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To Be Heard and Seen: Students of Color Call for a Sense of Belonging and Support in Higher Education

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Abstract

This research delves into the policies, procedures, and resources that higher institutions carry to best support their students of color. The support systems in this research centers on academic performance, cultural belonging, financial and mental health support of students of color. Many institutions concentrate on a general one-size-fits-all system that can be counterproductive because not all students are the same and their needs differ. This issue is important because students of color do not feel seen or heard at predominantly white institutions. This case study was created to find the weaknesses, strengths, and improvements on how higher institutions are best supporting students of color. The methodology that was used was interviewing two staff members each from Hampshire College and Merrimack College in Massachusetts through a questionnaire they responded to that was based on identity and cultural belonging. As a result, I found that students of color are best supported in higher education through academic advising, raising funds for campus programming, and cultivating cultural awareness at their higher institution. The conclusion is that higher education supports students of color by on campus programming but needs to develop stronger inclusivity tools for students of color to feel like they belong which is the step needed to move to get better results and higher retention.

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Higher Education

A first generation student is a person who is pursuing higher education and the first in their immediate family to attend a four year college or university. First generation students of color are a community of BIPOC people who carry intersectional identities that can impact their environmental and social systems. According to Mahoney, Jumar, and Sabsabi (2022), cultural belonging is the identifying profile that students carry themselves when they enter a new space whether that is familiar or unfamiliar to their personal background. The important factor of cultural belonging is the strong focus on enriching, teaching, and learning how best to bond through adversities. Those adversities can range from financial struggles to academic difficulties to social-emotional disconnectedness. This leads to focus on circles of support and how best students can reach out to people rooting for their success through advising, mentoring, or taking a workshop from their lead person.

This capstone will address how higher education schools can best holistically support their first generation BIPOC students. Higher education forgets to address the "whole" student and is accustomed to the student adapting to the campus rather than viewing a changed perspective by changing their campus climate to include students of color. According to Watts, Garfield, and Davis (2023), this issue is raised due to the biggest factor being that students of color need tailored support for their specific needs, better guidance, and the ability and empowerment to speak up for themselves about the issues that matter to them in a predominantly white institution.

Literature Review

Barriers and Challenges Faced by First Generation Students of Color

First generation students make up "one third of the U.S. college population yet only 56% earn a baccalaureate degree within 6 years compared to 74% of students with a parent who graduated from college" (Ives & Montoya, 2020, p. 139). This statistic brings attention to the differences in the number of students who are achieving and successfully completing their degree. Students who are first generation are significantly less likely than their peers who aren't first generation to complete their degree within a period of time needed to get it. This highlights the pattern of academic challenges that first generation students face to have taken more time to complete their degree and the numbers showcase how much less of them make it to the end.

First generation low income Black and Latinx students face the harsh reality that to attend a four year institution there are hidden costs associated with fulfilling their degree. The hidden costs are subjected into two categories: extra financial fees for academic course materials, services, and time constraints. Perez and Farruggia (2022) discuss how, "for privileged students, lateral postsecondary transitions occur, but for low income students, they 'swirl' in and out of higher education" (p. 157). This demonstrates how low income students have to consider balancing work outside of their academic studies which is a large task as a full time student. Those low income students are then faced with less time to dedicate to their studies and more time working to finance their education without taking out extra loans to cover the costs. The 'swirl' happens when low income students add multiple roles to their workload which pressures them to not have a centered focus but juggle many positions as a student. Another student anecdote came from, "Miguel, a Latino first-generation student attributed his academic dismissal to time management… we needed money to pay for rent and food so I had to work. I was under a

lot of pressure, so I wasn't managing my time. I was too busy" (Perez & Farruggia, 2022, p. 161). This personal narrative accounts for how much a Latinx student was faced with financial hardships and responsibilities that come from outside being a student. As a Latinx student the need to financially support his family greatly influences how well he manages his time. The financial constraints factor into how much students of color have to consider responsibilities as a caregiver role that challenges their time management skills to fulfill all of their duties in a concise manner. Therefore, students of color are faced with limited choices to help them in their life circumstances which causes them not to finish or complete their degree in higher education because of taking care of their home life.

Social class is a noticeable difference for students of color when they enter spaces around the college campus. The noticeable differences can range from the style of clothing people wear, how they speak whether in a formal or informal manner, and the level of comfortability they feel when entering a new space. Social class is an identifying factor into how well students of color are perceived or perceive others. These social class differences can influence the modes of communication through which students of color feel drawn or withdrawn into the space. Communication is key because it derives from the ideas, thoughts, and connection between people. The social tensions translate into the classrooms when there can be language barriers from English language learners to even challenges with public speaking due to lack of experience. A study by Herrmann et al. (2022) discusses a "cultural mismatch" between the institution and the students social class identity in which she examined whether middle class students will have a higher social identity integration by collecting zip codes, surveys, school data, unemployment rate, poverty levels, income, and households with a bachelor's degree. This cultural mismatch confronts the honest truth to how much awareness is needed to identify the

root cause of class differences amongst the students. These class differences mold a hierarchical

imbalance in the classroom where students of color are impacted. Students of color ways of

learning can look different from their peers who are more financially fortunate because they need

more individualized care, direct attention, and guidance from their educators. Another

contributing factor is the kind of learning tools that originate from their hometown public school

system and the efforts that came from communal resources in their community. These important

factors help contribute to how well it shapes them before they enter higher education. Higher

education is the opportunity for them to learn and grow as student learners, but that can be

difficult depending on how useful the community spaces are in providing guidance in a clear

direct way. This study (Herrmann et al., 2022) in particular reflects on how much class level

differences interfere with building student achievement when it comes to the qualities of self

confidence, connectedness, and ability to take lead in the classroom. These qualities are essential

for students of color to be successful in their educational journey. Cultural background shapes

students of color based on their experiences and direct contributions from their community. The

"mismatch" points to an important matter that with these social class differences there can be

steps taken to help close the gap of inequalities for students of color in higher education.

