, opinions, listen to others, and grow through diversification of perspective as part of the learning process (Lopez-Littleton, 2016). The purpose of brave spaces is to encourage students to take risks to engage in contentious conversations rather than seeking refuge in a “safe space”. This is paramount in academic and to a certain extent, professional spaces of the direct connection to the formulation of positive experiences for students. There is a need for students who will enter the U.S. workforce in a variety of occupations to have positive (academic and professional) experiences and exposure to such spaces to obtain an understanding of the various forms of equity (social, racial, educational, and gender), democracy, freedom, and other values necessary for inclusivity and navigating the nuances of education. These spaces create an opportune platform for all students, especially those who are non-minority, to diligently examine the ability of U.S. society to sustain systems of practice that allow differential access, opportunities, and outcomes to exist (Lopez-Littleton, 2016; Lopez-Littleton et al., 2018) or manifest in the form of academic and career experience(s).

The primary research questions that guided this study were:

1. What is the narrative of African American students based on their pre- and post-high school experience(s)?
2. What are the African American students’ academic and sociocultural experiences in their current institutional setting?

The remainder of this paper will present an overview of the theoretical background, materials, and methods used to conduct the study. Following the methodology, the findings will be detailed, leading into a comprehensive discussion. The paper will conclude with several recommendations based on the results.

Theoretical Background

Extant Student Retention Theory Overview

The retention theories furnished by sociologists identifying factors influencing student persistence (e.g., peer support and social isolation) (Jama et al., 2009) have been sparse. These factors influence whether a student will have positive or negative academic and professional experiences in an educational environment. Further, they also serve as a predictor of a student’s ability to integrate and be retained within their educational environment. These retention theories are losing relevance as education and society evolve and constitute broad-based approaches to student persistence. However, these theories are not as applicable to minority students, and despite their contending dropout occurs because students do not integrate into the environment. This is only half the battle for minority students because they may require more resources and interactions than originally detailed theoretically, both of which influence their experience(s) (Law et al., 2019). These resources and interactions can be supplied largely through Registered Student Organizations (RSOs), which may result in the creation of additional space for racial minorities. Such spaces are lacking, underscoring the necessity of this research and illuminating an avenue where Social Network Theory (SNT) may be of beneficence in bridging the gaps not only within student persistence but also space creation that may be supplemented through organizational advocacy and faculty/staff.

Social Network Theory

SNT is an encompassing theory that explains the salience of an actor's social network and how their social interactions link or 'ties' them to others. Social networking and networking are essentially two sides of the same coin and consist of a process individuals use to develop a relationship with other actors predicated upon mutual interests, information sharing, and other interdisciplinary reasons (Cote, 2019). The formation of these networking relationships with other actors allows for information exchange and knowledge attainment, which results in networking opportunities between actors internal and external to their network (Cote, 2019). In the context of SNT, actors are referred to as 'nodes', which can be an individual, teams, groups, or organizations (Cote, 2019; Storie, 2018). Nodes are connected via network ties (or 'ties'). The type and strength of the tie (i.e., strong or weak) dictates the development of the relationship and its nature (formal/informal or social/professional). For this paper, the term actor refers to an individual student.

Three scholars are credited with the creation and development of SNT: John Barnes, Mark Granovetter, and Ronald Burt. SNT's originator, Barnes, seminal research on social relationships in a small Norwegian city in the 1950s was the impetus of the theory (Cote, 2019). His initial work furnished an understanding of network ties across a social class system. The size of the setting was an inherent limitation because it was small; many communal members were related and/or knew each other on a deep, personal level (Cote, 2019). This reduced the reliability and validity of the findings, effectively passing the mantle to future scholars to spearhead the pursuance of reproducible results. Despite this, the impact of Barne's research cannot be refuted as it provided the foundation for SNT within an organizational setting, specifically examining social relationships and the impact of integral factors (e.g., hierarchy, centrality, power, etc.) on these relationships.

Development – Strength of Weak Ties & Structural Holes

Granovetter's analysis of the Strength of Weak Ties in a social network established one domain of SNT, in which he contended the stronger the tie between two actors (A and B), the more likely their social networks will overlap, meaning they will have ties with similar third parties (C) (Granovetter, 1973). This results in a strong tie being created between actors (A and B) and a weak tie created between A and C as well as B and C. The 'strength of a tie' is defined as a combination of the amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocal services characterizing the tie (Granovetter, 1973). Granovetter's main argument is that bridging (i.e., weak ties) are a potential source of novel information; weak ties link actors to external information. Therefore, a weak tie can furnish new, non-redundant information that may not already be flowing within one's network of strong ties. Strong ties are unlikely to render new information because actors interact more frequently with similar people, resulting in increased information redundancy.

