Spring 2011

Narrative Analysis of Students' of Color Experiences at Predominantly White Institutions and the Implications of Support Systems

Stephanie Blake
Providence College

Narrative Analysis of Students' of Color Experiences at

Predominantly White Institutions and the Implications of Support Systems

Stephanie Blake

Providence College

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Social Work.

2011

Abstract

This study will look at support systems for students of color at predominantly White institutions. A review of the literature reveals that the supports that are needed for this population of students to ensure a positive experience are their family and peers from home and on campus and faculty/staff and on-campus services. A qualitative, exploratory study was conducted through interviewing seventeen participants who describe themselves as minorities within a predominantly White institution. The findings from this study revealed that the above aspects were seen as supports while at this institution and that there was also the underlying theme of perceptions of how the White population perceives the students of color. Implications of this research show that there needs to be more cultural awareness among all parties and more support systems in place to assist students of color through their time in predominantly White institutions.

Narrative Analysis of Students' of Color Experiences at

Predominantly White Institutions and the Implications of Support Systems

At Providence College there is an annual meeting at the beginning of the school year

to discuss the provisions of the scholarship received by multicultural students. Statistics

of retention rates of students of color at this school are shared with the attendees. This

information is shared for many reasons, but the information raises a lot of questions

concerning the academic well-being of students of color at this institution, which is a

predominantly White institution. Why is there difficulty in retaining students of color at

this institution? Why are students failing? Is it due to being uncomfortable in this

environment? Are they not getting the support that they need as students of color at a

predominantly White institution? What does it take to be successful as a student of color?

The researcher will be looking specifically at support systems for students of color at

predominantly White institutions (PWIs).

Whether one will have success in a higher institution is thought of being predicted by

the previous GPA from one's high school or by SAT scores, but it has been discovered

that these are not the best factors for many students. Once at college, students are subject

to many influences that may change how they perform in school. Support systems on the

campus can aid the student in dealing with the new environment especially for students of

color at PWIs. These systems can present a challenge in themselves but may also assist

students. "In a study on academic persistence, Mallinckrodt (1988) demonstrated that

support from members of the campus community is critical in the retention of African

Americans at PWIs" (Nasim et al., 2005, p. 346). This support system, found in faculty

and staff, is critical for several reasons that will be discussed below, along with the many other supports a student may have while attaining a higher education degree.

One current goal at Providence College is attaining more diversity on campus. However with the shutting down of the physical location where The Balfour Center for Multicultural Affairs once stood, it seems as though the school may be taking two steps back. The current reconfiguration of the Balfour Center has left the school missing what was once a space providing support to students of color on campus and a physical indication that diversity was embraced on this campus. Even though some students have stated that the Balfour Center was never a true form of support, others disagreed. There are different forms of support, and this research will explore these different forms. This occurrence and my own personal experience as a student of color at a predominantly White institution has led to the questions that will be explored in this study. I would like to look at how minority students on campus have dealt with finding support systems on campus, if any, and if they feel that it has lead to their success here at Providence College or if by not being able to identify with any supports they have faced challenges. Being a minority on campus has led to many challenges, but the supports that I have found has made the time here rewarding. The supports are not only at the peer levels but with the Social Work Department and Public Service Department located at Providence College.

Social work is a field that deals with social justice issues that negatively impact certain populations. To social work this issue would be important because it deals with the possible oppression that some students may be feeling at homogeneous schools. When a person is in an unaccustomed environment, it can lead to distress and other emotional issues. There is a need to have supports on campus that might assist in helping

those students who may not have others to turn to for assistance. An aspect of

Ecosystems Theory is the person-environment transaction in which the intervention

process involves "changing the nature of the transactions, the environment, the

individual, or some combination" (Hudson, p. 16) taking place when the fit is not good

between the person and the current environment. If students of color are not feeling

comfortable at predominantly White institutions, changes need to be made at all levels to

ensure that the students are having positive experiences. Analyzing the issue serves the

purpose of looking more critically at the issue to see what changes should be made.

The eight non-cognitive factors as to why a minority student would remain at a

predominately White institution (PWI), determined by Tracy and Sedlacek (1984), were

stated as academic positive self-concept, self appraisal, support for academic plans, the

ability to understand and deal with racism, setting long term goals, academic familiarity

and interest, ability to establish community ties, and successful leadership experience (as

cited in Nasim, 2005). In relation to support Nasim et al. (2005) stated that all students,

whether White or black, have a better chance of succeeding if they are able to find a

faculty or staff person to provide that academic support for them. Students of color at

PWIs find it more difficult to find that support staff and sometimes end up with the

oppressed minority ideology.

The hardships that some students of color endure while attending PWIs may

suggest that they are in need of supports to deal with the problems that may arise.

Support systems may be needed within higher education systems so that the student can

perform at his/her best capacity. For a student, support can be attained from many

different aspects from one's life. At the new institution, support can be found in the

classroom from a faculty member, in a new social peer group, which can be other

students of color or organizations the student may join, or in terms of support they left

behind in their communities, which would be their families or friends.

Literature Review

The focus areas for this research are students of color attending predominantly

White institutions (PWIs), and the importance of having support systems at the school for

these students. PWIs are schools in which the majority of the students are White.

Colleges and Universities, such as Providence College in which 80% of the population

identifies as White Non-Hispanic (Providence College, General Information), would be

considered predominantly White institutions. The minority student population on

campuses is all the other students who do not identify as White Non-Hispanic. These

students, if given options to choose, would identify as African American/Black, Hispanic,

Asian Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Race Unknown, or Non-

resident Alien. The literature found on the topic supports the notion that supports are

needed for students in general, regardless of ethnic background, especially in the area of

academics.