Moreover, underrepresented students are having difficulties meshing well with the social

climate at their college campuses. Those students "report discrimination that leads to depression

but with extracurricular activities that rate drops" (Billingsley & Hurd, 2019, p. 433). Students of

color facing these roadblocks might feel othered seeing as they are the minority and can be such

a small group of students at the campus. Instances of discriminatory actions can arise in their

time at the institution whether from peer to peer conflicts or instances where it occurs in a social

setting. These occurrences can be disheartening to students of color because it prevents them

joining in on social activities in fear of being addressed unkindly or unwelcomed. The social climate is so impactful since it captures how students are interacting with each other outside of the classroom setting. When students of color encounter moments of disharmony and disconnectedness then it causes them to reject entering spaces like it. Students with intersectional identities are not made to mold into the societal normative settling. They carry into a different environment with caution and have trouble fitting into those social spheres. Those social identity differences can impact how well they interact with others and determine the treatment in return they receive from their peers. This can cause separation and not an inclusive space unless there is intention and care involved. However, extracurricular activities can help bridge that social gap because it lessens the pressure and breaks down walls that people carry because they are able to share a common passion that builds stronger relationships. Spaces where students of color can bring forth their interests and be received well from others is when barriers can be broken. Extracurricular activities allow for students to reimagine and act upon creating new relationships and grow as an individual to break out of their shell who wants to collaborate more in a social setting that is healthier for them.

The significance of college burnout can impact the mental health and wellbeing of students, especially first generation students of color. The central purpose of Kundu's research is to identify the causes of college burnout in racial minority "strivers" students who tend to overburden themselves to meet high academic standards from comparing themselves against the well endowed privileged students (Kundu, 2019). This term of "strivers" derives from students whose "on track high performance" begin to derail and get overwhelmed with the responsibilities and expectations from higher education after being through many years of this conditioned state of mind. The direction of their success rate tends to fall short from their normative academic

success rate. Many of these students are low-income students of color who want to produce the best work and push themselves to the maximum limit to reach their idea of worthiness for their familial pride from their labor intensive work (Kundu, 2019). Students who overwork themselves pass their limit then develop habits of self isolation because they do not have a strong circle of support. These issues are brought to attention because they can cause patterns of depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses (Kundu, 2019). This area of need brings forth the importance in providing strong circles of support that help bridge the gap between cultural and academic spheres to build effective relationships that enrich students of color in their learning process.

Additionally, first generation students tend to lose track of their purpose when they face hardships that enter their educational pathway. First generation students' purpose for entering higher education can be multiple reasons. Those reasons can range from wanting better pay at a job, learning new skills, to better their families lives, and more. These contributions are the motivating factors for them to pursue a higher education. However, when first generation students begin to feel they have "less knowledge navigating the academic landscape" (Mikell & Davis, 2022, p. 39). This sense of doubt and internal conflict can highly influence a student from believing they are not sufficient enough to the point where they can confidently seek out those tools. It can be daunting for first generation students to ask for help and they may not know where to start. The staff and faculty that they encounter are starting places for them to ask for help but then it may be difficult to communicate with them depending on their office hours. This can conflict with first generation students in reaching out because they can be working students and their availability might be best at night or weekends. The resources to self navigation may discourage them from asking for help because they do not trust being vulnerable with educators they have not bonded with yet. Trust is the freedom to share without filter or hesitation because

that is when students can let go of the stigma that they are not good enough. Those societal stigmas can divide them from social encounters in response that their work is not met to the standard level like the rest of their peers. This can further emphasize the lack of transparency when it comes to spreading awareness on the important needs of first generation students. Transparency can be the deciding factor for first generation students to share the ways they are struggling with hardships in their lives. When first generation students are transparent, then results may grow to support them if they receive the proper help in return. Students who have trouble finding that point of clarity tend to lose focus on the reason and core factor that led them to higher education based on their strong qualities and special interests to take lead in their communities. First generation students need to be reminded that sharing aloud is not a form of weakness but a sign of strength.

Online learning is important for students of color because it sets a new standard for learning through technology and visual media from anywhere in the world. However, some drawbacks to online learning are that "many students feel a sense of invisibility and treatment as opposed to a number rather than a person" (Stone, 2022, p. 141). Students of color seek online learning because it may benefit them to take their courses from home instead of needing transportation, less spending on traveling to get to class if they do not live on campus, or whether they are a full-time working adult. Online learning can influence how well students of color adapt to the new format of learning with their peers and professors. Students engaging in online learning seek to learn at their own pace, but that can lead down a path of isolation and stress. Students need to feel heard and seen throughout their learning journeys in order to put their best effort into their work. The quality of learning is the need to meet at a middle ground where there are moments to learn and grow with building student peer connections in online classrooms,

provided guided resources, and social opportunities online for students of color to feel included and not just a number.