The crux of SNT resides in an actor's ability to develop the breadth and depth of their social network, leading to increases in networking opportunities, exchange of information, and diversification of perspective. In the context of higher education, SNT may help explain and predict retention issues, specifically for Black students. Research by Brass (1984), states environmental success is attributed to being well-integrated into a social network. Being involved in a social network may render insight and information students may not receive

otherwise; this information evokes benefits that increase opportunities. Information benefits exist in three forms: access, timing, and referrals (Burt, 1992). Thus, by being better connected via strong and/or weak ties, they may increase their access to information and expedite the receipt of information.

Social relationships comprise a significant portion of one's social capital, aiding in an actor's development. This social capital consists of ties external to one's family, including communal, academic, and social ties (Coleman, 1988). The socialization facet embedded within these activities expands their social network and improves their perception of college. Therefore, involvement in various activities may grant minority students access to information, develop more weak ties, and/or strengthen their extant weak ties. Said activities and ties may provide (peer) support, financial support, and a sense of belonging. These factors are salient for social network expansion, which has been suggested to increase retention (Deng et al., 2022; Jama et al., 2009). SNT may be powerful in student persistence and their experience due to weak ties being created that ground students within the social (network) community in their respective educational environments, inform them of and provide access to collegiate activities, and influence their decision to stay in school.

Method

Research Design

American and Black students' perspectives on college and career development within a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). This approach involves delving into participants' comprehensive personal experiences to explore a specific phenomenon, as elucidated by scholars like Marriam and Tisdell (2016). The study centered on conducting semi-structured interviews with students, as we believed this method was best suited to capture the nuanced narratives of their collegiate and career journeys. The participants included current Black or African American undergraduate students or recent graduates from a rural PWI institution. A convenience sampling method was employed, utilizing an email list from the university's diversity support program, which included students who self-identified as Black or African American.

Procedures

To initiate the study, a researcher responsible for student support and diversity initiatives at the institution sent out an email to African American and Black undergraduate students. This email outlined the study's broad objectives and invited students to potentially take part in the research. Moreover, the email sought individuals interested in co-leading the project, resulting in the involvement of two African American male undergraduate students who volunteered and were subsequently hired. These student researchers underwent qualitative research training led by another member of the research team. Throughout this training, the team engaged in discussions concerning the project's objectives, the roles of the student researchers, and the primary faculty researcher. Together, they crafted a semi-structured interview protocol designed to elicit academic and career narratives from the interviewed students. The questions spanned several categories, including high school experiences, college decision-making, university life, career planning, and the impacts of COVID-19, aiming to understand students' perspectives on their education. Examples of the questions were: How well do you

think your high school experiences prepared you for college? What are your expectations for yourself regarding college and your future? How would you describe the university’s African American community? Additional questions, detailed in Appendix A, focused on critical aspects of the African American and Black student experience highlighted in existing literature. These included high school and bridge program experiences, the college decision-making process, the institution’s cultural and social environment concerning African American culture, and students’ career aspirations. After refining the interview protocol through testing, the research team sent out a recruitment email to all enrolled and recently graduated African American and Black students at the campus. This email requested volunteers for interviews, and ultimately, 14 individuals came forward and were interviewed as part of the study.

Data Collection

Data collection involved conducting one-on-one, student-led, semi-structured interviews, which took place either via Zoom or face-to-face. During these sessions, predetermined questions were asked to guide the conversation, with follow-up clarifying questions included as needed to gain deeper insights. Each interview generally lasted about an hour, providing ample time for comprehensive discussion. The interviews were audio recorded to ensure accuracy and subsequently transcribed for detailed analysis. This approach allowed for a thorough understanding of the participants’ experiences and perspectives. The attributes of the researcher’s participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewee attributes*

Attribute		N	%
Gender	Female	9	64.3
	Male	5	35.7
Undergraduate Major	Arts and Humanities	2	14.3
	Business	6	42.9
	Education	2	14.3
	Social Science	4	28.6
Enrollment Status	Second Year/Sophomore	2	14.3
	Third Year/Junior	1	7.1
	Fourth Year/Senior	7	50.0
	Fifth Year or Higher	1	7.1
	Graduated	3	21.4
	Frist Generation Students	5	35.7