As more students of color are graduating from high school and attending higher

education institutions, the difference in needs they face is becoming more recognized in

the education system. "According to data from the US Census Bureau, 80% of all Blacks

25 years and older have attained a high school degree, placing them only 5% below the

rate for Whites. Additionally, nearly 45% of Blacks have attended college compared with

53% of White" (as cited in Guiffrida, 2010, para. 1). As more Blacks enter higher

education, more are going to go to PWIs since there are not as many Minority Serving

Institutions (MSIs). African Americans are currently attending PWI's more than

historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), yet Allen (1992) and Easley (1993)

found that "HBCUs still graduate a disproportionate number of black students in

comparison to their historically White counterparts" (as cited in Benton, para. 1). In the

past, there was a large number of African American's enrolled in HBCU's but by 1973

only one-fourth of African Americans students were enrolling in HBCU's (Allen, 1992),

showing that the majority of African Americans students, not all groups of ethnic

minorities, are enrolling in PWIs. By 1992, 60% of the baccalaureate degrees given to

African American students were awarded by PWI's (Allen, 1992). These statistics do

show the need to have supports for students of color at PWIs since there are more of them

attending those institutions.

For minority students who are coming from schools or environments in which

they were the majority, the transition to a PWI can be a difficult one. Minority Serving

Institutions (MSIs), such as historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs),

Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), and tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), are run

in a way to provide services to minority students because there is an understanding of the

oppression that these populations are faced with outside the confines of the school. For

example, "Black teacher trainees at HBCUs often learned that it was their moral and

spiritual obligation to uplift the Black community by attending not only to students'

academic development but also to their social and psychological development"

(Guiffrida, 2010, para. 10). A lot has also been learned about Black students, the

relationships that they have in their lives, and how those relationship affect them at

PWI's. The relationships that are affecting their educational experiences are "faculty,

family, friends from home, and their peers in Black student organizations" (Guiffrida, 2010, para 5).

These relationships can sometimes have a positive or negative effect on their learning experiences while in school and may at times shape how they are viewing themselves. For instance in the case of faculty, a positive experience can lead to more access to knowledge being gained and a person who is seen as a supporter or mentor for the student. However, as will be discussed later, a negative experience between a minority student and White professor could possibly lead to the student having a bad experience, even to the point of leaving the institution. Positive and negative relationships can have an impact on a student and be a determinate factor as to whether they choose to continue their education at an institution.

Students of Color, as Compared to White Students

In an ideal society, one expects that all children, regardless of race or ethnicity, are receiving the same educational experience and are able to perform at the same level, especially when they are admitted into similar colleges or universities. However, there are aspects such as home environment and socioeconomic levels that differ between students and even more between students of color and White students which has lead to disparities in educational levels. Disproportionally, African American college students'

> Parents are more often urban, have fewer years of education, work at lower status jobs, earn less, and are more often divorced or separated than White students' parents; further, Black students on predominantly White campuses do not fare as well as White students in persistence rates, academic achievement, postgraduate study and overall psychosocial adjustments. (as cited in Allen, 1992, p. 28)

It can be concluded that an African American student's home life may be negatively impacting experiences at PWI's. Another factor that affects students of color is that they

generally perform lower academically than White students. This is demonstrated in SAT scores, GPAs, and any other form of testing. As stated earlier, these scores are seen as predictive of how the student will perform in college, but this example is merely showing a comparison of educational levels between the groups. Besides family background and lower academic performance, students of color are also dealing with assimilating into a new culture while attempting to retain their previous culture. This bicultural lifestyle can be draining but is also a survival mechanism for many students of color at PWIs. The bicultural lifestyle refers to balancing the culture of one's home environment with the environment at the institution.

Barnett (2004) states that "past studies on Black students at predominately White universities have concentrated on attrition and its causes" (p. 53). Loo & Rolison (1986), Ottinger (1991), and Mabry (1991) cite "academic under-preparedness, socioeconomic status and negative campus climate as factors that contribute to attrition, these authors have sought to provide an explanation for reasons why African American students are retained at a rate less than their White counterparts" (as cited in Barnett, 2004, p. 53). These factors may not only have a negative effect on the student while in the institution but may also cause the student to leave.

Many challenges are faced by students of color at PWIs. The problems they face can have negative effects on their college experiences, which then affect retention rates of minority students. The obstacles minority students face are financial barriers and low level of education when compared to White students. Coupled with this is the racial tension that is sometimes felt between a minority student and a White faculty member. The students are dealing with problems that are beyond their control (financial issues,

racial tension, etc.) but that can have negative impacts on the way they experience higher

education. Hunt et al. (1994) state that "in general, black students seem academically,

culturally, and economically incompatible with the PWI model of education" (as cited in

Benton, para 2).

A family's background may impact the student negatively in several ways.

However, "it is widely known that for Black families, education is viewed as the path to

liberation and success in the American society" (Barnett, 2004, p. 53). The value of

education takes precedence over financial struggles but not having the financial

capabilities to support the child may lead to many other issues. The family may value

education and parents expect to see their child go into higher education, even if they

themselves never did, but financial support may be lacking. This causes many students to

leave or struggle academically. Some students are working while in school but finding

that their school work is suffering because of this. Another problem is that students begin

to feel guilty because they feel that they are being selfish by having their parents help

them pay for school or asking their parents for money (Guiffrida, 2010).

Another issue stems from the low performance of many minority students.

Research shows that minorities have low GPAs and low SAT scores and have difficulty

with reading and mathematical levels when compared to White students.