Supporting First Generation Students of Color

The importance of cultural strategy for belonging is to create a shift away from predominant ideas and systems to a new modern day communal diverse support. A strong lesson that was taught emphasized how, "it is not a practice of waiting for and historicizing heroes, but cultivating vibrant widespread cultural practice set out by the people creating it" (Bissell, 2019, para. 112). At times, when it comes to social change, people are waiting for one leader to stand out. But we can't wait for that one outspoken, opinionated person, to start conversing with each other about changes that everyone would like to see on their campus or in any environment. Supporting first generation students of color should not come down to one person. It should be a community effort by professors, offices on campus, and more. This shows how people can make space for belonging through their actions and redirective focus on the values that encounter pushing against social barriers that seek to diminish diverse influences.

The ideal environment for students is a space that allows them to feel comfortable, included, and accepted. The students need to feel as if they belong in the space whether that is shown through their direct input, voice, or action within the space itself. Students need to feel independent and that they can take charge over their own venture to a path of discovery.

The Role of the Institution

One particular way that can help support students of color is by the role of the institution identifying the value in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programming, hiring more staff and faculty of color, and how best to support their students of color by asking them directly about their needs. The nature of social programming draws on the many ways students of color can

collaborate with their peers on a deeper social level by working together towards a common goal.

The need for more staff and faculty of color is crucial because it benefits students of color to

connect and share more with them upon their experiences (Ford et al., 2023, p. 379). Those

experiences can range from difficulties to achievements, which can be a tremendous effort from

students of color to share with another adult who has been through a similar cycle in higher

education. The needs of students of color can be complex but providing space to discuss these

reasons can help strengthen trust and bonding with the institution because it demonstrates how

that extra step made a difference in their choices and direction for their futures.

Key Supports Systems for First Generation Students of Color

A support system surrounds the many people, places, and culture that helps ensure

students are receiving proper care, attention, and advising. One type of support can be academic

which represents the tools and tips to provide students with during their path to learning. Another

type of support is social awareness which brings attention to the difficulties students experience

especially from being entered into a new space away from home. Additionally, mental health is

important to identify because it discusses the causations that influence isolation, insecurities, and

challenges students face as an ongoing cycle.

Student advising is crucial to benefiting student development because it centers the

students' individual goal planning and shares their vulnerable growth moments. The main

concern that follows first generation students of color is how much they want more empathy and

proactive measures from their educators to help them holistically even with handling

microaggressions (Ford et al., 2023). This highlights the importance of holding space for

intentionality when meeting students of color because their experience is their own. The battles

that they face are valuable to unpack those layers to find new approaches that best provide tools to influence their mindset on building their self confidence.

The classroom environment is the centerfold for all discussions amongst students who aim to learn and grow in their field. The research emphasized how much "academic fit and identification" is crucial to encouraging inclusivity and connectedness among students (Brannon et al., 2021, p. 490). First generation students of color intersectional identities become the center of attention in spaces of higher influence due to the constant premise that exists as a societal image to share and speak on issues that concern those marginalized identities at large. Pride and prejudice is such a deep intellectual idea that confronts the importance that stigma and cultural beliefs battle with as a continuous cycle within and outside those college spaces (Brannon et al., 2021). There is a strong emphasis on how much student interactions co-mingling across various diverse identities can help build gaps and bridges towards a new sense of belonging in those spaces. There is a need for more peer relationships to foster harmony in understanding the struggles and battles that first generation students of color face daily when entering spaces that are a new or a foreign concept of ideals compared to their organization of core beliefs.

Furthermore, difference education is discussed by "normalizing differences" and "comfort with social group difference" (Townsend, et al., 2021, p. 1511). This new form of teaching education helps students build more bravery, courage, and self confidence within themselves and others. Students in the research learn to open up more and discuss their stories with one another which allows them to gain more awareness and comfort from their peers.

According to Howard (2020), Transparency education is essential to student learning because it allows them the opportunity to digest and share their experiences about their communities with their peers. This new mode of teaching provides students with the space to

learn without the weight of unpacking another form of language. This can allow the students to dive deeper into their learning and work with their professor to use the transparency education to their advantage by taking control of their own learning and redirect their focus to a larger cause. This can deepen their understanding and take notice of issues that are happening around them that they can participate in to handle with utmost care and attention needed.

