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Examining Primarily White Institutions of Higher Education: Black Student Experience in the 1960s

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Abstract
A major outcome of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the desegregation of higher-learning institutions. Despite this, there was little change regarding the character and cultural norms of predominantly white institutions (PWIs) of higher learning. In this review of literature discussing the experiences of Black students attending PWIs during the 1960s, I argue that cultural norms such as racial discrimination yielded a detrimental impact on the success and wellbeing of African-American students. While I discuss what quality wellbeing for African-American students entails, I highlight the significance of black student unions to the wellbeing of black students. In order to further distinguish and understand the social climate of PWIs during the 1960s, literature regarding the learning atmospheres of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) during the 1960s will also be discussed. Although political in nature, it is my argument that the formation of black student unions served as a catalyst to effectively address and improve the psychological nature of being an African-American student at an institution deemed unresponsive to the needs of African-American students.

Introduction: Brief History of African-American Exclusion from Higher Education
While 2016 marks the 52nd year since college desegregation, diversity and inclusion continue to be highly debated topics on campuses across the United States. Throughout history, many African-Americans have perceived higher education as a pathway to the improvement of their social standing in America (Watkins, 1993). Many studies acknowledge John Russworm, who in 1826 became the first black person to graduate from a PWI with a bachelor’s degree (Feagan, Vera, & Imani, 1996). Judging by this historical feat, one might assume that Russworm’s graduation from a PWI was subsequently followed by a significant influx of black-student graduations from PWIs. However, the statistical trends of African-Americans that graduated from PWIs after 1826 suggest that PWIs continued to lack a strong black student presence after Russworm’s graduation. Between 1826 and 1865, only 28 African-American students graduated from PWIs (Jackson Jr., 2002). Between 1865 and 1890 that number increased only by 2 students, making a total of 30 African-American graduates. Between 1890 and 1910, this number increased significantly, but failed to exceed 700 (Feagin et al., 1996). According to these statistics, only eight African-Americans graduated from an institution of higher learning every year for 84 years. This
graduation trend reflected that there were still barriers that hindered African-American enrollment and graduation at PWIs during the nineteenth century.

As the first few decades of the twentieth century commenced, PWIs in different geographic areas modified their enrollment policies. In the Northern region, blacks were openly encouraged to enroll at PWIs after the 1940s, whereas in the border region, blacks were encouraged to enroll at PWIs after the 1950s (Williamson, 1999). By 1954, there were 4,000 African-American freshmen at PWIs nationwide (Plaut, 1954). In the 1960s, an even larger increase in black student enrollment at PWIs followed the growth of college enrollment generally, and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

For institutions of higher learning, the Civil Rights Act prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (Days III, 2004; Oppenheimer, 1995; Williamson, 1999). This act also called for a collection of data from all American institutions that identified students by race or ethnicity. Administrators at PWIs faced the likelihood of losing federal funding if they did not comply with the mandates of the act. Data collection from PWIs focused federal attention on the enrollment trends of students from each race demographic. The mandates of the Civil Rights Act and the collection of enrollment data made it possible for federal officials to keep a watchful eye on administrators as well as their enrollment trends according to race. By the early 1970s, two-thirds of all African-American students in the United States were enrolled at PWIs. The remaining one third of African-American students were enrolled at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

Historically Black Colleges & Universities: A Response to Racism
By 1968, 61% of all African-Americans enrolled in college (150,000) attended HBCUs. Although these institutions represent only 4% of all colleges and universities in the U.S. today, by 2011, 16% of African-American students were enrolled at HBCUs (Irvine & Fenwick, 2011). In the same year, 30% of African-American students graduated from HBCUs with a degree in the science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM) fields.