> At almost every selective college in their sample, racial/ethnic minority students'
> academic performance was below that of White students and at levels lower than
> what was predicated by their SAT scores. These data strongly support the notion
> that Black students face challenges beyond academic preparation and ability that
> affect their chances to succeed at college. (Guiffrida, 2010, para. 3)

Academic challenges are at times a result of poverty. Schools have to be willing to

provide services in which those faculty, staff, or students giving out the services are

aware of these realities. When students of color are equally compared with White students across different academic spectrums they are still showing minimal gains. This has to suggest that there is more that is needed to be done to support minority students when they are in higher education institutions.

Aside from the financial and academic barriers that minority students face in comparison to White students, they enter a campus in which the people they are seeing do not look like them. If they are coming from an environment where there are many African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, Asians, or any other racial/ethnic group in which they were the majority, it is a difficult transition to being the minority. This can be very unsettling or it can be a new challenge for that student. When Black students attend a PWI their "educational attainment is also generally lower …and… [they] apparently experience considerable adjustment difficulties" (Allen, 1992, p. 28-29). According to Allen (1986) and Thomas (1984), some "adjustment problems are common to all college students, while others are unique to Black students" (as cited in Allen, 1992, p. 29).

A need to have a bi-cultural identity is recognized by the families of students of color. Peter (1997) found that families are aware that "their children must be accepted in the Black community in order to have friends, and they must be accepted in the White community in order to survive" (as cited in Barnett, 2004, p. 54). "This bicultural socialization process enables Black children to interact in both societies, often shifting between two" (Barnett, 2004, p. 54). The bicultural socialization may occur during the period of accepting and assimilating into the new culture. Assimilation into the American culture is expected by the majority, however there is always that struggle to maintain

one's own cultural identity (Guiffrida, 2010). Many students maintain this connection by keeping in touch with their families and their friends back home. "Racial/ethnic minority college students perceived relationships with friends from home as important sources of cultural sustenance that assisted in their transitions to college" (Guiffrida, 2010, para. 16). Maintaining both cultures allows for an easier transition.

Comparison between a PWI and an MSI

PWIs and MSIs serve the same purpose, which is to educate. However MSIs have more supports in place to serve the minority population, whereas PWIs traditionally have an environment that caters to the White population. If a student of color chooses to attend a PWI, the student would have to be comfortable enough to be in that environment. However the institution should feel obligated to make that student feel welcomed. PWIs have curriculums that are focused on the White cultural experience. Taylor (1989) states that "the curricula, teaching styles, student services, and campuses in general are tailored to White students" (as cited in Benton, n.d., para 5). At Providence College this can be seen specifically in the requirement of Development of Western Civilization: a two year program that teaches the evolution of western civilization, in which only 3-5 days or fewer are spent on any topic related to non-western culture or to the contributions of non-Whites to development of western civilization. Students who are entering into these environments and are not White may not be able to relate what they are being taught to their personal experience.

Students of color face some of the same issues whether they are at PWIs or MSIs: financial barriers, academic failure in comparison to White counterparts, low reading and mathematical levels, cultural and geographic concerns (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005),

however MSIs are aware of the cultural differences between White students and students

of color and are aware of the obstacles that many students of color face. The difference

between these two institutions is how they choose to deal with the issues. MSIs have set

up many programs and intense summer sessions to help the students prior to starting at

the institution. They then provide them with ongoing support once they are enrolled in

regular classes. The racial barrier is also not present in most situations because the faculty

at MSIs reflects the population of students attending the institutions (Merisotis &

McCarthy, 2005).

  The benefits of MSIs are not only academic, but also emotional and

psychological. Students who attend MSIs have a better sense of self. They "possessed

positive self-images, strong racial pride, and high aspirations, while Fleming (1984)

found them to have more favorable psychosocial adjustment than Blacks on White

campuses" (as cited in Allen, 1992, p. 29). At the opposite end of the spectrum are those

students of color who attend PWIs. "Black students emphasize feelings of alienation,

sensed hostility, racial discrimination, and lack of integration" (Allen, 1992, p. 39).

Students can have different perceptions on the subject, but the extreme difference

between attending a PWI and an MSI can be the difference between experiencing a

hostile environment and one that provides "engagement, connection, acceptance and

extensive support and encouragement" (Allen, 1992, p. 39).

Different Forms of Support

  Human service professionals refer to the general systems theory (GST) in regards

to clients and the systems that they interact with. "General systems theory conceptualizes

systems as collections of entities that influence one another and change as a whole"

(Hudson, p. 9). Many systems have a natural relationship that forms in which feedback is circulated among those that are part of the system. The feedback can be negative or positive, so that "feedback helps us understand stability or understand change and growth" (Hudson, p. 14). A support system can come in many forms for a person. Supports help individuals cope within their environment. Some supports are natural and lifelong such as family and peer groups, while others may be created and time sensitive, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or groups that deal with grief. Either way, support groups provide individuals with an opportunity to deal with certain events in their lives, usually in a supportive and nonjudgmental environment.

Addressing the issue through "a highly supportive academic environment, involving tutoring and mentoring programs and active faculty and staff support" (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005, p. 52) is one way to administer support. Not only is it necessary for individuals to be supported, but the environment has to also convey a message of support to the students. However Black students tend to view White faculty as being culturally insensitive. Students in Guiffrida's (2010) study stated that they felt Black faculty members are more willing to go above and beyond to help a Black student than a White faculty member would be. This can be due to a lack of cultural awareness from both parties; however, more cultural awareness needs to be present from the side of the faculty member in order to be able to build relationships with students of color. The students are the ones who are out of their comfort zone and may be struggling academically due to this. GST has many theories and approaches that can be framed to address the issue of teacher-student interactions. One of these approaches, stated by De Hoyos & Jensen (1985), "focuses not so much on change but the abilities of the

individuals to negotiate and compromise with their social environment" (as cited in

Hudson, n.d., p. 16). A student may have the ability to negotiate and compromise,

however if the social environment and those within the environment (faculty/staff and on-

campus services) are not one that is encouraging, other systems must be put in place to

assist the student.

