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Students of Color at Predominantly White Institutions—The Experience

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Students of Color at Predominantly White Institutions—The Experience

Shamar Barker

A SENIOR THESIS PRESENTED TO
THE FACULTY OF BINGHAMTON UNIVERSITY
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Dedication

I dedicate this honors thesis to my Mother, Abiola, a warrior and dreamer, who taught me to dream big. I met my mother in person, in 2014. She had left Guyana when I was little and relocated to the U.S., leaving me and my sister in the care of our aunt, whom I love dearly. In my younger days, she used either Skype or Oovoo to keep in touch with me and my sister for eleven years. Fast forward to our move to the U.S. in 2014, the adjustment was not easy for my sister and I. However, my mom constantly drilled into me and my sister that we are in a country where dreams come through and to stop at nothing until we have achieved all that we desire. Today that lesson has brought me so far and I remain forever grateful. I admire her tenacity and fearlessness. As I wrap up the final semester of my studies, I have since realized that while my mother helped to guide me towards my dreams, I must thank God for keeping us both and seeing me through this new beginning.

Abstract

Today, many people in society advocate for higher education. Parents, above all, are usually the biggest advocates for education. While this support is necessary, important, and appreciated by all students, especially by minority students, encouragement from our loved ones only signify the tip of the iceberg. This is because of the grueling experience that many students of color face at predominantly white institutions. Only then is the magnitude of said support put to the ultimate test, raising the question of how far support from family and peers really gets you when navigating a system that may not have been tailored to facilitate the success of Black and brown students alike.

Minority students who attend school at predominantly white institutions tend to have more to worry about aside from the everyday coursework stresses, social life, and even finance—universal problems shared by all students. What creates the separation between minority students and their white peers is the racial bias, economic status, and systemic prejudice that minority students experience, along with the universal problems shared by all college students.

In the thesis, I will examine the nature of these institutionalized racial problems and explain the importance of leveling out the playing field of college experience, for all students despite their race. I will identify and examine some of the contributing factors that reinforce this unfortunate structural and institutional imbalance of experience among students of color and their white peers.

Secondly; I will examine the relevant literature that has been produced on the topic to show its importance to society at large and to secure the foundation for my argument. Thirdly; I

will do so against the backdrop of critical race theory, affirmative action, and other relevant themes to reinforce my overall claim regarding the grueling experiences many Black and minority students face at predominantly white institutions, as opposed to their white peers.

Lastly, I will analyze the systems that are in place in the higher education system that keep these difficult experiences alive by bringing to the fore, the history of the U.S. and the lived experiences of what many minority, most especially Black students, like myself, have been through, while making a connection to society at large.

This research is important because it brings to light an issue that many Black and brown students face in silence while pursuing their dreams—whether working or studying—to have a successful career after school. While working and studying, they have to give their all to make it to the finish line and become a first-generation graduate in their families. Society at large must be made aware of these challenges, because it does not just negatively affect Black and brown students, it also unfairly benefits white students. This spotlight on the experiences of Black and brown students at predominantly white institutions serves as a beacon for change, since it impacts how we navigate the world around us, the racial prejudices we encounter, and the relationships with ourselves and our peers. Our relationships and how we view them hold great importance because they shape our society and the way in which it functions.

Introduction

In this introduction, I share the story of my experience at Binghamton University to serve as a beacon of hope for any other students of color who might be experiencing the same. The hope is that our white peers will then realize that our experiences are not the same and hopefully start to ask questions to the higher-ups that can eventually lead to change.

Growing up in Georgetown, Guyana, I didn't quite know what direction my life was heading. I had always loved school but constantly struggled with my grades and coursework. Fast forward to moving to the United States in 2014, this was my fresh start and opportunity for a do over, to finally take advantage of what I looked at then as a setback since I was placed a few grades back after my relocation to the U.S. Unknowingly, this was my slingshot moment, a minor setback for a major comeback in my drive to be in school and a desire for higher education. Middle and high schools in the School for Human Rights in Crown Heights Brooklyn was a struggle itself — at least at first. The adjustment to a new culture and way of speaking was hard to grapple with, which made it no easy walk in the park. I became depressed. I was dealing with depression and trying to figure out myself at a pivotal transitional point in my life. My depression and journey of figuring myself out were all unfolding at the same time I met my mom for the first time in person. After High School, I attended SUNY Delhi, a small university in upstate New York. I met some of the best people there and had the best time.

Delhi gave me a college experience like no other. I was very involved. Most of the time, when hanging out with my friends, I always had to be at a meeting somewhere, which shows how packed my schedule was. I did Track and Field and was in the modeling club. I was on the E-board along with the pastry club. I was also a Resident Assistant on a floor of thirty-plus residents; so yes, I had a lot going on. The small size of Delhi made it all manageable along with

the friends and faculty that I met. The support was endless both on and off the campus, which I found surprising since it was in a town that was not especially diverse.