Scholarship programs are beneficial to students of color since it allows financial relief from expensive costs of attending a higher institution. Students of color awarded a scholarship are able to commit their full attention to their studies without any worries on how they will cover the costs of their education. Boatman and Long highlight the importance of the Gates Millennium Scholars (GMS) Program that is awarded to high school students of color with financial need as a first time full time student enrolling at a U.S. college or university. The researchers emphasize how, "GMS aims for scholars to exhibit behaviors of persistence, leadership, and civic engagement" (Boatman & Long, 2016, p. 658). The GMS Program was built to financially support students of color who aim to direct their full time focus on their academic studies in higher education but do not have the foundational financial security to pursue it. The three key goals of the program illustrate the necessary factors that will help encourage growth, development, and pursuit of finding academic interests that stem to connect those students to better career opportunities. Another direct result from the program is how, "non-recipients report working more hours per week than scholars: an average of 13 hour for scholars and 20 hour for non-recipients… this increases their participation in certain extracurricular activities" (Boatman & Long, 2016, p. 658). By not working extensive hours during the week, scholars are directing their focus to campus opportunities like student-led organizations where they can prosper their interests to learn skill sets from their participation in

social activities. These social activities retain the idea that students of color in the program are gaining the proper encouragement to get involved with campus activities that can help enrich their experience. Scholars who work less hours begin to dedicate more time on their academic and social fields that can aid in their character development for future career positions. These career positions can extend to paid internship opportunities, a higher paying job of their interest, or continuing their education towards a master's or doctoral degree.

A first generation student's recommendations for college students brightens up how influential it means to receive feedback from someone who understands that identity. The recommendations that were listed states "remember to live, don't be so hard on yourself, and remember your why" (Higginbotham, 2022, p.19). These tips can help first generation students formulate a better path for themselves by listening and taking into consideration that value in believing in oneself. The biggest highlight is how important it is for students to not forget the reason they are pursuing a higher education and the next steps that will lead them to their future goals. Students' self encouragement can shape their foundational commitment to concentrate on the values that go into their completion even if it means pushing themselves to their maximum limit.

First generation students of color (FGSOC) experience a multitude of challenges when studying at a predominantly white institution (PWI) such as their academic performance, marginalization, and cultural belonging (Schuyler et al., 2021). First generation college students with intersectional identities face many academic and social barriers that block them from venturing towards finding those success marks of achievements and groups of supportive environment culture. This article focuses on academic, transitional, and mental health support that critically engages first generation students of color to be more proactive in communication

with their professors, staff and peers. The framework being utilized is strongly focused on social

justice advocacy that delves into the crucial efforts in empowering and engaging first generation

students of color to feel more closely tied to their institution (Schuyler et al., 2021). The topics

that need attention would be more collaborative and socially informative events that target those

oppressive systems and social injustices that impact marginalized students on their campus

(Schuyler et al., 2021). These findings lead to a more holistic approach of learning the in depth

layers that surround the needs and wants from first generation students of color to lead them

down the road towards completion in their field.

Means and Pyne (2017) discuss how much institutional support needs to be reflected in

both academic and social spaces. The sole purpose of first generation students of color having a

sense of belonging is to provide them reason to feel accepted, connected, and that they matter.

The main concern is addressing the racial tensions and lack of community support in those social

spaces both inside and outside of the classroom. The researchers critically examine the rapid

decline of direct effective engagement of faculty advising over the course of the student first year

transitional period (Means & Pyne, 2017). Invisibility is the common thread that pulls those

students to fall in the shadows in their higher educational journey. The consensus that seems to

be highlighted is the necessary steps to be more proactive in supporting first generation students

of color through efforts of counseling and communal bonding.

Invisibility is a term that strongly correlates when comparing it to women of color in

society. Women of color hold intersectional identities that influence how they are perceived and

ignored in society. Jackson, Colson, and Fearon all conceive how transiting to college is difficult

and the impact on women of color students who face difficulties with exposure and

hypervisibility that occurs in a classroom setting with different academic language knowledge.

This call to action urges for more social awareness and support with the imposter phenomenon that invokes women of color experiences in academic spaces.

College students deal with a lot of major deadlines and tasks during their time at their institution, therefore, a huge issue that needs to be addressed is mental health. Mental health is important because it allows students to reflect, compress their thoughts, and analyze their growing concerns on their wellbeing. The need to address mental health is crucial because it can impact students' ability to complete assignments, deliver proper attention to their studies, and connect with their peers and professors. A statistic that acknowledges this issue on mental health states how, "college populations have a special significance for mental health policy given that nearly 75% of mental illnesses have first onset by the mid-20s" (Lipson et al., 2018, p. 348). This statistic illustrates a high number of college students are dealing with mental health battles even through their list of to dos as a student having many duties to fulfill as a well rounded student. These responsibilities often have deadlines and meetings to attend which can impact a student to overextend themselves and cross their mental limit so that they can appease others even when they are not at their best in their mental state of mind. Another supporting evidence from the researchers details how, "In our sample, nearly half of White students received a diagnosis compared to less than one-quarter of African-American students" (Lipson et al., 2018, p. 351). In this study, it brings awareness to racial differences that are brought forth on how much or how little students are being diagnosed on their mental health. African-American students are limited in getting diagnosed which can increase their chances of not getting the help they need to ensure their quality of life and work is taken care of. This shows how addressing mental health concerns is needed to support students of color so that they can succeed and accomplish their goals at their institution.

First generation students of color paths can drastically benefit from all three support systems: academic, social, and mental health. They will be able to acknowledge their points of struggle and identify their needs in order to better comprehend that their path to success looks different than others. The ability to be vulnerable and share stories can bring insight to their college or university which can possibly lead to a cultural shift of change.