   Family. One's family is the first system with which the person interacts and

begins development. Youth in a family are taught values, rules, how to behave, et cetera.

Within a family system is where the child is given the most emotional, financial, and in

some cases spiritual support. While away at school, most students receive financial

support from their family to help pay for school and provide necessities while away. As

stated earlier, students of color may often come from households in which the family is

not financially stable, which may lead to guilt or students working to support themselves.

However students of color also find emotional support in their families while away at

school. Barnett (2004) found through her research that "family support and interaction

have been found to significantly correlate with social adjustment and institutional

attachment; self-confidence and independence; grade point average; and persistence of

college students" (p. 54).While in PWIs this emotional support is needed because it links

the student back to the culture and comforting environment which are accustomed.

   Peers. Another important natural support for many is their peer group. Typically,

students form new peer groups when they begin to attend a college or university, while

retaining the peers they had from high school or childhood. Peer groups for students of

color at PWIs create a haven in which they are surrounded by others to whom they can

relate and with whom they may be having similar experiences. "Forty percent of the

students reported that peers were 'very significant' in helping them to persist in college,

46% of the students reported that it was their own determination that enabled them to

persist" (Barnett, 2004, p. 62). Barnett's study consisted of interviewing Black college

students about their social supports and family support. Of these participants, a good

portion did acknowledge that peer groups do have an influence on how a student may

perform. Also of these participants, 46% of students said that their success was based on

their own determination (Barnett, 2004), implying that 54% could have possibly been in

need of other supports to help in their academic success, and even if they may say that

peers did not assist in their success, it does not mean they did not seek other supports.

Faculty/Staff. A research study done by Gonsalves (2002) argues that a

relationship in which the faculty is showing concern by getting to know the student,

understanding the goals of the student, and acting as means of support in the school, will

lead to more academic success. Gonsalves (2002) research is based around the

relationship between White professors and Black males students. Gonsalves (2002) finds

that White professors will have an easier time addressing writing issues if there is already

a bond between professor and student. The pedagogy she is addressing is specific,

however the information is transferable to other teaching situations, if the student is

Black, or of another racial/ethnic minority within the institution, and the professor is

White. The professor will have an easier time communicating with the student if no threat

is perceived and instead the professor is seen as a support.

An issue that arises is that the Black student may be feeling inferior to the White

faculty member and other White students. In a qualitative study conducted by Gonsalves

(2002), she concludes that there is a lack of communication between Black Male students

and White professors since there is racial tension. A Black male student made a comment

in regards to the White teacher not liking him because he may look like someone who

robbed him the other night. The White professor wants to make a student aware of a

problem that they may be having academically but does not want to stress the point,

afraid the student might see him as a racist (Gonsalves, 2002). This is not the case for all

Black students when they interact with White professors, but there are certain themes that

arise that could hinder the development of a support when this interaction takes place.

For students in PWIs, whether this racial tension is real or just perceived, the student

would have difficulty connecting with faculty and finding supports since the faculty is

predominantly White.

On-Campus Environment. The environment of the campus is also a component

that provides support to a student of color. If the campus itself is welcoming, holds events

in which diversity is welcomed, provides tutorial services to students in which the tutors

are also of color, and offers other initiatives that show students of color that they are

welcomed at the school, the student will feel more comfortable with the school. "The key

retention component, then, appears to be the introduction of positive influences and the

succinct removal of negative influences" (Seidman, 2005, p. 10). Negative influences are

not always thought to be negative, but can be a negative outcome of what has been put in

place. The lack of diversity at a campus can lead to limited support for students of color

who attend the school. However there is still the reality that all people deal with

situations that are not always pleasant. Allen (1988), Pentages & Creedon (1978), and

Peterson et al. (1978) found that "typically, students who successfully adapt establish

social relationships with Whites, adjust to Black-White cultural differences, and cope

with college academic requirements that are more demanding than those they faced in high school" (as cited in Allen, 1992, p. 29).

Conclusion

Students of color at predominantly White institutions face challenges that their White counterparts do not. Due to these challenges, they may struggle academically, which leads to low retention rates for students of color at PWIs. Supports are needed for the students who are struggling to compete in these institutions. The support can come in the form of familial, peer, or faculty/staff support. The campus itself can provide support to a student of color. As stated in Barnett's (2004) study, "those students who perceived greater support were more likely to use help-seeking behavior as a means of coping with problems. Students who perceived less support were more likely to use avoidance coping mechanisms" (p. 53). If the perception on the campus is that there are supports for the student, the student is more likely to seek support and may ultimately succeed.

The literature shows that there is a need for supports for students of color at predominantly White institutions. The literature also shows that when supports are available, students of color are more willing to access them, especially if those providing the service are from a similar ethnic/racial background, and to perform better at the institution. The following research study looks specifically at the relationship between students of color at PWI's, if they access supports and if from accessing the supports they perform better at the institution.

Methodology

Research Design

The study conducted was a qualitative, exploratory study. There was a semi-structured interview schedule with the flexibility to ask any further questions for clarification.

Population/Sampling Recruiting

For the interview the participants in this study were third and fourth year college students of color at a predominantly White institution, Providence College. I wanted to look specifically at third and fourth year students of color since they have had time to establish relationships, become involved in clubs, et cetera. They will also have had time to have more positive and negative experiences as compared to first and second year students. There will be seventeen students interviewed during this process. The sample group was intentionally selected since there needs to be a criteria met for this population. I reached out to people I knew on a personal level and also those I was acquainted with.