*Mean Age: 22.9

Data Analysis

The researchers utilized NVivo 11, a widely used software program for analyzing qualitative data, to conduct a thematic analysis of the interview transcriptions. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. In NVivo, interviews were read and “segmented,” or separated into discrete parts, by interview question, which allowed the researchers to compare statements by an interviewee

on the topics about which interviewees were asked. After reading through the data and taking notes on several important themes that aligned with our study goals — typically ideas that resonated with the experience of student researchers as well as ideas that were much-repeated among interviewees—the team conducted a much more detailed, line-by-line inductive analysis (Saldaña, 2015) of specific interview segments speaking to these ideas. These segments included interviewee descriptions of their college preparation, the trajectories that brought them to the institution, and their experiences on campus and in the community surrounding the campus, through their entire tenure at the institution as well as through 2020 specifically. As this process unfolded, the team wrote notes on prominent ideas, views, and perspectives within each area of importance, noting specific points within each area that were shared or contested among interviewees, as well as interviewee quotations that represented these points well. Eventually, this process allowed the analysts to delineate and define three prominent themes from the interviews: high school bridges, Whitewater paths and space, and African American community. Descriptions of these four themes are presented below.

Results

After analyzing participants' (n = 14) unique responses relating to descriptions of their preparation for college, the trajectories that brought them to UWX, and their experiences on campus, three major themes emerged: 1) high school bridges, 2) the university's path and spaces, or 3) African American community.

Theme 1: High School Bridges

Salient links between high school and hometown experiences—including preparation and/or resources from urban/suburban or African American /White majority high schools, bridge programs, or neighborhoods—and college and career trajectories.

A significant recurring theme that emerged during the interviews centered on the pronounced connections that students perceived between their experiences in their hometowns or high schools, and their subsequent trajectories in college and career. This theme shed light on the interplay between these different phases of their lives. Out of the 14 interviewees, 10 hailed from the largest and most segregated city in the state, situated approximately an hour's drive away from the campus. Among these individuals, approximately half attended local district high schools that, according to certain students, lacked essential resources such as up-to-date textbooks and comprehensive career counseling services. Conversely, the other half attended either local private schools or public schools in suburban areas. These students often mentioned that these institutions had predominantly White student bodies and offered access to resources geared towards college and career preparation.

While all students in the sample conveyed that their high schools effectively equipped them with academic readiness for their college experience at UWX, a subset of graduates from private and suburban schools also highlighted how their high school experiences contributed to their cultural preparedness. Additionally, the students underscored the significance of high school-to-college bridge programs, with nine participants in the sample having taken part in these programs. Several students even participated in multiple bridge programs, such as TEAM GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs), College Possible, Boys and Girls Club's Graduation Plus, or Stein Scholars programs. These bridge programs, as per the students' accounts, were often more actively promoted to those

attending majority-minority schools. The programs involved campus tours, support with college applications and financial aid processes, ACT/SAT test preparation, guidance on what to expect in college classes and campus life, and generally enhanced students' understanding of the college environment.

All interviewees who engaged in bridge programs expressed how beneficial these experiences were. These programs not only provided them with valuable insights into what college life would entail, but they also instilled a belief that pursuing higher education was attainable. This overarching theme is underscored by the following sample of quotes from the interviewees:

Decision to go to college. Like I said, team GEAR UP, that program, it really pushed me to want to go to college. Just seeing how much different college was in high school, really played a big role in why I wanted to do it. And then just my parents, they played a big role too because they didn't want me to live like them have having to live paycheck to paycheck, wondering what's the next meal going to be, if we're going to be able to have that or not? And they just wanted me to have better for my kids and have my kids have whatever they want (Interviewee #1).

Yeah, College Possible. I joined my junior year, is supposed to help you with your SAT scores. So like, every week out of five days you'll have two days to try to study the SAT scores. I mean the SAT. Like we will have books on how to take the SAT for the math portion, the writing portion, the science portion, reading portion. So we were pretty much just nail those down and then they would give us practice SATs is like three of them. So we got the chance to do that. And then when the real SAT came, we would take that. And then they would still give us like another free choice if we want to take it again. I didn't know anything about Financial Aid. They helped us clear, they helped us do our FASFA, signed up for grants, and helped us with pretty much our application, because I didn't know how to do college applications either (Interviewee #1).

Theme 2: The Institution's Path and Spaces

Financial, geographic, and family/community paths to UWX, campus students describe as both familiar and alienating because of the lack of African American students and visible culture, stereotypes of African Americans, and implicit and explicit discrimination.