Theories Around Student Support

Racial Battle Fatigue. Racial Battle Fatigue is the concept that focuses on black educators who work to support students of color yet this leads to a toll on their bodies from over-extending their aid (Quaye, et al., 2020). The other health effects presented are stress, depression, anxiety, and other trauma concerns (Quaye, et al., 2020).

Cultural Belonging Theory. Cultural Belonging Theory is the concept that students of color face difficulties with connectedness, shared language, and a sense of place amongst their experiences in a given social environment due to racial and cultural disparities (Lee et al., 2023, p. 2). These reasons can bring forth apparent social issues that come up when cultural belonging is not addressed in a respectful and intentional manner by the community surrounding them..

Effective Support Models and Frameworks

The Sanctuary Model represents the process that goes into emotional healing from traumatic changes in a community setting. The changes that occur can be minimal or large but the result from it brings alarm to the students. The Sanctuary Model is a crucial point of reference because it brings forth the idea that "relational support systems is critical to the reduction of feelings of isolation, disconnection to one's personal experiences, and recognition of the unique challenges that students of color face on a PWI campus" (Smith et al., 2015, p. 30). The foundational support for students of color is the community that encourages them to

continue on their educational journey to continue to grow and evolve their character during their

time at college or university. If that community leaves or departs from the institution then that

leaves students of color to fend for themselves. Students of color struggle with connecting to

their institution because of the constant unknowns that come up when they first enter the space

since the culture is vastly different from their own. Community is built from bonding,

connecting, and trusting that each member of the community supports each other to their best

ability. When major challenges or shifts occur that is when the community will rise up or fall

down from the disruption. This means that students of color need their supportive community

because it's their way of finding home away from home. The approach that comes from The

Sanctuary Model encompasses, "seven commitments that are nonviolence, emotional

intelligence, social learning, open communication, democracy, social responsibility and growth

and change" (Smith et al., 2015, p. 28). These seven approaches emphasize how much

institutional support is imperative to the wellbeing of their students. Institutional support means

that the college or university takes notice of the needs of their students. The support of the

institution can ensure students, especially students of color, that their voices are heard and being

listened to with open ears. By acknowledging the points that communication and social change

are needed allows for students of color to speak up, voice their thoughts and build the courage to

direct attention to the points that matter most to them. When an institution can listen and accept

their students' concerns then that is when healing and bonds can strengthen between the two

groups, which will reflect back to show how supportive the community is.

Another framework to highlight is called Cultural Navigators: An Equity Minded

framework. This framework consists of people who look at social problems and find ways to

shape them in a format for better understanding so everyone can be involved and nobody is left

out of the social situations. Strayhorn best simplifies the equity framework by stating,

"navigators know the codes of conduct, customs, dominant values, language, requirements, rules,

traditions and so much more" (Strayhorn, 2022, p. 29). A cultural navigator is someone who can

be a social guide to implement the necessary social cues to help acknowledge forms of

discomfort and isolation that confront oppressive dynamics directly. They understand the

dominant and underrepresented culture rules and can socially navigate in response to both

groups. Cultural navigators situate how to repair broken bonds before they worsen. The relief

that comes from cultural navigators' support towards students of color is paramount because it

distracts them away from negative stereotypes and internalization. This shifts the students of

color focuses on presenting their whole self that takes up space to mark their important value.

Capstone Project

The purpose of this capstone will be to explore and analyze the policies, procedures, and

effectiveness of two college support programs focused on first generation students of color. The

result of this analysis will culminate in a set of recommendations and practices that will help

other college-based programs to meet the needs and concerns of first generation students of

color.

Methodology

This capstone will be a qualitative thematic analysis, focusing on the insights and

experiences of student support services staff at two colleges in Massachusetts.

Participants

I plan to interview two staff members per institution that I have selected across

Massachusetts. The two institutions that I will concentrate on will be Hampshire College and

Merrimack College. Both institutions are from the same state, private schools, and host a strong

focus on community engagement which I will dissect further during my research process. I hope to raise questions that will connect to my theories, address the issue, examine how prevalent it is in current modern day, and find resources that will help engage the community to use in the future.

Project Themes

The themes explored through interviews in this capstone will be:

- Social Categorization; Social Identity; Social Comparison, Group Norms and Behaviors; and Group Identification which all are rooted in Cultural Belonging Theory

- Constant Vigilance; Microaggressions; Emotional and Psychological Impact; and Interpersonal and Social Effects which are based in the Racial Battle Fatigue Theory

Materials

I interviewed the participants by asking them nine questions total. Question one focused on the characteristics of the college environment. Question two centered on their student programming available for students of color and whether they see it as an effective resource or not. Question three and four asked the interviewees about a constant subject matter that students of color bring up often and the challenges they face. Question five dives into reflecting back on a time where a student shined through a period of hardship. Question six centered on their college community cultivation of a sense of identity. Question seven focused on their hopes for the future when it comes to building more effective resources for students of color in higher education. Question eight asked the interviewees the length of time that they have been in their position at their institution. Question nine ended the interview with any additional details the

interviewees liked to share and express about their programs or other important notes that may

need to be spoken about to me. The protocol can be found in Appendix A.