Throughout American history, HBCUs have played an integral role in higher education for African-American students. HBCUs were launched as a means for educating African-Americans during the years in which they were prohibited from attending the same colleges and universities as their White counterparts. Most HBCUs were established before 1890 wherever large populations of African-Americans resided (Evans, Evans, & Evans, 2002). In 1837, Cheyney State University was established in Pennsylvania as the first of the 106 HBCUs that exist today. Many researchers argue that HBCUs emerged as a direct response to white discrimination towards African-Americans that sought to secure basic and advanced learning experiences (Benton, 2001; Franklin & Moss, 1994). In other words, HBCUs aimed to serve the educational goals of African-American students.

Previous studies reflect that black students and white students differ in their expectations of what a successful academic experience should entail. For whites, the purpose of a higher education is to generate middle-class Americans who not only share white values, but also accept the existing social order (Williamson, 1999). At PWIs, this purpose was reflected by the courses offered and the structure of student organizations. During the late 1960s, black students perceived an adequate higher education as one that served multiple roles: 1) the preservation of black identity, 2) the provision of a culturally relevant education, and 3) a platform to be equipped with the skills
necessary to work towards social change and the collective good of black communities (Walker, 1976; Williamson, 1999).

For black students, enrolling at HBCUs proved to be a feasible alternative to PWIs. The mission of HBCUs embodied the factors that black students associated with academic success. Several studies have evidenced that HBCUs provide black students with the education needed to return to their communities as effective leaders, teachers and scientists (Bowles & DeCosta, 1971; Neverdon-Morton, 1989). Whereas black student graduations from PWIs failed to surpass 700 by 1910, black student graduations from HBCUs had already amassed 2,000 by 1900 (Jackson Jr., 2002). Several studies have also shown that attending an HBCU yields positive impacts on the cognitive development and educational attainment of African-American students. Patrick Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora (1996) compared the first year experiences of blacks attending PWIs with those of black students attending HBCUs. First year students at HBCUs reported higher levels of confidence in their academic abilities, more positive relationships with faculty and more involvement in student organizations (Terenzini et al., 1996). Additionally, first year students at PWIs also reported a higher inclination to transfer out of their institutions, less positive relationships with faculty, and less overall confidence in their academic abilities. The results of this study also reflected significant differences between the social climates of HBCUs and PWIs. First-year students at HBCUs reported a more tolerant climate on campus, while students at PWIs were more likely to report that their colleges promoted less respect for differences (Terenzini et al., 1996). The results of this study support the notion that in comparison to PWIs, HBCUs provide a social environment more conducive to the personal and academic success of black students.
Evidence of this claim has been provided through measures of academic achievement (student persistence, graduation rates and student satisfaction. Jacqueline Fleming studied 2,591 African-American students attending PWIs and HBCUs. For this study, participants reported higher levels of comfort and success in the classroom at HBCUs (Fleming, 1984). Stewart (1997) complemented Fleming’s results by emphasizing that HBCUs offered Black students a firm education in a more nurturing environment.

In order to grasp the significance of HBCUs to the African-American pursuit of higher education, it is important to understand the racial discrimination faced by African-Americans throughout history. Racism towards African-Americans has been rooted in the systemic subordination of black people from the time that blacks were brought to the Americas as slaves (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). This subordination has consistently been accompanied by inaccurate assumptions about black people in higher education. Such assumptions include the idea that African-Americans are intellectually inferior, an inference based solely on skin pigmentation. Additional assumptions include the idea that African-Americans did not possess the mental capacity to learn, and the idea that African-Americans did not desire a formal postsecondary education (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009).

The statistics regarding black enrollment at HBCUs reflect otherwise. The number of black students that graduated from HBCUs by 1900 indicated that several thousand African-Americans not only desired a postsecondary education during the nineteenth century, but also possessed the capacity to successfully complete undergraduate coursework. These statistics also reflect that HBCUs were more welcoming of African-American students than PWIs were. The fact that many PWIs were less welcoming of black students than they were of white students throughout the
nineteenth and twentieth centuries reflects racially discriminatory norms grounded in American history and facilitated by PWIs of higher education.