A notable portion of the students we interviewed expressed a strong inclination toward attending Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs) during their high school years. Many of them had been introduced to HBCU campuses through bridge programs, and they were drawn to these institutions due to their substantial African American student populations. However, the financial constraints associated with out-of-state college attendance or familial obligations compelled them to opt for state schools. One student candidly shared, "The financial reality hit me. I didn't want to put my family in a situation where they were under financial pressure." Among the participants in our study, a majority chose UWX for its convenient, yet not overly close proximity to their hometowns. The affordability of tuition and UWX's notable reputation within the African American community were also pivotal factors influencing their decision. Additionally, some students mentioned their personal connections to UWX, such as family members or friends who had attended or were currently attending the university. Interestingly, a few participants emphasized that only a limited number of state universities offered a substantial presence of

African American students, with UWX being among those select few.

Despite this sense of familiarity, numerous students conveyed that navigating UWX's campus proved to be a challenge due to the limited presence of African American peers and the predominance of White students, constituting over 80% of the student body. Instances like receiving excessive attention or being stared at in public spaces on campus, such as during walks to lunch, in dorm hallways, or within classrooms, were reported by interviewees as indicative of the scarcity of African American students at

UWX. One student interviewee poignantly remarked, "It's like people are touching their eyes on you." Several students recounted their experiences of being the sole African American student amidst a predominantly White class, highlighting the resulting disconnection they felt from peers with differing interests and perspectives. One student articulated, "There's a lot of stuff that African Americans don't care about that the White people on the campus do. I don't really blame Black students for not going to a pumpkin-carving fest." Beyond the challenges stemming from underrepresentation, nearly all African American interviewees shared encounters with more overt instances of discrimination, including microaggressions and stereotyping. This overarching theme is underscored by the following sample of quotes from the interviewees:

There was no doubt in my mind that I was going to go to college. It was always a goal or a path that I had been brought up to do, even though my parents loved my -- mom, she didn't get her -- she did get a certificate, but that was -- she just got that a year or two ago. So, there was no real college background within my parents, but yet they raised us to go to college. That was their goals for me and my siblings, so it was always a path for me. It was never -- it was never something I felt forced into though. It was just where I had seen myself going. It was the next step in my life after high school (Interviewee #15).

My brother and my sister, they both went to college -- but they didn't graduate. Like my brother went for like a semester and didn't like it. My sister, she just stopped going, I don't know why. But then my family, like my cousins and all of them, they went to college. But the thing is my family, they live out in like the suburban areas, they don't live in Milwaukee. This is my white side of the family (Interviewee #1).

I don't know if you remember, but again, my freshman year, we had this whole blackface situation. I mean, it reached the news. I think it reached almost national news and things like that. And I think when it gets big, when it's something that could damage the reputation of [UWX], then that's when they all want to always take two steps to take things better together. But then after the hype dies down, it's just like nothing changes. I don't notice anything, criteria wise, that changes. I'm constantly questioning. Since I just I have a lot of cultural and historical classes and I always have to challenge my professors on their criteria and why they choose to showcase more history of certain civilizations than others. Because all of that contributes to the racial climate that we have today...(Interviewee #10).

Theme 3: African American Community

UWX-specific social and cultural interactions and spaces in which African American students can be comfortable and successful, including mentorship relationships, living and study communities, and student organizations.

Students also highlighted positive encounters on campus that served to mitigate this stress. Frequently, these experiences were characterized as opportunities to engage with other African American peers or mentors in environments that felt safer and more representative, forming what we refer to as the “African American community” theme. For numerous interviewees, the sight of another African American student on campus generated a profound sense of camaraderie. As one student eloquently expressed, “You just feel like this little thump in your heart, like, oh my god, there’s another one of me!” Further enhancing this sense of belonging were initiatives such as first-year experiences and cohorts, diverse living communities, and institutional support services like the African American Network. Additionally, a range of African American student organizations, including the This One’s for Us (TIFU)

Cultural Ensemble, Ignite-Impact (an African American religious organization), student networks like Brother to Brother and Sister to Sister Mentors, the Black and Mixed-Race Student Unions, the National Association of Black Accountants, and various sororities and fraternities, provided platforms for students to connect more readily with UWX’s African American community.