I interviewed all of the interviewees using Zoom on my laptop device. The interviews

lasted approximately 45 minutes total each. The tool that I used to transcribe the interview data

was handwritten on notebook paper with a pen.

Procedure

Participants were selected and invited via email to participate in an online interview

about their program. Once participants confirmed, they were sent an invitation and a link for an

online session. At the time of the interview, participants were asked questions from the interview

protocol. Feedback was recorded using handwritten notes using paper and pen. Once the meeting

was over, participants were thanked for their time. The data was then transcribed into a

Microsoft Excel workbook. Data was coded and then placed into categories. The categories were

then analyzed for themes.

Results

After collecting interview responses from all four interviewees, I gathered the titles and

number of years that each individual has been working at their institution. Interviewee One had

been working at their institution for a total of eight months as a Scholars Program Manager.

Interviewee Two had been working at their institution for a total of ten years and their role is an

Assistant Dean for Advising. Interviewee Three had been working at their institution for a total

of twenty years and their role is a Director of Student Affairs. Interviewee Four had been

working at their institution for a total of four and a half years and their role is Dean of Students.

In question one, I asked all of the interviewees to "share about the college community

and its key characteristics". All of the interviewees differed in their responses to this question.

Interviewee One explained how "the institution is very collaborative". Interviewee Two

emphasized how the "institution is very experimental". Interviewee Three discussed how "the

institution is a rural community where students are self motivated". Interviewee Four stated how

"students like to explore and gather support from student led groups on campus".

In question two, I asked all of the interviewees to "share a student program or

organization that best supports students of color from their institution and whether or not it was

an effective resource". Both Interviewee One and Four were similar in their responses since they

mentioned "how well attended Unity House programming events are since it is a safe space for

students". However, Interviewee Two responded how "the James Baldwin Scholars program

helps support first generation students through its summer internship grant funding and social

programming events". On the other hand, Interviewee Three highlighted how "all of the identity

based student organizations have such high interest from students of color".

In question three, I asked all of the interviewees to "share a subject matter that

continuously comes up from students of color". Interviewee One shared how "students need

more advocacy and flexibility in their academic workload". Yet, Interviewee Two and Three

both shared how "students need more access to resources on campus". Another commonality was

between Interviewee Three and Four, who both mentioned how "microaggressions are a constant

issue for students of color".

In question four, I asked all of the interviewees to "share how a program at their

institution helps tackle challenges that students of color face on their campus". All of the

interviewees differed in their responses to this question. Interviewee One shared how "students

of color want weekly or biweekly meetings with their advisors and want to feel included and

seen". However, Interviewee Two responded with how "there is a low retention rate of men of

color in higher education". On the other hand, Interviewee Three stated how "peer advising is valuable to students especially from upperclassmen mentoring the lowerclassmen". Yet, Interviewee Four expressed how "there is a need for more cultural awareness in the community".

In question five, I asked all of the interviewees to "share a change or growth in a student of color who had to overcome an obstacle". Both Interviewee One and Four shared a common response to how "a student who faced microaggressions, isolated themselves from the campus community, but then grew to become more socially involved in leadership roles on campus". Yet Interviewee Two responded that "every student has the ability to grow since they are so young". However, Interviewee Three answered that "students who seek life advice and ways to build skills for their future have grown".

In question six, I asked all of the interviewees to "share how their institution cultivates a sense of identity and cultural connections for their students of color". Both Interviewee One and Four shared a common answer that "diversity training and inclusivity workshops cultivate a sense of identity". However, Interviewee Two responded that "students of color are encouraged to see the cultural center as a safe space". Interviewee Two added that "students of color can attend the collaborative events between the multiple cultural student-led groups". On the other hand, Interviewee Three answered that "community cultural dinners, food and clothing donations spots on campus" help cultivate a sense of identity for students of color.

In question seven, I asked all of the interviewees to "share their hopes for the future within the next five years at their institution". All of the interviewees differed in their responses to this question. Interviewee One responded on their "hope for more financial support in study abroad programs and alumni connections for students of color". Interviewee Two expressed how their hope is for "more admission of first generation students of color and building more

networking opportunities". Interviewee Three shared an interest in "reconnecting the First Network to campus so that faculty and staff can share their stories and experiences too". Interviewee Four stated that there "needs to be more advising opportunities for financial literacy and peer mentoring".

In question eight, I asked all of the interviewees to "share any additional information about their program". All of the interviewees differed in their responses to this question. Interviewee One shared how "it is hard for students of color to navigate familial relationships while being a full time student". Interviewee Two stated that "financial investment into the scholarship program from donors is needed to keep the program alive". Interviewee Three expressed how "student led organizations are impactful to students of color". Interviewee Four explained that "there is nothing else to share".

Discussion

The cultural belonging theory and the cultural navigators equity minded framework were the most intriguing parts during the learning process of this capstone. I learned that cultural belonging is valuable for students of color because they need to feel like they belong at a higher institution through receiving words of encouragement, guidance from mentors and support from their community. Students of color want to feel seen and heard because of the many experiences they carry in higher education such as their efforts to try new things, ability to juggle many roles in their life, and evolving character as a student. Students of color need that inclusive welcome from their peers, staff, and professors or else they can self isolate and end up leaving the program altogether. This can be supported in the results section when both Interviewee One and Four shared a common response to how "a student who faced microaggressions isolated themselves from the campus community" which represents how students of color need people and places

that they can share their concerns with or else they will internalize their thoughts and not seek

help from others in their community on how best to solve the matter together.