“**I Don’t Belong**: Alienation in a Sea of Whiteness**

Many researchers assert that a sense of belonging and a sense of social membership produce greater growth and accomplishment (Astin, 1993; Pace, 1975; Tinto, 1987). For many African-American students who enrolled at PWIs immediately following college desegregation, this sense of belonging, as well as its byproducts, were not felt. These students expected integration to entail the incorporation of their traditions and interests into the culture of predominantly white campuses (Biondi, 2012). Unfortunately, despite federal efforts to end college segregation, black students at PWIs were confronted with the reality that their new learning environments would not acknowledge their traditions or interests. Furthermore, such circumstances elicited feelings of alienation and isolation for Black students attending PWIs. Ultimately, these shared experiences of being an outsider to the mainstream White culture of PWIs impacted how many African-American students shaped their identities at PWIs.

It has been emphasized that college integration failed to bring about the necessary fundamental changes to the cultural norms of PWIs (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Williamson, 1999). Upon the arrival of African-American students, many white students, professors, and administrators openly challenged the abilities of black students as well as their right to attend college. In addition to the teaching styles and campus services of PWIs being generally tailored to white students, curricula often reflected perspectives derived from the dominant white culture while excluding perspectives from non-white cultures (Taylor, 1989). According to students at City College in 1967, the curricula failed to offer courses on Africa or African-Americans (as cited

Past studies on the learning environments of PWIs have reflected that campus activities at PWIs reflected the interests and traditions of white students and faculty only. Statistics from these studies demonstrate a discrepancy in the appeal of campus activities at PWIs to African-American students. Sociologist Walter Allen conducted a comparative study of African-American students attending PWIs as well as those attending HBCU’s. Sixty-two percent (62%) of African-American students at PWIs found campus activities unappealing (Allen, 1992). It was also found that only 33% of black students at HBCUs found campus activities to be unappealing. These statistics support the claim that following integration, black students were more likely to find appealing campus activities at HBCUs than they would at PWIs. Understanding these findings, as well as the lack of black representation in curricula and campus activities, may help one understand why black students often refrained from participation in mainstream student life and formed their own groups (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Williamson, 1999).

In 1963, Malcolm X openly critiqued the concept of integration in higher education by asserting that PWIs recruited small numbers of Black students in order to portray their campuses as equally accessible (Biondi, 2012). He noted that although 1963 marked nearly a decade since the outlawing of segregated public schools by the Supreme Court, less than 10% of the America’s black student population attended integrated schools (Biondi, 2012). While Malcolm X understood the higher education integration effort as tokenism, black students at PWIs soon understood that successful integration, even if permitted by white students, would cost them their identities.
One African-American undergraduate student anonymously shared her experience of integration at a PWI (Feagin & Sikes, 1995). She explained that integration did not imply fusing the black & white cultures, but rather, becoming white. She also went on to explain that white students had no reason to know the cultures of black students, but that in order to survive, black students needed to know everything about the culture of White students (Feagin & Sikes, 1995).

In a *New York Times* article entitled “The Negro Student at an Integrated College,” one black student shared a similar perspective. In the article, he explained that black students were being admitted to PWIs on the condition that they become white students with dark skins (Lukas, 1968).

In *The Basis of Our Ethos*, a black Wellesley alumna remembered her campus as one that lacked recognition of the African-American experience. “[That] was our opportunity to become like [the whites]” she recalled (Biondi, 2012).

In *They Demand Relevance*, political scientist Charles Hamilton conducted a qualitative study on the experiences of African-American students integrating at PWIs. After visiting 60 colleges, he found that integration traditionally meant that black students needed to become more like their white classmates (Hamilton, 1972). He went on to term this idea of integration “racial assimilation” (Biondi, 2012), which he found problematic for many reasons. The concept of racial assimilation reinforced the racist belief that black students were inferior to white students, and therefore needed to adopt the traditions and interests of white students. Overall, the pressures that many black students felt to racially assimilate compromised their sense of self and loyalty to their heritage. Black students nationwide did not want their entrance into academia to be seen as a rejection of their culture and communities (Biondi, 2012). African-American students confronted the pressure to racially assimilate in ways that suggest a relationship between the racially
oppressive environment of PWIs during the 1960s and the wellbeing of black students that attended them.