Data Gathering

Interviews were conducted to extract information from a small number of participants about the topic of support systems. The interviews were recorded, leaving the researcher time to reflect on responses and pull direct quotes rather than taking notes.

Data Analysis

The data gathered are to determine if these students have found support systems while attending the school, what these supports are, and whether they feel the supports have led to the success in school. I would also like to know how the student feels about any lack of support and if it has caused any harm academically or socially. In this study,

there was no formal way of measuring success, the themes within the responses were most important. The analysis of the data was conducted by the researcher who is a student of color as the same predominantly White institution, Providence College, as the participants in the study.

Findings

There were seventeen participants interviewed as part of this study. Ten of the participants were female, 7 were male. All of the participants were in their third and fourth year at the institution. The first question posed to them was for them to identify themselves, racially/ethnically or through their nationality. Most of the participants differentiated between what they would check off on legal forms, such as employment application or the Census Bureau, and how they would categorize themselves. On legal forms the participants would check Black, African American, Hispanic; two participants stated that according to the Census they would have to check off White, however ethnically one said Dominican and the other Afghan or Middle Eastern. Having to check the box as White is simply due their lighter complexions. Others who said Black, clarified that even though they would check Black they would identify ethnically or through their nationality as Haitian, Jamaican, African, Dominican, Cape Verdean, West Indian, Trinidadian, and Puerto Rican. All identify themselves as not White, so they fit the criteria for this study.

The participants were asked a series of questions to discuss their experiences at Providence College (PC), a predominantly White institution, and their support systems while at PC. In terms of their experiences, several themes emerged while they discussed the issues that they experienced. Racial profiling, racial barriers, isolation, feeling no

isolation, adjustments made after finding supports, and adjusting academically were

discussed by the seventeen participants.

Isolation

There were themes of isolation identified by the subjects in being a minority at a

PWI. Some stated that they felt like an outsider, while others specifically used the word

lonely. Some stated that they felt overwhelmed with the changes but were able to adjust

once friendships were formed. "Minorities are outsiders, I feel like I'm an outsider, I

don't feel included." One participant felt like the only student who identified as a

Dominican (descendent from the Dominican Republic) besides the workers, making

reference to the janitors in the buildings and those that work in our dining services. One

participant reported feeling "very lonely" in this setting because, being raised around

other Black people, the participant was not used to interacting with people of a different

race.

Racial profiling

There were many instances in which the respondents experienced racial profiling.

The definition of racial profiling is "government activity directed at a suspect or group of

suspects based solely on race," (http://dictionary.reference.com). The participants were

not targeted by government officials, however some did experience actual racial profiling

from on campus security, and, if the word government is removed from the definition,

many participants had experiences that could be considered racial profiling. Some were

automatically assumed to be athletes. Others were not let into the library on-campus until

identification was shown. One participant was accused of stealing money by a White

friend, and another was not let onto the campus, even though the parking pass was in

clear view for the security officer to see. The student who was not let on campus and the

other who was accused of stealing the money were both hesitant to state that the action

was racial profiling, however. In the case of the student being accused circumstantially,

the accuser should have been suspicious of all the residents, however only the participant

was accused. The participant expressed his emotion as one of confusion. "No matter how

much you prepare yourself for an interaction like this, you don't know how to deal with

the situation when it occurs."

Racial Barrier

Others felt that there is just a racial barrier between themselves and their White

counterparts. One participant reported not having problems interacting with White peers,

however in class had experienced situations referred to the participant as "awkward."

This participant and another both stated that they felt as if they are looked at certain way

because they are Black in the classroom, both stated that they are not considered up to par

with the other students, who are usually all White, and feel as if they have to try harder to

show that they are good students. Specifically stating, "if you're not an athlete you're

looked at differently, either viewed as filing a quota or even if you are smart, still seen as

a lazy person." Others felt that no one on campus either resembled them or had a similar

cultural background. Two people spoke about the adjustments they had to make from a

diverse high school to a college in which there was no diversity. They stated that the

transition from a diverse high school to a predominantly White institution was difficult,

but they were able to make the adjustment after finding a group of friends.

Other Findings

There were some participants who stated that peers or peers from home were seen as supports to them, but four of the respondents specifically stated that it was peers who resembled them, either racially or culturally, that they found to be supportive. One participant stated that they found this support after joining the Board of Multicultural Student Affairs (BMSA). In this setting they became exposed to students with "familiar faces" and "more people to have interactions with similar issues." Others did not specifically talk about BMSA but stated that "having students that look like" them was a support.

When participants were asked what they have found to be supportive, they responded by saying peers, on-campus supports, faculty and staff, and on-campus services. Others stated that faculty and staff were at times helpful: one respondent stated it was the ones that are dedicated, but one respondent stated that the professors at times looked down on students of color. Students did talk about family, but one participant's family was not geographically close enough to provide much support. The support from family while at home was what lead them to pursue higher education, but once at the institution, family were not seen as a main source of support. In terms of what has been the most important support, four of the 14 stated their families, five stated peers, two stated faculty and staff , two stated on-campus services such as multicultural groups, one stated on-campus services in terms of academic advising. Three of the students who stated they felt support from their peers, stated specifically that the support came from their roommates and not their families. Their roommates supported and helped them in

the decisions that they were making academically since they were not receiving that

support from home.

When asked what they found to not be supportive, participants stated academic

advisors, whom they had expected to be more of a support in terms of helping to pick

classes. They also stated on-campus services that they felt were not as welcoming to

students of color.