After two years in Delhi, my goal was to go to a larger university to further my education in language studies, a passion I've had since high school. Binghamton University was my first choice, given that it offered advanced levels of the languages I was very interested in. At Binghamton, I realized so much more was at play. It was a much larger University with a higher ranking and a drastically different demographic of students compared to SUNY Delhi. This difference in culture, diversity make-up and overall campus feel, made my experience a notable one to write about. I quickly noticed the campus culture and how predominantly white the racial demographic was. The racial makeup of the students contributed to not only my negative experience, but also to that of my peers, who are students of color. At predominantly white institutions (PWIs) these racial gaps create a plethora of discomforts that puts students of color at a disadvantage, not only academically but socially. Sometimes the ratio of Black versus white students looks like a classroom of 200:1. I know this because many of the classes my very close friend sat in represented this ratio.

In reading my thesis, readers will come to understand this difference and its impact on students of color. It is imperative to identify the features in predominantly white institutions that create a negative impactful culture for students of color. I also present a deeper perspective of factors in society that contributed to the disparaging treatment and radical difference between the experiences of Black students and students of color, on the one hand, and their white peers at predominantly white institutions on the other hand. Actions like microaggressions surround Black students all the time, especially Black male students.

Another concern is the accessibility barriers when it comes to financial aid, including scholarships. Blatant racism from staff and faculty members exist including prejudices, amongst

many other things, that does not foster an adequate learning environment. I plan to delve further into the specific nature of modern day racism and prejudice towards students of color in PWIs, and to expand on the details of these experiences later in my writing.

This topic is highly relevant, given that many students like myself, especially from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background, struggle in silence while navigating a system not tailored for our success. Another central point supporting the relevance of this topic is bringing to the forefront the systems of biases and prejudices in place at these predominantly white institutions, where Black students are concerned.

I remember the day I received my acceptance letter. My mom was in the kitchen, and I was in bed, exhausted with nerves leading up to that day. I couldn't go a few hours without checking my email to see if I got accepted. I kept checking my email that entire week and succumbed to exhaustion. The notifications on my phone when I received an email were so loud that it woke me up. Upon opening my email, I saw one from Binghamton University; I thought, "Ugh, what do they want now?" It was nerve-racking because, before that email, I kept receiving notifications that my letter of recommendation had been received and that I needed to submit more documents. But not this time. As I opened the email, I saw the word "*Congratulations.*" I would describe the excitement I felt then, but I can't. What I do remember feeling, however, was extreme pride in myself, like I won the lottery; that I got the golden ticket! I screamed so loud that my mom thought something terrible happened until the words "I got in, I got in" escaped my mouth.

At the time, my mom didn't understand how much of a big deal it was for me to get into a school like Binghamton University, but I understood, so did my sister, and my friends. What I didn't know at the time was why the acceptance rate of Black students was so low, that it was below multi-ethnic students, who are only about 12% and a 3% Black population, while white

students make up 58%. Either way, I thought, no worries, I will go there, keep my head down, take care of business, and leave. Boy, was I wrong. I remember my first day on campus at my then-dream school. It was like the movies I had watched back home in Guyana. I remember seeing lush trees, beautiful buildings, and resident halls. I remember it was during COVID-19, but the campus looked so lively; that was how I perceived it then. Even though I had already been to college and received my associate degree from SUNY Delhi in Social Sciences and Humanities, it felt like I was a freshman again. I thought to myself, “Wow, I am here. I finally did it!”

I was coming from SUNY Delhi, a four-year college that was misleadingly labeled a two-year community college by a faculty of the Romance Language department at Binghamton University to justify my inability to keep up in class. I am still struggling to understand this disparaging parallel. Nevertheless, I remember my family driving around the ‘Brain’ as we explored the campus, hoping that I would be staying in one of these residence halls with the big shiny windows. But to my surprise, my residence was situated way behind these new halls in the lackluster apartment communities. I later learned from deep reflection how this event affected my experience. But at the time, I was extremely grateful for my residence, and I still am.

COVID-19 was still rampant that fall semester and the chances of socializing were slim. The only sense of diversity I experienced was among my roommates. They were all great guys with whom I'm still friends today. What shaped my experience for the most part of that semester was the campus life and my online courses. I remember walking around campus that first week, feeling cold and lonely. However, coming from SUNY Delhi where I had the best two years of my life, my agenda was to settle in, work hard, and then get out. I also remember we were in a pandemic, so I quickly brushed the cold and lonely feeling off and became immune to it.

As I started classes, the pressure got intense, not because of the workload but because the culture was so cold that it was almost palpable to the point where it affected my studies. Students and faculty would see you around and look at you as if you do not belong. Fellow students would not even give you a welcoming smile or greet you in any way. This was the first stage of the alienation I experienced.