**Understanding Black Student Psychological Wellbeing**

Human beings experience the best psychological development in environments where they are valued and accepted (Allen, 1992). Thus understanding the human development of black students at PWIs is of major importance. Several researchers have discussed how racial oppression affects the psychological health of African-Americans. In several studies, racial oppression has been shown to function as a chronic psychosocial stressor that negatively affects the mental and social adjustment of people of color (Akbar, 1996; Estell, 1994; Jackson, 1990; Johnson, 1990; Landrum-Brown, 1990; Utsey & Ponterotto, 1996). For African-Americans, racial discrimination is directly connected with psychological wellbeing (Pierre & Mahalik, 2005). Racial discrimination has also been shown to contribute to the prevalence of psychiatric disorders in African-Americans such as anxiety and depression (Burke, 1984; Outlaw, 1993). White & Cones (1999) embellished this connection by explaining that the continuing presence of racial discrimination triggers powerful emotions such as anger, grief, despair and uncertainty in the lives of African-American men. For African-American women, the reality of racism and sexism through various forms of prejudice and racial discrimination can induce stressful experiences that negatively affect their psychological wellbeing (Torrey, 1979). Based on past assertions by researchers regarding the wellbeing of African-Americans, it can be argued that racial discrimination negatively affects academic success for African-American students.

For African-American individuals, positive self-perception and positive identity development each play integral roles in mental health development. Researchers have found that
when blacks endorse their own values instead of assimilating to white values, psychological distress is likely to decrease and self-esteem is likely to increase (Asante, 1987; Karenga, 1980; White & Cones, 1999). Additionally, African-Americans who possess a strong and positive sense of black identity are more likely to achieve a higher quality of mental health than those who racially assimilate with the dominant white culture of the United States (Butler, 1975; Helms, 1990). It is important to understand what constitutes positive wellbeing for African-American students at PWIs because during the 1960s, black students at PWIs found themselves in learning environments that pressured them to forfeit their identities and adopt white values. Based on this understanding, it can be argued that at PWIs during the 1960s, this pressure led many black students to develop a negative sense of identity, and in turn, a lower quality of mental health.

**Black Student Unions: An Effort towards Improved Wellbeing**

The federal push for college integration should have resulted in a gradual shift towards multiculturalism at predominantly white campuses. However, the campus environments of PWIs did not seek to integrate the traditions and interests of African-American students. Instead, the social dogma of PWIs perpetuated a dominant white culture that pressured black students to racially assimilate with the culture of their white counterparts. At PWIs, this dogma facilitated modes of racial oppression that left African-American students feeling alienated from their campus communities.

As previously mentioned, the alienation that black students experienced encouraged them to form their own groups. Amidst pressures to racially assimilate at PWIs, these students recognized a common goal: the power to redefine integration as multiculturalism (Biondi, 2012). During the 1960s, many black students nationwide began recognizing their predominantly white
campuses as places to develop new ideas and techniques towards achieving this goal. As black students nationwide formed their own groups, black student unions emerged. Initially, during the 1960s, black student unions aimed to provide black students with a platform to effect social change at their PWIs and in their communities (Edwards, 1970).

While studies on black student unions have highlighted their political orientation, it may be helpful to understand how these student organizations appealed to the identity development of African-American students. For many black students, the pressure to racially assimilate generated a negative sense of identity. Black student unions worked to restore positive aspects of black identity while empowering African-American students in ways that instilled a sense of pride (Williamson, 1999). The formation of black student unions provided spaces where Black students could endorse their own values.