Faculty and staff mentors on campus played a pivotal role for African American students, offering essential encouragement, support, and guidance, and fostering a stronger connection to university resources and academic life, thereby integrating them more fully into the university fabric. Particularly noteworthy were mentors who not only comprehended the complexities that rendered campus life challenging for African Americans but also displayed genuine empathy, treating them as individuals rather than perpetuating stereotypes or caricatures. One student recounted a teacher with whom she felt authentically herself, a novel experience on campus. “I appreciate that he allowed me to express my thoughts,” she shared. “It was a very liberating experience to not have to limit myself.” Another student related how his mentor possessed a profound understanding of his cultural context, making him feel that “there is a place on campus for us.”

These mentors, it seemed, had the power to unlock opportunities while simultaneously reinforcing the sense of African American community on campus. When discussing the kind of mentorship that had the most positive impact, a student highlighted the importance of “staff who listen and actively try to create more spaces.” They acknowledged that some mentors, unacquainted with the experiences of Black individuals, could struggle to offer meaningful support. While the broader campus community might at times appear distant to African American students, the acceptance and insight offered by such mentors proved to be a powerful motivator, instilling a renewed sense of purpose and drive. This overarching theme is underscored by the following sample of quotes from the interviewees:

Yeah. So I was part of the learning community called Man of Excellence. So that’s one of minorities, like African-Americans. So my first year, we all pretty much had like almost the same schedule. So I didn’t really have to worry about being the only Black person in my class because we had like eight other Black people that had pretty much the same schedule as me. And then we pretty much worked all together in every class to make sure we was successful in it. So it really wasn’t that hard (Interviewee #1).

Well, that’s another thing. I do feel like we kind of have a sense of inclusion too much. Like we love the WCC, the connection. I call that the Colored Convention Center, because

where all the, you know, peoples of color mainly hang out, especially African Americans, and I know that's where a lot of organizations are (Interviewee #10).

So, Women of Excellence is, sadly is discontinued. I don't believe it's going on anymore. But it was a group -- it was basically a minorities women's group. There was also Men of Excellence. For Women of Excellence, we basically set up our schedules together. We was in the same living arrangements. We had one -- I think we had one or two, it might have been two personal classes where we all had it together, and it was just a kind of a support system on campus to have your peers around you, your different mentors. They also were telling you about the different stuff that's happening on campus, the different stuff that may benefit you or help you or aid you and that you need. So, it was kind of like a nice room -- oh, it was a nice support system, especially coming in as a freshman (Interviewee #15).

Discussion

This study utilized qualitative research methods to examine the experiences of African American college students in a PWI located in rural southeastern Wisconsin. The study concentrated on their preparation for high school, college, and career paths. This investigation validates several factors previously identified in research that impact the educational and career trajectories of African American students in PWIs. These factors encompass one's family background, connections to the community, participation in high school transition programs, engagement with student organizations and mentors during college, and the significance of establishing a sense of belonging on the institution's campus (e.g., Griffith et al., 2019; Monjaras-Gaytan & Sánchez, 2023; Parks-Yancy, 2012). The research was conducted by student researchers, empowering them to advocate for policy changes that would benefit both themselves and their peers within their own communities. The use of student researchers proved to be beneficial as they provided a unique lens to examine and understand some of the latent factors that impact the academic and career experiences of African American students. Through this lens and the rapport established between the student researchers and interviewees, deeper insight into the systemic obstacles, bouts with institutional inequity, and other "hidden" factors at play were elucidated.

Research efforts have paved the way to uncover and dismantle systemic obstacles hindering equitable transitions of African American students from college to career. However, in the context of PWIs, earlier studies have highlighted the importance of physical and social environments, where African American students can freely express themselves without facing unjust judgment or scrutiny (e.g., Harwood et al., 2018). It is for this reason that having "safe" and/or "brave" spaces for students identifying as racial minorities and for African American students in particular is important (Boostrom, 1998; Lopez-Littleton, 2016). Often, African American student clubs, groups, or registered student organizations serve as crucial platforms for social support and validation, contributing significantly to the sense of social and academic belonging among African American students attending PWIs (e.g., Museus, 2008; Tichavakunda, 2020). Our study's participants echoed sentiments consistent with prior research findings. However, there has been an overreliance on these student organizations, and more intentional efforts should be made by educational institutions to create space for minority students at both the high school and collegiate levels.

Within the realms of high school and college education, faculty and staff mentors have emerged as pivotal sources for advice, information, and support in all contexts of the word.