For the next couple weeks I was desperate to find anything that reminded me of the warmth and familiarity that I felt at SUNY Delhi. My first real familiarity with anyone who looked like me or what I associated with diversity was at the "Black Education Matters: Fifty Years of Black/Africana Studies at Binghamton" webinar, in the fall 2020 semester. I felt pride in seeing people like myself here at Binghamton University in high positions and successful. It was my driving force to get through that part of the semester. Faces like Dr. Titilayo Okoror, the Chair of the Africana Studies department, gave me a feeling of familiarity and belonging. After being in school for two years prior and of course both High and middle school, I became good at recognizing educators and staff who have good intentions and especially, who genuinely love what they do and of course are amazing at it. I quickly recognized that Dr. Okoror is one of those people. It was important to me as a student to see such faces because I have experienced the positive impact it has had on me and my academic career in the past, and I had no doubt that if I stayed close it would have the same positive impact.

That semester I took the course titled "Nazi State." Now, you might be thinking I was begging to be hate-crimes at this point, because it is safe to assume most of the class would be filled with white students, and it was, so my chances of experiencing microaggressions and other prejudices from my peers was high. I was interested in German and other European languages at the time. I also planned on taking Russian and Spanish. My aim was to learn as many languages as possible since language learning has always been my passion.

I was the only student of color in my class, which wasn't surprising, since in my years of language learning, I haven't met any Black German speakers, nor have I met Black Jews, so I figured the people interested in this class would be all White students since it may be closer to their heritage.

I liked my professor at the time; I thought he was a great guy and very easygoing. My classmates, however, were questionable. One day the professor told the story of being in a gas station here in Binghamton. If my memories serve me correctly, he said a man walked up to him saying, "I like what you guys (my professor is German) did to the Jews in Germany, now we just have to figure out what to do with the *niggers* around here. I remember a few of my classmates chuckling. Immediately, I knew that I was in the wrong place. However, how do you grapple with such a situation in a university you thought to be your dream school? To be in what I felt at the time is my dream school and in a class that is a prerequisite for learning a language I had a great interest in, it was hard. It was hard to exist in a space where I was and felt alienated due to the lack of diversity.

I remember that same semester, the university had a mask mandate policy. This was both understandable and necessary, because COVID was not a joke. I had come down from my apartment, which at the time was in Saratoga, I was on my way to the University Union to grab a bite after a long day. Admittedly, I also wanted to see some humans, because I was going crazy in my room due to the COVID isolation policy in place.

I recalled the lively campus I saw the first day, and the cold and unwelcoming feeling I felt in my Zoom class. As I made my way to the Union, a famous food court on campus, I noticed some students with masks and some without because they were eating. I recollect seeing this guy who wore a uniform and appeared to be a campus worker. I assumed he was a campus dining employee, because he was actively enforcing the mask mandate within the dining areas. I

watched him tell a white male student who wasn't eating to put his mask on. After getting my food and beginning to eat, I was approached by the same man. He came up to me and told me to put my mask on as I started eating. I told him I was eating. In any case, I obeyed and decided I'd return to my room to eat. But just before I left, he asked for my student ID. As a new student, I was intimidated and didn't want to make a scene, so I handed it to him. (If cops have ever stopped you as a Black male or person of color, it felt very similar to that; even though we were just on a college campus, in a dining area).

This incident was my first encounter with racism and racial profiling at Binghamton University. I was singled out because I was a Black male student. I was able to come to this conclusion not only because I watched him give a white male student a warning without asking for his student ID card, but also because, later in the week, I received a judicial sanction for a student code of conduct stating that I violated school mask mandate policy because I was allegedly in public without a mask. Yet, there was no policy stating that students are not allowed to eat in dining areas. Judicial sanctions are never good because they reflect negatively on one's student records, and I am sure it did on mine.

I remember going about my week as usual, still shaken up about what had happened earlier that week. I was enraged! In college, I have never received a code of conduct, much less for not wearing a mask while eating. If I had told my white friends at the time, they would have shrugged it off, not realizing that a judicial sanction on my student records looks differently than on theirs. At the end of Fall 2020 semester, I decided that the next best thing to do was move off campus. I knew I couldn't continue living anymore on campus as the space and cold environment all started weighing on me. Soon enough, the campus culture, which hadn't bothered me before, now made me feel unsafe whenever I stepped on campus. I was genuinely scared.

Compounding matters, I lost my Excelsior scholarship in Fall 2020/Spring 2021 semester because the school advising office failed to notify me of my low course credit count. Excelsior requires 30 credits per year for recipients to maintain their eligibility, and I was under the limit. Usually, whenever this happens, given my experience at SUNY Delhi, the school sends a notification stating that you are under the requirement and need to add a class or two. However, I am still waiting to receive that notification from Binghamton University. Today, I grappled with whether that was my fault or not. What I do know was that, in the long run, it greatly affected my academic experience from that point on, and it significantly affected my finances too since I now definitely needed to take out loans to pay school fees. Without the Excelsior scholarship, I eventually had to begin paying out of pocket. This meant that all the money I had set aside for food, savings for rent, and simple enjoyment now had to go towards my tuition. I took on full time jobs which took away from my studies and resulted in my lower grades. My family also took on a huge financial obligation that strained our limited resources, and resulted in personal and family indebtedness, because we now had expenses we were not prepared for. Very soon, I was playing catch-up with paying my bills, living under extreme pressure with numerous eviction scares, and I was at constant odds with my mom about finances. Nevertheless, I remained laser focused on finishing my degree that I started.