Black student unions met psychological and academic needs that were not being met through traditional university mechanisms (Exum, 1985). Based on this assertion and previous ones, the “needs” that Exum discussed include the need for African-American students to feel a sense of belonging at their respective campuses. This sense of belonging required the inclusion of black traditions and interests at PWIs. In contrast with the racially oppressive environment of many PWIs, black student unions acknowledged the common goals and interests of black students while providing spaces for African-Americans to sustain their identities.

In order to understand the purpose that black student unions served for the experiences of Black students at PWIs during the 1960s, it is important to understand the context. Many of the students who joined these groups were familiar with the racial discrimination exposed by the Civil Rights Movement (Biondi, 2012). Throughout the 1960’s, civil rights leaders such as Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Bobby Seale, and Huey P. Newton became increasingly recognized by black
students as action-oriented activists in the quest for social change. In addition to publicly criticizing higher education integration efforts, Malcolm X publicly articulated action-oriented methods for social change. Such methods include gaining control of public institutions in black communities, revaluing the African heritage of Black people and throwing off the psychological shackles of self-hatred (Biondi, 2012). Stokely Carmichael, former cofounder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), spent many years encouraging black students to openly challenge the white power structure of PWIs (Biondi, 2012). Prior to founding the Black Panther Party, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale attended Merritt College, where they participated in campus protests for the addition of a black history course (Biondi, 2012). Their efforts contributed to the addition of the course by the 1965-1966 academic year as well as the addition of a Black Studies department by 1968.

**Discussion: Proposed Solutions and Future Directions**

During my review of the literature regarding Black student experiences at PWIs during the 1960s, I identified two efforts that administrative forces at many PWIs made to improve the black student experience: 1) the implementation of Black Studies programs and curricula, and 2) the implementation of Black Studies centers.

In the fall of 1966, Sociologist Nathan Hare led thousands of students at San Francisco State College in protest for the addition of a Black Studies program; three years later, it was launched as the first Black Studies program in the United States (Bradley, 2008, p. 112; Williamson, 1999). By 1971, over 500 Black Studies programs were offered at PWIs across the United States (Williamson, 1999).
Many black students attending PWIs during the 1960s found it imperative to have their own separate living and eating facilities in order to survive on campus (Edwards, 1970, p. 98). For black students, separate campus facilities represented opportunities to appreciate other black students and opportunities to be immersed in black culture. In 1966, black male students at Cornell established the Elmwood House, an all-black male residence hall (Williamson, 1999). The Wari House was established the following year. Multiple researchers have investigated the concept of black culture centers (BCCs). Pittman contended that BCCs facilitate the identity development process for African-American students (Pittman, 1994). Stewart, Russell, and Wright (1997) contended that BCCs provide Black students at PWIs with the necessary support they need to excel on campus. Based on my analysis of what wellbeing entails for Black students at PWIs, BCCs appear to address the psychological wellbeing of black students by facilitating multiple modes of healthy black-identity development.

My review of the literature regarding the experiences of alienation and racial oppression that Black students endured at PWIs during the 1960s reflected that the racially oppressive norms that existed at many PWIs may have negatively impacted the wellbeing of African-American students. Considering the psychological dimension of being a black student at a racially oppressive institution opens the door for new perspectives and new questions regarding the formation of black student unions. Although the goals of black student union membership were political in nature, my review of the literature on the topic suggests that black student union membership may have been a collective push by black students towards a more positive sense of psychological wellbeing. To further investigate this hypothesis, it may be necessary to conduct a qualitative case study in which members of black student unions at different PWIs in the Northern and Southern states are interviewed about their campus experiences. Interview questions should be geared towards
understanding five things: 1) why these students chose to join black student unions; 2) how they perceive themselves in comparison to their white counterparts; 3) whether or not they have experienced racial discrimination at their respective learning institution; 4) whether or not they perceive their campuses as safe spaces, and lastly; and 5) the degree to which they perceive the contribution of their Black Student Union membership to their overall college experience. A case study grounded in these guidelines may further reflect the findings of my literature review, and more importantly, shed a new light on the issues that ignite instances of Black student protest at PWIs today.
References