> But being a black male and like going to those things I feel awkward because its
> either one it makes me feel like I'm not intelligent enough like all the other
> kids…it makes me feel like I need to go to those things because I am Black or two
> it just makes me feel weird, like degrading to myself, like I need to go for help.

The perception is internal and external. The feeling of being awkward can be coming

from a message within the services. If everyone within the center is White, while the

Black or Latino student is approaching there is a sense of discomfort that can overcome

them.

Some participants also stated that they did not find other peers of color to be

supportive. One participant specifically stated that students of color do not support other

students of color in initiatives that they may be taking, such as putting on educational or

cultural events. The lack of unity among the students of color was mentioned by other

respondents. Some participants stated that staff members that they felt were supposed to

be supportive, wound up not being supportive at all. These staff members were academic

advisors, financial advisors and, contrary to the many positive remarks about Balfour

made by other participants, one participant thought Balfour and the administration in

Balfour would have provided more support, however realized "they were there for

nothing." One student spoke specifically about the transition program (Multicultural

Scholarship Program) and felt that the program should not be for just multicultural

students but for all students so that there isn't such a culture shock when classes start.

When asked if they attribute accomplishments to supports or the lack of supports,

three of 15 stated the lack of supports because it motivated them to do better, two stated it

was because of the supports they did have but also the lack of supports because it helped

to motivate them more, and 10 stated it was because of the supports that they did have

whether that was in term of family support or peer support. All of the participants stated

that not having certain supports had made their time at Providence College difficult. One

participant talked about not having supports, however having a goal that needed to be

reached,

> I would attribute my accomplishments to the fact that I haven't had supports, just
> because I feel like I have a goal pretty much and whether I have support or not,
> like I'm still going to have to do my best to reach those goals so I push myself a
> lot, so my biggest support has probably been myself.

Another participant did not experience support so could not say what exactly had been

missing. Another stated missing the support on the peer level, whether from upper

classman to lower classmen, or support from other students of color. For those who stated

that the lack of supports motivated them, one had said by being discouraged by a faculty

member, the participant had wanted to succeed to prove them wrong. Another had a

similar experience, but the discouragement was coming from a father which then

motivated the participant to do better in school. Two other participants stated similar

stories but did not name a specific person. One participant stated not having supports was

motivation to be more involved to find his own supports and be involved in supporting

new programs that would help support future students of color who may decide to attend

Providence College. "The fact that there wasn't supports made me want to go out and do

more." Two of the participants who named their family was supportive, specifically

named their mothers as that support, with one participant referring to her as the

"backbone who has pushed me."

I had asked the participants whether not having certain supports has made their

time at PC difficult. All of the respondents stated that it has, but the specific responses

ranged from some stating specific aspects of their experience that they felt were missing,

to others stating that they were not sure exactly what had been missing since they never

got the opportunity to experience it. Respondents stated that the lack of diversity among

the student population and the faculty had been an issue for them. One participant stated,

> Definitely, because you feel like you're alone sometimes here at PC. You're
> basically alone, there are a not enough teachers of color and this campus has a low
> rate of minorities, so you feel like it's you against hundreds of kids and faculty
> members. And it's just hard to be successful, and if there is an incoming freshman
> of color I would tell her not to come here.

The participant continued to share her experience by specifically stating that it was due to

the lack of supports on campus that made the experience here not a good one, having

attended a predominately White high school, the respondent had expected to adjust well,

however that is not what occurred. "All of them [White students at PC] are stuck up, stick

to their own circle, and some of them don't really talk to you, they feel like you're lower

than them, which makes you feel uncomfortable to be here in the first place." Balfour, the

former multicultural center at this institution, had been mentioned as a support and lack

of support. One participant stated that once Balfour no longer existed it became difficult,

however another participant stated thinking there "would be more structure from MSP

[Multicultural Scholarship Program ran out of Balfour] but did not find that support,"

once school began. Some respondents did state that they expected to receive support but

were not disappointed when they did not find it. One stated, "[I] came to the realization that there won't be support in the real word." Another stated "after realizing everything is not going to be perfect, [I] have to be able to care for [myself]" and continued by saying "not having supports made me a stronger, more well-rounded person." One respondent was able to reflect on not having supports but then finding the supports and seeing an improvement academically. Academically, the respondent was not doing well freshmen year, "nobody cared. so I didn't either," however when supports were attained and people were asking how the participant's grades were, the participant started to care more and saw an improvement.

From the previous questions, I decided to ask the participants what supports they feel should be available to students of color at this institution. Two of the participants did state that there are supports for minority students; however one student stated that the programs are not as appealing as they should be. This sentiment was also expressed by another who stated that "the group [African-American Association] needs to be more aggressive about getting people together and letting others know about events." Two participants commented specifically on the recent program that has been started for the freshmen class known as the Horizons Retreat, giving the program as a positive example of the attempts of the institution to provide supports and programs for students of color. One of the respondents, stated however that, "[The Director of the Multicultural Scholarship Program] is more proactive with the freshmen, but kind of forgot about us upper classmen." There was one respondent who stated feeling that there should be a specific transition for minority students. Another stated that it would be good to have something that "would make me feel comfortable on campus to be with other minorities,"

however, "I don't want to be known as part of the black people group, I don't want to be judged, I want to be my own individual."

Balfour Center for Multicultural Affairs

Throughout the study many participants did comment directly on the Balfour center and the fact that it had been shut down. Many negative feelings about the closing of the center were expressed by people who I knew before this study, and during the interview process many did share their resentment towards the shutting down of the center. One respondent stated, "by eliminating the Balfour center they are showing that they don't appreciate students of color, they don't care about us." Another respondent stated, "there needs to be another Balfour center or another community here for better communication, a comfort zone."