In the spring of 2022, I was determined to come out of my financial struggles. I remember going to my brand-new apartment downtown. I finally decided to relax and take a breather. That Spring semester, I took classes that celebrated what I was better at, which was mostly Africana Studies courses, such as; African Women and Feminism with SUNY Distinguished professor Nkiru Nzegwu, African Youth and Pop Culture with Dr. Moulay Ali Bouanani, both of whose courses I have taken multiple times. I found that the department had

more diversity than my previous courses and they really gave me a solid grounding and an opportunity to critically think, which helped the overall quality of knowledge I learned.

Summer 2022, however, was the hardest. My financial investment wasn't going well, and I had to search for a job to live on and continue paying my school fees. I remember going weeks without eating as much as I usually did because I was running out of money. So, I got creative. I vowed always to have flour and essential ingredients in my apartment. I would make pizza almost every day, not the luxurious kind. Half of the time, I didn't have all the ingredients, but I would improvise, I learned humility in baking. Baking was inexpensive, and kneading the flour would always bring me calm, so that today, I always resort to it as a form of therapy.

It was August, and the fall semester was slowly approaching. My new roommates had already either graduated or moved out. It was bittersweet since they were all great guys. So I moved to a new apartment unit. Even though I was pretty sad, I was excited for the next chapter. I remember meeting my new roommates and immediately knew this would be a mixed bunch. We were all total opposites. Either way, I put my head down and kept to myself as much as possible; this didn't help. That semester of Fall 2021, I was battling my biggest fear. I feared being unable to return to school since I couldn't pay. As that reality became more of a possibility, I decided to accept my fate and look for a job to get by. During the semester, instead of being a student and focusing on my studies, I worked in a factory to earn money for my tuition, food and rent. It was hell. I worked from 3 pm to 3 am, Monday to Friday, and sometimes on the weekends. The negative impact of losing the Excelsior scholarship was that this became my gap semester, halting my education, since I could not take classes due to a tuition bill on my account.

The factory was a lively environment, but I had one goal: to do what I came to do and leave, and I did just that for the next six months. I only spoke when spoken to and answered when called. Otherwise, you would only hear me speak if I asked for help, greeted you in the morning,

or said goodnight when I left. That semester, I aimed to make enough money to pay my expensive rent, which is about \$945, and pay for the spring semester.

Working full time greatly set me back because I had to push my graduation back an entire semester. Somehow, I was ashamed and disappointed in myself because I convinced myself that I could have done more to pay for school. However, after a while I accepted the situation for what it was. I was simply existing, since being out of school was my worst nightmare. I am certain there were and still are many Black students like myself who find themselves in similar situations and were not able to land a job in the area and stick around. They would eventually have to drop out, all because a school's financial aid officer and the academic advising offices failed to do their jobs. Reflecting back on the experience, I find that this failure of paid university officials to notify me of my low course credit count is a gross injustice to students who worked hard to stay in school, especially first-generation students.

Spring 2022 came along, and I congratulated myself that I did it, that I raised the money for my tuition and accommodation! I believed too that my mom could get some money from what I had made and I was back in school. I was feeling elated after the longest six months of my life. I thought this deserved a celebration. I went to a speakeasy in the area for a glass of wine to celebrate. After two glasses, I reached out to one of my roommates, who I knew would go out no matter the reason. I admire that about him. He didn't need anyone to have a good time. He was a "one-man army," as we'd call it in Guyana. We set up a meeting place at a popular bar downtown and waited in line. He then noticed a girl whom he recognized either from class or in passing and greeted her. I completely ignored both of them. To my surprise, she turned around and responded not just to him but also to me, as if I was hitting on her. She said, "Eww, who are you? I don't know who you guys are. Eww no I'm not interested". At this point, I defended myself and responded, "Yeah, ew, I'm not interested either". Then the white guy she was standing next to

pushed me to the ground. Now, I am from a place where we defend ourselves no matter what, but I thought about how much I had to lose. I was just getting back into school and as a permanent resident; who knows what could have happened if I had retaliated?

I remember my hands breaking my fall, and the guy kept approaching me. My roommate helped me up and was going to approach the guy in my defense. I told him it wasn't worth it. That night, my arm aches all night. I woke up the next day and went straight to the emergency room after showing my friend, Danae, who advised me to get it checked out. I felt so powerless on our way to the emergency room. I thought, for this to happen to me unprovoked, I'm happy to have walked away with my freedom and life. When we arrived, the nurse checked me out, and she asked what happened. I told her I was pushed by some guy unprovoked. She then did some exams and x-rays. She came back and said that I had a broken wrist. I couldn't believe it. Growing up in the Caribbean, I've never broken a bone in my life, and I mention this because some of the things we consider to be fun may sometimes lead to us being seriously injured. But that was childhood back then, and this was physical assault. I remember calling the Police to file a formal report later that night. He came in and immediately seemed uninterested. As I explained what happened, he was in disbelief based on the questions he followed up with, "You're sure you didn't provoke this?", "Are you positive you didn't hit him back?" "I'll ask again. Are you sure this wasn't just a disagreement, and you lost, so now you want to file a report?"