Additionally, cultural navigators can help students of color because they lend a chance

for their adversities to be acknowledged respectfully instead of seen as a problem for others.

Cultural navigators bridge the gap of open communication and clear understanding to support

students of color without asking anyone for help or guidance. This can be highlighted from how

Interviewee Four expressed how "there is a need for more cultural awareness in the community"

because it draws focus on how much cultural navigators are culturally aware people and can be

the bridge that comforts and lends a helping hand to students of color to lean on in times of need

when confronting someone who is not. Each one of these theories and frameworks reshape how

educators in higher education can take better notice and reflect on how to make conscious efforts

to support students of color during their time at college or university. Educators becoming

familiar with these theories and frameworks helps close the gap between miscommunication and

understanding how to build bonds with their students of color.

My goals of the capstone project were to learn more about the practices, policies, and

programming to support students of color of higher institutions. Through the research I gathered

from numerous sources on the concept of belonging and support, I collected that there is a strong

direct correlation between students of color participating in campus activities and the role the

institution plays in encouraging them to feel included. This can be supported when Interviewee

Three answered that "community cultural dinners" can be a way for students of color to be more

involved directly into the campus community because it gives them space to share their world

and cultural background with others at the institution to learn about various types of food that is

not only Americanized. In order for students of color to lean towards opening up and being more

vulnerable with others, the space needs to encompass a place for communal support and tools for success. These tools for success will sharpen students of color to be more engaged in campus activities and in other areas that can shape their experience which propels them to have attainable goals. The resources are within their reach, but it is up to their institution to share these resources and direct them to the right people and places on campus.

I am able to understand and apply my theories better because through the interview and research process I was able to decipher the main needs of students of color. The overarching needs were advising, access to resources, time management, and cultural awareness. These core topics revolve around the challenges and a call to action for higher education to make a step forward in producing quality over quantity programming. This can be seen when Interviewee One shared how "students need more advocacy and flexibility in their academic workload" because students of color need the proper tools and understanding from their professors on how best to manage their time even as a working student from signing up for individualized meetings, working with the writing center, or possibly having a peer mentor to support their academic progress in the courses they are taking. Students of color relentlessly emphasize the importance of creating strong relationships with their professors, getting peer advising, and finding their purpose at the campus. These avenues of support will take precise time, goal planning, and funding to gather those resources and groups of people that are able to contribute to that mission of cultural belonging for students of color. This can be applied in many directions from capturing action steps, reflecting on these matters, and gauging responses from the community.

A moment that stood out for me during this research and interview process was that Racial Battle Fatigue Theory was addressed the least. The research acknowledged how much students of color are struggling in higher education but paid little attention to how much staff or

faculty of color are challenged through overworking themselves to help everyone else. This is

important because the voices of staff and faculty of color in the space are needed when

discussing matters of Racial Battle Fatigue because they have the largest input. Staff of color

working to help students of color and their colleagues can be a huge weight of responsibility.

They are putting in work to serve others but are not getting the same work in return from the

campus community. The Racial Battle Fatigue Theory having less focus demonstrates how

minimal staff of color are brought up in conversations around identity and cultural awareness. I

believe that the interviewees did not bring it up because they are primarily focused on their

students' experiences and neglect to take a step back to analyze to best support others in their

field as staff.

I learned that the process of teaching a social justice topic on belonging and support for

students of color in higher education is a matter that needs all people involved like staff and

faculty too. The community to build a supportive system starts from within and then moves

outwards. This can be supported by Interviewee Two expressed how their hope is for "building

more networking opportunities" which can be beneficial for students of color because they can

reach many departments and people from around the campus who may have some tips on any

problems that may arise like handling housing conflicts, reaching out to a teacher's assistant for

support, or how to use Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) which are all useful

tools for them take use in. Students of color speaking on social issues consistently need to know

that people are listening from their institution and taking account the serious nature of holding

conversations around belonging and support systems are essential to working together towards a

common goal. Staff and faculty need to listen to students of color and take account on how best

to approach the matter with respectful intent and be willing to share back their thoughts and next steps to follow.

The lessons learned for others who want to teach on cultural belonging and supporting students of color are to specify motivation, goals, and plans to develop further. The motivation should be introspective and extrospective reflections because this involves heavily on identity, culture, and societal norms. This can be seen when both Interviewee One and Four shared a common answer that "diversity training and inclusivity workshops cultivate a sense of identity" which can help in encouraging for more self and community reflections through the lens of social justice engagement work to be the starting point to gather those ideas and build from it with actionable steps to take a closer look at topics like race and diversity. The goals need to be thoughtful and hold a depth of reason for creating it because it needs to be purposeful for students of color to receive effective support. The plans that come after the goals should center around the community and how best to use the resources already available and find ways to improve on it for better results.

The main takeaway from this research is that higher education is more than a space for academic and career development but a community that surrounds students from all walks of life and cultures. The students coming into the higher education space may or may not be familiar with the tools needed to guide them in the right direction. Higher education needs all spaces on campus to be culturally aware of power and privilege, bias, microaggressions, and stereotypes when it comes to students of color entering those spaces and ways to engage them to feel included. The spaces around campus should encompass community support and lend a helping hand to others that need that extra push and guidance.