Specifically, seven out of the 17 participants stated that they found the Balfour Office for Multicultural Affairs to be a support, and some specifically named supportive staff members who were employed in the office. One respondent had stated that the physical space of the Balfour Office was important since the person was a commuter; it was a place where the participant could store books or rest in between classes. Balfour was also stated to have been supportive financially. Some of the respondents had received financial support through a scholarship, while another had received the support to start an outreach program at Providence College. Support from within Balfour was also found from administration in the form of advocacy. "[The Director of the Multicultural Scholarship Program] does a good job helping us, kids of color, if treated unfairly." In terms of on-campus supports eight people said that they found some of the on-campus

services to be supportive, seven of them specifically stating the Balfour Center, one of these seven stated that a faculty employed by the Balfour Office.

Respondents explained that there are cultural differences in terms of dealing with issues and the different issues that are dealt with within cultures. One respondent stated that "different cultures go through different issues and the school does not provide supports for culturally different students." Another stated, "the way we [students of color] are raised if we have a problem we deal with…I believe we are morally stronger than White people…we don't tolerate weakness." This respondent continued to state that dealing with issues alone is preferable, but that there are supports that exist at this institution. Cultural awareness issues were discussed more than any financial barrier. The participants were not directly asked if there were any financial constraints within their home life, however two respondents did mention being raised by their mothers and the support they received from them

Participants generally stated that there needs to be more supports for students of color on campus from all aspects of the campus: peers, faculty and on campus services. One person stated there are "a lot of safe spaces but all are student run, more teachers need to step up." Another stated that there are on-campus services, but there needs to be more and another stated that the institution needs to keep the programs that are already in place, but there needs to be more. Respondents did also recognize that not only does the support not exist cross-culturally but also among the students of color. A respondent stated that "more minority students need to help each other" and another stated "among the minority population there is a lot of division, minority students should support each other."

Perceptions hinder the students' experience if they feel they are being perceived a certain way, but also for them to feel this way they must be getting the message from some source. One participant stated faculty saw students of color as just filling a quota, while another stated being more willing to accept others' experiences. The first participant was stating from her perspective of events that have occurred at the institution faculty view her and other students of color as filling a racial quota for the institution, but the topic was never directly addressed to her. While the other participant was stating that he was willing to accept that other culture/racial backgrounds may have different opinions than him and he is willing to accept this. Some students of color on campus may feel that they are being attacked, and this anger may hinder their experience at the school, while others adapt to being on a predominantly White campus differently.

Summary and Implications

This study looked at support systems for students of color at predominantly White institutions. A review of the literature revealed that the supports that are needed for this population of students are their family and peers from home and on campus, and faculty/staff and on-campus services to ensure a positive experience. A qualitative, exploratory study was conducted through interviewing seventeen participants who describe themselves as minorities within a predominantly White institution. The findings from this study revealed that the above aspects were seen as supports while at this institution and there was also the underlying theme of perceptions, specifically how the White population perceives the students of color. Many implications can be determined from this research such as the need for more cultural awareness among both parties and

more support systems in place to assist students of color through their time in

predominantly White institutions.

Participants did speak about the exclusion that they felt as students of color at a

predominantly White institution, however, one participant brought up the need for there

to be inclusion and not separation among the different races/cultures and classes. There

are racial barriers, but a lot of these issues are mere perception. Culture/Racial awareness

needs to come from both parties. People that are White need to be made aware of how

certain actions can lead to negative perceptions from students of color, but students of

color need to also be aware of the fact that not all White people think alike. Participants

shared the sentiments of not wanting to be clumped with all the other students of color,

but seen as individuals themselves, and I would expect the same from White students.

Students of color have a right to be and feel supported at predominantly White

institutions. Providence College is in the middle of making changings to ensure that

diversity is celebrated and that there is more awareness around the issue. The number of

students of color on campus has increased among the incoming class of freshmen as

compared to previous incoming classes, but with this increase of students of color there

also needs to be supports in place to ensure that these students will remain in school. The

juniors and seniors I interviewed are still at this institution, however the majority did

mention that they knew students who transferred because of the environment at this

institution.

The institution should be providing more support to foster connections cross

culturally and providing activities. This institution should become more intentional with

the programs that they offer. The school orientation is a great opportunity to bring

students to discuss the issue of race, not necessarily in the form of racism or prejudice, but in terms of different cultures and bringing awareness to them.

Another opportunity for the institution would be offering diversity classes that could be incorporated in our class requirements. There are currently classes being offered in certain majors (Social Work, Global Studies, Public Service and Education), but the reality is that a person will always have some exposure to diversity in any field that they choose to enter. As students at this institution, it would also be beneficial to take a class on diversity that could probably lead to more interaction and open dialogue between different races, cultures, class, and sexualities. These suggestions are not to simply say that these are the only way to provide supports to students of color at PWIs, but they are suggestions to possibly opening the doors to other possibilities of support. Participants in the research specifically stated that they found more comfort from other students who looked like them, in terms of race and similar experiences. This finding may refer to cultural upbringings, which can be their ethnic culture or urban culture, this was not specified. Awareness of differences and similarities among cultures can lead to unity among the student population

There are many opportunities that can be taken from an administrative/systematic level that can be employed to help facilitate a supportive environment for all students, specifically students of color at PWIs. Participants spoke about the lack of color among faculty. As previously stated in the review of literature, "Mallinckrodt (1988) demonstrated that support from members of the campus community is critical in the retention of African Americans at PWIs" (Nasim, 2005, p. 346). Hiring more faculty and staff that are of color can also foster an environment of support. Not all faculty and staff

will be actual supports, however having more presence from people of a different race

serves as a comfort. As one participant had stated, it felt as if it was them against

hundreds of students and teachers, implying hundreds of White students and teachers.