At this point, I became stern and restated precisely what happened. The officer then went to write up my statement and asked me to sign it, confirming it was all correct. His penmanship was illegible, which at the time seemed purposeful, because there was no way this man expected me to understand what was on that paper. Frustrated, I glanced at confirmed date times and a synopsis of the events, signed it, and went to bed. That night, I felt so powerless. I remember crying so much and slowly slipping back into a depression I hadn't felt in a long time. This was

hard, even for me. I recall quitting my job at the factory because I needed my hands to sew. That semester, I fell far behind on rent because I needed to use my saved money. I even came close to being evicted from my apartment downtown. Since then, my finances have recovered less than when I was in school.

After a while, I shifted my focus; I thought, well, I can finally take my Spanish class and do everything else I was so eager to do that semester. I remember my first day of class. I was excited because I could finally finish what I came to do. I remember my Spanish professor at the time, who seemed laid back but was very motivated at the same time. My first week was slightly rough, as I learned that I don't do so well in courses when they have lots of moving parts. This means there were quizzes, verbal and written projects, presentations, and in-class participation, which is usually standard. As the weeks went by, my grades tanked.

One day, I went to her office hours to confide in her why I was struggling so much. I mentioned my previous situation of being assaulted downtown; it was also challenging to hide since I had a cast on my forearm, and also my struggles with the class. That day, my professor found it fit to broadcast to the entire class not to go downtown because dangerous and crazy things happen. It was only natural for the class to ask why since she made such a spectacle of it while simultaneously glancing at me and my broken wrist.

Being the only Black student in the class, I thought this was the last thing I needed: to be a spectacle and not for the best reason. However, with all of the scenarios I have had with that professor, this one takes the cake. One day in class, we were working on an activity. She wrote an example on the board: "Shamar needs to study more so he can do better on quizzes." She then laughed it off and kept moving forward, disregarding how that impacted me. My grades were tanking at this point, not because I didn't know Spanish but because I didn't feel comfortable

going to the Professor because of her condescending demeanor and the constant digs she was taking at me in class.

My struggle in the class continued not because I didn't know the language, but especially because of the small "moving parts" of online textbook quizzes. It was a textbook that took me weeks to access, and whenever I accepted her offer to attend office hours to catch up, it was a session filled with her being patronizing, so I stopped going. Many students of color may understand. It's like being told, "Wow, you are so articulate." I remember finals were coming up, and as more belittling situations kept happening, I felt unmotivated and stressed; I had to talk with her.

I remember the day I went to her office and told her in these exact words, "I am here to discuss what a horrible time I had in your class this semester." I know that was strong, but it was how I felt. I was immensely angered and felt taken advantage of. It's like I was paying to be belittled by my professor, instead of being educated and guided. As I continued explaining why I felt that way, she immediately took offense and disagreed with just about everything I said. I told her how hard it is for students of color to be on a campus with no diversity, and she refused my claim by saying yes, it is diverse. I asked her to explain, and she said that she meant Long Island introduced diversity because most of the students were from the city. No offense to Long Island, but how does that address the issue of racial diversity? The truth is that those students who are from Long Island are predominantly white and went to predominantly white high and middle schools. I know this to be a fact because my friends, who are Black twins, grew up in Long Island and, for a long time, were a part of the handful of girls who were Black in their high school. But also, the Long Island students are white because Binghamton is very meticulous about who they preponderantly accept, based on obvious student diversity makeup.

At this point, it was clear we had different ideas of diversity, with hers coming from a blatantly uninformed point of view. She apologized after realizing she couldn't school me on something that I was living. By the end of the semester, she found out that I spoke Spanish better and knew way more than the entire class. My ten-minute oral presentation, which had to be in Spanish only, told her that.

But in the summer, I decided that I would pivot to French in the fall. I already had the prerequisite, but because it was from SUNY Delhi that the department thought was a “community college”, it would not accept my prerequisite. I was informed that I needed to audit the course. I agreed as long as I didn't have to pay since I planned to take it over the summer. In the summer, right when I was going to start the audit, I received an email from another faculty member stating that I did need to pay even if I had the requirement already because I didn't get it from "Binghamton University." At this point, I left the department. It was clear that they tried to push me out using a financial scheme that they couldn't and didn't care to justify.

The following semester, I dropped them as a minor and switched to Africana Studies, because I was currently taking courses with the department and felt like I was receiving the quality education that Binghamton University promises to their students. At this point, my expected graduation date was pushed back by one year after changing majors four times, which, unfortunately, was necessary, and being in departments that clearly didn't want me there.