Limitations of the Project

The limitations I had were to alter and find two people out of the four original interviewees for my interview because those two people said they didn't feel like the best fit to respond and answer my questions. Timing was another issue during the interview process because in some moments it was difficult to schedule meetings with them since their timeline didn't always align with mine, so this pushed meeting with them for a later date. A few interviewees also responded to the questions more in depth than others. I would have preferred to record their responses rather than writing it by hand in a notebook just so it can give me more time to engage with them.

Implications for Future Projects

The recommendation for future projects are to have more diversity campus workshops, build community input like town hall meetings from students on how they feel about belonging at the institution, and have more intentional spaces on campus that support students of color in higher institutions.

Higher institutions and educators need to prioritize having conversations surrounding race, privilege, and ways to ensure all voices are heard in spaces. Students of color need support from the community and that starts from holding conversations about social issues that are presented when they enter the campus. Dialogue and workshops will encourage people to share their experiences, ask questions, and map out how best to address the issue with action steps. These diversity workshops will enhance the campus community to engage in topics that are needed to create social change. This opportunity will allow students of color voices to be heard and highlights the disparities that exist for themselves and for others like their peers, staff, and

faculty to contribute with active listening and communicate healthy approaches to counteract those oppressive cycles.

In addition, Town Hall meetings are needed to build a sense of belonging and contribute to systems of support for students of color. These meetings can be presented weekly, bi-weekly or monthly in order to make a large positive impact on the community in higher education. These meetings can allow students of color to contribute their thoughts to the community and reinforce the value in collaborative communication to gather together in one central place. Staff and faculty are encouraged to participate and contribute their thoughts on how best to find a common ground in harnessing those qualities of cultural diversity, awareness, and bonding. The consistent meetings will center everyone in the community to understand the importance of their contribution and have a say on important matters that revolve around them in the community. Social change will not occur overnight but the small steps that lead to it can create lasting change that helps and supports everyone no matter their cultural background or differences.

Lastly, intentional spaces around campus can help support students of color and provide them with a sense of belonging. The idea and steps to create intentional spaces on campus starts with community guidelines, building community activities, and sharing student led contributions into the space. Community guidelines can be the starting point where everyone in the space can make agreements that allow for a common understanding that centers all voices. The guidelines can start broadly then get more specific since it is not binding but an ever-evolving list of agreements that change periodically. The list of agreements can start as to be respectful of others then grow to enhance where it says all identities and cultures are to be acknowledged with the utmost care and respect. Community activities are the foundational moments for connecting with peers on a personal level. The activities can be from interactive icebreakers, games, or an open

opportunity to build community connections across many identities and cultures. Another

communal experience is student led contributions that allows them to present and share to the

community how they would like the intentional space to look and feel. This can be from re-

designing the space, taking on a leadership role, becoming a peer advisor, or contributing with

their ideas. These core examples emphasize the importance of needing more intentional spaces in

higher education because the students using the spaces should have a say on how inclusive it is

to make it a more enriching environment.

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Appendix A

Introduction

My capstone centers on learning about first generation students of color influences of support and how it builds and uplifts their academic performance, cultural belonging, and mental health support. I wanted to discuss how higher education institutions aid in building that circle of support for the students of color. Therefore, I wanted to bring attention to how those tools, resources, successes, and challenges are brought to light when meeting with staff members from that community. I concentrated my focus on two private four year institutions in Massachusetts to determine the cross similarities and differences between the two called Hampshire College located in Amherst, Massachusetts and Merrimack College located in North Andover, Massachusetts. I aim to collect interview responses from at least two members from each institution to produce this information.

Opening Question

1. Can you tell me about your college community? How does it look and feel from your perspective? Any details I should know about in terms of characteristics and key words that best describe the college environment?

Core Questions

2. What are your thoughts on the specific programs or student organizations available to students of color from your institution? Would you consider them to be an effective resource for students; do they participate, are they well attended? Why or why not?

3. From working or being around students of color and hearing about their experiences at your institution, what are some subject matters that continuously come up/have been voiced consistently from students?

4. How do you think the programs mentioned help tackle those challenges that you see or hear when it comes to students of color?

   a. Yes, why do you think they're successful?

   b. No, why not?

5. Can you share a time where you have seen or heard of growth/change in a student of color who faced these challenges and grew to overcome those obstacles?

6. How does your institution cultivate a sense of identity and cultural connections for students of color? In other words, how does your program create a sense of "we" for students of color at the institution?

7. What are your hopes for the future in regards to first generation students of color support at your institution? Specifically, what are some changes or growths that you would like to see in the next five years?

Final Wrap-Up Questions

1. How long have you been in your position?

2. Is there anything you would like to share with me about your program that you think would be important to know? Or anything that you think would help me understand the impact of this program?

Request Opportunity to Follow Up

Thank you for taking the time to meet and be willing to talk with me about my capstone project. Your responses will be a tremendous help as I continue to work on its development across the next couple weeks. After collecting and reviewing your responses, may I contact you for further questions or clarifications in the future if need be?