More diversity throughout the campus can serve as a venue towards more students

feeling supported, as some participants did state that they felt uncomfortable reaching out

to some of the on campus services such as tutoring.

One participant also stated that as much as the faculty should be involved in

providing the support, students at the institution should be willing to create these supports

if they are currently not present. This action has already been taken on by many students

on campus, however more initiatives need to be taken by the other students to continue

these initiatives. One participant expressed the lack of support from other students of

color in times of cultural and educational events, and I can also agree with how difficult it

is at times to get other students of color to help at activities for which they may be

needed. Through the Multicultural Scholarship, recipients are asked to be part of the on

campus life, being representatives, however not all participate. Constantly arguing about

what does not exist will not make those things suddenly exist. I would suggest that if

there is more cultural awareness, and more diversity among faculty, staff and peers,

students of color would feel more comfortable to reach out and be a presence on campus,

instead of trying their best not to stick out.

Many questions surfaced for me as I was having these discussions with the

respondents that could lead to a more in depth conversation pertaining the issue of

support systems for students of color attending predominantly White institutions. A lot of

the responses were not as in depth as I wanted them to be but I did not want to push the

participants to share more than they were comfortable with. Also since there were

experiences in which I could relate with, I did not ask as many clarifying questions as I

should have. A topic that could be further explored based on this research are the

perceptions that students of color may have being in a predominantly White institutions.

Discussions about race and racial tension between students of color and students who

identify as White would be an important change agent to motivate change towards a more

inclusive campus.

References

Allen, W. (1992). The color of success: African-american college student outcomes at

   predominantly White and historically black public colleges and universities.

   Harvard Educational Review *62*(1), 26-44.

Barnett, M. (2004) A qualitative analysis of family support and interaction among black

   college students at an ivy league university. *The Journal of Negro*

   Education 73(1), 53-68.

Benton, M. Challenges African American Students face at Predominantly White

   Institutions. Retrieved from http://www.colostate.edu/Depts/SAHE/

   JOURNAL2/2001/Challenges.htm

Gonsalves, L. (2002). Making connections: Addressing the pitfalls of White

   faculty/Black male students communication. *National Council of Teachers of*

   English,53(3),435-465. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/1512133

Guiffrida, D. (2010). The Black student experience at predominantly White colleges:

   Implications for school and college counselors. *Journal of Counseling and*

   Development.

Hudson, C. *Complex systems and human behavior.* Chicago, IL: Lyceum Books, Inc.

Nasim, A., Roberts, A., Harrell, J.P., & Young, H. (2005). Non-cognitive predictors of

   academic achievement for African-Americans across cultural contexts. *The*

   Journal of Negro Education 74(4),344-358. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/

   stable/40026734

Merisotis, J., & McCarthy, K. (2005). Retention and student success at minority-serving

   institutions. *New Directions for Institutional Research 25*, 45-58.

Providence College, General Information, Alumni, History, Campus, Students, Faculty,

     Address, and Tuition. Retrieved from http://www.stateuniversity.com/universities

     /RI/Providence_College.html

Seidman, A. (2005). Minority student retention: resources for practitioners. *New*

     Directions for Institutional Research 25, 7-24.

Umbach, P. & Kuh, G. (2006). Student experiences with diversity at liberal arts colleges:

     Another claim for distinctiveness. *The Journal of Higher Education, 77*(1), 169-

     192.

Appendix A

Informed Consent

Dear Potential Participant:

I am a Social Work major at Providence College, inviting you to participate in a study regarding the importance of support systems for students of color and predominately White institutions (PWIs). Information gathered from this study will remain confidential; however will be shared in a research paper for the social work course Theory Practice Capstone, SWK 489.

We are currently seeking Junior and Senior, undergraduate students of color at Providence College to be interviewed for this study. Participation will involve an interview to collect information regarding the supports that have or have not been influential during the course of study at this institution.

There are no anticipated significant risks associated with involvement in this research. There is always the possibility that uncomfortable or stressful memories or emotions may be stirred up by introspecting about psychological processes. Participants are free to cease participation at any time until identifying information is removed from responses.

Benefits of participation in this study include the possible reward of knowing that the participant has contributed to the generation of knowledge that may aid in work with others in the future.

Confidentiality of participants will be protected by storing signed consent forms separately from data obtained in the study. Once data are obtained (and the written descriptions and secondary elaborations are linked), all identifying information linking the participant to his or her response will be destroyed so that responses can no longer be identified with individuals. Data will be reported mostly in terms of aggregate numbers. Brief excerpts of individual responses may be quoted without any personal identifying information.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time until the researcher has removed the link between your response and identifying data.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Thank you for participating in this study.

Stephanie Blake   blake@friars.providence.edu
                           4014998924

_____   _____
                    (Name)   (Date)

PLEASE KEEP A COPY OF THIS FORM FOR YOUR RECORDS

Appendix B

<u>Interview Schedule</u>

Tell me about your experience at Providence College.
> Tell me a story or two about your experience at PC that would communicate to others what it's like to go here.

What have been some of your supports while at school?

What have you found to not be supportive?
> Have you found supportive faculty/staff/peers/on-campus services/family?
> How has that support looked?/What supports have they provided?

What would you say has been your most important support? Why?

Would you attribute your accomplishments to any supports or lack of supports that you have experienced? How/Why?

Does not having certain supports (like those mentioned) make your experience at PC difficult? How/Why?

As a minority, what supports do you think should be available, for other minority students?

Additional Comments