I remember my first Africana Studies course in person. I felt welcomed and celebrated because I was finally in an environment that reinforced my strengths and helped me to work on my weaknesses. From then on, I tried my best to take only Africans Studies courses, even after declaring my Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention (GMAP) minor. At the same time, my Africana Studies department served as my break and exhale from a few grueling years. I still found myself in classes that didn't align with what I perceived as a healthy college experience,

but at this point, I was a semester or two away from graduation, so I did whatever to stay on track.

As I get closer to the conclusion of some of my more memorable experiences in college, I find myself at a crossroad where the raw truth of Black students' tribulations intersects with the broader discourse on equity, inclusion, and systemic prejudice in higher education. The journey that many Black students experience within the confines of predominantly white colleges serve as a mirror reflecting the multifaceted dimensions of societal struggle and institutional shortcomings.

During my documentation, we've seen a complex pattern of difficulties. These difficulties are like threads of strength, courage, and strong commitment to overcoming the significant barriers caused by the systemic inequalities of racism. My testimony stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of discrimination and marginalization that continues to cast a shadow over the educational experiences of minority students across the country.

At its core, my narrative speaks to the lived realities of countless students of color who find themselves grappling with the forces of racial prejudice and bias within the space of academia. From the subtle nuances of microaggressions to the overt manifestations of institutionalized racism, the challenges faced by Black students serve as a stark reminder of the entrenched inequities that plague our educational systems.

The documented experiences of not only mine but later my friends' experiences offer a sobering accusation of the status quo, challenging us to confront the uncomfortable truths about the inherent injustices that pervade our educational institutions. It is incumbent upon us, as individuals who occupy space in the academic community, to sit with these truths and to confront the systemic biases that perpetuate inequality and exclusion within our midst. We cannot afford to remain passive bystanders in the face of systemic injustice; rather, we must summon the courage

to confront these injustices head-on and to dismantle the structural barriers that obstruct the path to progress.

In confronting the specter of systemic racism within higher education, we are confronted with a tough challenge—one that demands a multifaceted approach rooted in empathy, compassion, and a steadfast commitment to justice. We must interrogate the underlying structures of power and privilege that perpetuate inequality within our institutions, and we must strive to dismantle these structures brick by brick.

Moreover, we must cultivate a culture of inclusivity and belonging within our educational institutions—a culture that celebrates diversity, fosters dialogue, and empowers individuals from all walks of life to thrive and succeed. This necessitates an effort to address the root causes of racial discrimination and bias, while also fostering a sense of community and solidarity among students, faculty, and staff alike. In closing, I would like to reference the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who famously declared, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

I hope this introductory autobiographical narrative sheds some light on my authentic experience navigating one predominantly white institution as a Black male student of color. Though my experience may not speak for all students of color, it shines some light on what most of us Black males experience at one point or another. I found that when Black students and students of color stay in close-knit groups with other students who look like them, it is much easier to navigate the social aspect of college, which is sometimes helpful. The bigger question I would encourage readers to ask is, why? Why do students of color encounter adverse experiences in PWIs? Why do they feel more comfortable around peers who look like them in an institution where diversity catalyzes growth and knowledge? In Chapter 1, titled "What does history say?", I hope to answer these pressing questions. I will utilize books such as *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race* by

Beverly Daniel Tatum, and *Racism Without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* by Eduardo Bonilla Silva along with scholarly articles, newsletters, and blogs.

Chapter 1 - What Does U.S History Say?

History as we know it – Or not.

“Racial or white supremacist” history in the United States has influenced much of what happens today in predominantly white institutions, and now students of color are left to experience much of its legacy, while our white peers benefit from the racist system now, as they did back then. In this chapter I provide a background on what influenced a system that is steeped in racism today, in relation to higher education. My intent is to educate anyone that may assume that students of color are stuck in a constant cycle of claiming victimhood; but it is sadly just what it is.

The legacy of students of color being marginalized in predominantly white institutions might seem far fetched, however at some point, students of color were not allowed in these very institutions. This was evident in the well known Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* in the 1950s. People who may be uninformed may still argue the latter—which is, certain schools tend to flourish when the population is mostly white. Nevertheless, history holds the details that support this very claim that some may find hard to believe and acknowledge. Scholarly work from Anthony F. Patterson, “‘It Was Really Tough’—Exploring the Feelings of Isolation and Cultural Dissonance With Black American Males at a Predominantly White Institution” and “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race” by Beverly Daniel Tatum all of which I plan on exploring in my thesis.

In modern day, predominantly white public institutions like Binghamton University, Alfred State College, University at Buffalo etc are well connected, have access to funding, resources for students to study abroad and many other resources for social and academic

involvement etc. However, this “connection” is usually only accessible to white students, especially since they make up the majority which creates a larger network for information to flow more rapidly about these specialized programs, with students of color being an afterthought. As the chapter goes on, I argue that anyone who may not be educated on the topic; should keep an open mind, because this information affects us all, either directly or indirectly. Keeping an open mind also allows you to take on a new perspective and gives you the advantage to identify these nuances in your community, especially if it is a predominantly white institution. Readers can also expect to be able to make assumptions, from a newly educated and informed perspective.