The access to information and support underscores and reinforces the premise of SNT discussed earlier that undergirds this study. By the students making connections (or ties) with their peers, faculty, and staff within their institution, they were provided with access to new information (e.g., scholarship or financial aid information), support groups through student organizations, and mentors, and other pivotal resources that shape their educational (academic and career) experiences that they may not have known about otherwise. These relationships (i.e., strong and weak ties) helped students not only circumnavigate the nuances of the educational environment but, more importantly, enabled them to foster a sense of belonging that places them in an advantageous position as African American students to succeed in their terms (Griffith et al., 2019). Additionally, it equips them with insights into employment, thus enhancing their post-college career paths (Parks-Yancy, 2012). Building upon this foundation, scholars and practitioners who emphasize the cultural and social dimensions of career identity development and decision-making underscore various critical strategies to promote career growth among Black college students (Abdi, 2021; Byars-Winston et al., 2023; Parks-Yancy, 2012). These strategies encompass recognizing racial discrimination and Black resilience, nurturing strong family and campus social ties, and fostering Black self-authorship (Storlie et al., 2018). Although existing research has shown that the latter can be nurtured through college and career narratives that allow students to articulate their development journeys, minimal attention has been given to exploring the significance that African American students attribute to these narratives within PWIs. Furthermore, few studies have actively involved African American students in the research process.

Conclusion

To conclude, while acknowledging that more work remains, the research team contends that these findings suggest a series of measures that can be implemented to cultivate an environment conducive to the type of self-authorship crucial for the engagement and success of marginalized students on college campuses. It is evident through this study that the academic and career experiences of minority students, especially African American students attending PWIs, are largely influenced by the type of connections or ties they can make within the environment. Doing so affords them the space to find a community of support and, consequently, obtain a sense of belonging in an environment where they are underrepresented in many facets. Without such support, the narrative of the African American experience at PWIs seems to be a somber one of social isolation compounded by less-than-pleasant academic experiences, which can ultimately impact the career experiences of these students and discourage them from pursuing education. These types of institutional climates do not add to or benefit inclusion and defeat the purpose of bridge programs which aid students in overcoming certain educational obstacles. Therefore, it is up to institutional leadership to become more cognizant of the experiences of minority students and begin implementing changes at the meso- and macro-levels within their institutions. These institutions have a charge to deliver a quality education to ALL students and as such, should make intentional improvements to help alleviate certain obstacles minority students tend to encounter. It is imperative that this onus not be shifted to or placed upon the students - they are there to learn, and as young seedlings, they should not be forced nor expected to "survive" in an environment that lacks adequate watering or space for them to germinate into successful members of society.

Limitations

The limitation section of the article highlights two key constraints of the project: the small sample size and the single-site data collection. Specifically, only 14 students participated in the interviews, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences among African American students in higher education. Additionally, data were collected solely from one university campus, limiting the generalizability of the results to other settings. To address these limitations, future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample of participants from multiple institutions and geographical regions. This would enhance the representativeness of the findings and allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of African American students in higher education.

Implications and Future Research

To guide Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) and their leadership in taking the necessary steps to promote equity in their organizations that are informed upon the experiences of African American students, strong consideration of the following recommendations should occur. The first recommendation is for IHEs to provide and strongly encourage faculty/staff to participate in training related to working with racially and culturally diverse students. This training should be provided in different modalities and attendance must be supported and encouraged by department chairs and supervisors. The second recommendation is for IHEs to consider providing a platform for intentional mentorship by faculty/staff for African American students. This could include providing meal passes for the dining halls or local coffee shops, hosting mentor/mentee matching social events on campus, and allowing faculty/staff to “claim” mentorship activities as university service towards promotion/tenure reviews. The third recommendation is for IHEs, specifically PWIs, to work diligently to attract, hire, and retain diverse faculty and staff. This recommendation would be put into action by requiring the hiring committee to take consciousness bias training, creating inclusive position descriptions, and providing professional mentorship, and implementing researched based retention strategies.

Given the exploratory nature of this study and its focus on African American student experiences, future research may benefit from understanding the experiences of other minority students to ascertain if there are any similarities or differences between their experiences and, if so, in what areas. Longitudinal studies may be conducted to track the long-term academic and career outcomes of African American students who participated in bridge programs and other preparatory initiatives. This could provide deeper insights into the effectiveness and lasting impacts of these programs. Finally, comparative studies across different types of institutions (e.g., HBCUs vs. PWIs) to understand how the cultural and social environment impacts African American students. This could help identify best practices for fostering inclusive and supportive campus climates.

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