It was just fifty-eight years ago, in 1965, that Jim Crow laws of segregation were abolished (Angela P. Harris, 2000). Jim Crow laws were a set of state and local laws that enforced racial segregation and discrimination in the South of the United States from the late 19th century through the mid-20th century. These laws were enacted after the Reconstruction period following the Civil War and lasted until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

The term “Jim Crow” originated from a 19th-century minstrel show character that depicted a stereotypical African American (“Who Was Jim Crow?”). These Jim Crow laws were designed to enforce racial hierarchy, with white people considered superior and people of color treated as inferior (ibid.). Segregation was present in almost every aspect of life. One of the key aspects of Jim Crow laws was segregation in public institutions such as schools, transportation, restaurants, and restrooms (ibid.). This segregation was enforced through “separate but equal” policies, that are anything but equal. These policies entrenched racial difference and racial segregation even as they claimed that facilities for African Americans were equal to those for whites, whereas in reality, the social, educational, medical, residential, transportation, and cultural facilities and institutions were vastly inferior, underfunded and in most cases unkept.

Jim Crow laws impacted the education system in a major way because resources were accessible to students solely on the basis of race. Schools for students of color were typically underfunded and lacked proper textbooks compared to white schools (“Jim Crow Laws and Racial Segregation in America, GPB Education”). This lack further drove the literacy level of many students of color downward. The result was a knowledge gap between Black and white students that would exist for generations to come. In addition to education, transportation was also segregated, with separate train cars and waiting rooms for whites and African Americans. This segregation extended to other public spaces like parks, theaters, and even cemeteries.

The Jim Crow era was marked by systemic racism and violence against African Americans who challenged segregation or attempted to exercise their rights. Lynchings, mob violence, and intimidation tactics were used to maintain white supremacy and discourage activism. The Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s and 1960s challenged Jim Crow laws, leading to landmark Supreme Court decisions like *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954, which declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were key legislative victories that dismantled many aspects of segregation and racial discrimination.

In Joy Ann Williamson’s journal article “In Defense of Themselves” (1999), Williamson discusses this phenomenon of Black students feeling alienated at predominantly white institutions. She calls to attention to the fact that “Many Black students experienced a sense of alienation when they arrived at PWCUs in the early to middle 1960s” (Williamson, p. 95). The small number of Black students on any given campus contributed to this sense of isolation. One student reported feeling as if she were “being drowned in a sea of Whiteness” (Williamson, p. 95). Several other Black students indicated that they did not feel welcome to participate in

student life and organizations such as fraternities and sororities, student government, or academic associations” (Williamson, p. 95).

This reference to past history is designed to educate everyone, especially our white peers who are the sole beneficiaries of this system that the very system they benefit from today, comes from a much darker history that they may not be aware of, and in most cases, may not align with their current modern values. The history of segregation is one of the main reasons why there is a miniscule amount of students of color, versus their white peers in predominantly white institutions, like Binghamton University. According to Data USA, the ratio is that whites (Non-Hispanics) are 75%, in comparison to Black or African Americans (Non-Hispanic) that are 4.17% and Hispanics are a mere 1.32%.

This clear gap in diversity can and has been a major barrier for students of color when it comes to navigating everyday life at predominantly white institutions. This is where administration needs to take accountability and uphold the promise they make to every student when they are admitted into Binghamton University. After all, things are not free, and whether they want to admit it or not, when any school admits a student, it is considered a contract for the student to be educated and for the school to get paid to do so. As Doughty and Martin-Parchment noted, “the gap in diversity results in feelings of inadequacy, imposter syndrome, and lower academic performance, perpetuating cycles of inequality” (Doughty and Martin-Parchment, 2023, p. 4). They states that “Impostor phenomenon (IP) is another potential contributor to mental health problems in undergraduate students. Imposter phenomenon has been defined as a feeling of intellectual fraudulence and self-doubt that is most often experienced by high-achieving individuals and is characterized by features including a fear of failure, difficulty accepting praise and positive feedback, fear of evaluation, and underestimation of one’s own strengths. IP is not a recognized psychiatric disorder, but it has been associated with greater

psychological distress and poorer mental health in college students, (Doughty and Martin-Parchment, 2023, p. 1).

A harmful common misconception is that Black students equals more chaos, (Plaut, 1954). Plaut stated that “A final generalization is that campus climate is usually healthier where Negroes are relatively few in number. Where they are present in large numbers, there is often a tendency for them to build their own social ghettos, (Plaut, 1954, p. 313). This article was written over fifty years ago but not much has changed concerning negro integration in PWI, which tells us we still have a long way to go.

Administrative Perils

Administrative practices at predominantly white institutions often reflect a complex interplay of policies and politics that can unintentionally affect the admission of Black and brown students. These practices may include standardized testing requirements, holistic review processes, and the prioritization of certain extracurricular activities, which can inadvertently disadvantage underrepresented groups. For instance, reliance on standardized tests may not fully capture the potential and experiences of students from diverse backgrounds, as these assessments often reflect systemic inequalities in educational resources. Additionally, the criteria used in holistic reviews can sometimes emphasize aspects that are more commonly accessible to white students, such as certain types of leadership roles or extracurricular involvement, potentially overlooking the unique challenges faced by students of color. Furthermore, administrative decisions about outreach and recruitment efforts may not always reach the communities that would benefit most from PWI resources. As a result, the overall admission landscape may not fully represent the diverse student population, leading to a lack of equitable access to higher education. Recognizing these dynamics can foster a more inclusive environment, prompting

institutions to reflect on their admission strategies and consider how they can better support a diverse array of applicants.

To shift gears to the classroom setting, many students including myself have struggled in classes not because the coursework was hard to grasp, but because the environment was not conducive to learning, either because a professor did not respect personal boundaries as in my case, or in my friends case, the professor would constantly comment negatively on her hair and sometimes even go as far as touching it. Some professors even go as far as making students of color the spectacle because of their personal prejudices.

Furthermore, it is important to underscore that faculty diversity—or lack thereof—shapes the classroom climate. Research shows that diverse faculty bring unique perspectives and unique approaches, enriching the learning environment for all students. However, PWIs often struggle to recruit and retain faculty of color, leading to largely white teaching staff that struggle to connect with and support diverse student populations.

When I arrived at Binghamton University, the value of diversity, which I have cherished for many years, became even more significant to me as I realized the importance of learning from a wide range of perspectives. Not just in race but also in background and experiences. For a while this was not the case as I found myself in departments with all white staff, all white faculty, and in majority white classrooms that were not tailored for students of color, and the professors made no effort to speak to all students.

It is crucial to understand that the absence of diversity does not necessarily mean there is a lack of knowledge sharing. Instead, it's about ensuring that the knowledge shared is relevant and applicable to every student. This is especially true in liberal arts and sciences and humanities departments like history, political science, anthropology, and others where perspectives and opinions are at the basis of classroom discussion.

A major barrier that has continued to perpetuate racism and inequality not only in society at large but also in predominantly white institutions, is the concept of colorblind racism. Colorblindness is the racial ideology that posits the best way to end discrimination is by claiming to treat individuals as equally as possible, without regard to race, culture, or ethnicity (Williams, 2011). This viewpoint however can be harmful because the word “blind” refers to not being able to see, and when intertwined with race, can insinuate that individuals choose to ignore and not take into account the hardships, struggles and inequality that students of color experience. The term also disregards the history of students of color as it relates to society at large.

In *Racism Without Racists* (2006), Eduardo Bonilla-Silva stressed the harms of this mindset and the disregard that people who possess this mindset hold. Bonilla-Silva states, “Whereas for most whites racism is prejudice, for most people of color racism is systemic or institutionalized” (2006, p. 8). This quote explains the gap in the definition and understanding of racism for people of color and white people. For the white population prejudice is seen as something that we all hold as a society at large, and it is a characteristic of all people, including people of color. However, the fault with such thinking is the fact that racism and inequality goes much deeper than an opinion or bias formed overtime; and speaks more to systematic policies, laws, and institutions that have carried out distinct otherness for people of color.

Many white people in America may try to ignore the space they occupy in society because they may not be familiar with the contributing factors in society that built the pedestal that they stand on today. Angela P. Harris states that, “For African Americans and other nonwhite citizens, the constitutional and statutory remnants of Reconstruction outlawed state white supremacy. Yet the willingness of the courts to take racial difference seriously and to entrust to state and local governments racial management of that difference in the ‘social’ realm permitted

both private and state action in furtherance of white exploitation, discrimination, and terror despite the promises of equality” (Harris, 2000, p. 1982).

In “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness (2000)”, Gayle Wald discusses how the United States has made political and social investments in the progression on white in American society. At the base of this process are the concepts that were associated with various racial groups. Wald stated that “White settlers institutionalized a possessive investment in whiteness by making Blackness synonymous with slavery and whiteness synonymous with freedom, but also by pitting people of color against one another.” (Wald, p. 3). As simple as it may seem to associate words like slavery and freedom to a specific race, the lasting effect of that is trying to remove those terms even when theories are not accurate. This is also where stereotypes come into play, which is associating certain characteristics to a specific racial group though they are usually not accurate, especially when it is a negative stereotype. With this, it is important to also note that “The possessive investment in whiteness is not a simple matter of Black and white; all racialized minority groups have suffered from it, albeit to different degrees and in different ways” (Wald, p. 2).

It is also worth taking a close look at wealth building in America. If one goes back far enough, one would notice that it has always been easy for the most part for whites. Wald analyzes the Homestead Act of 1862 that parceled out land for free to whites but denied it to African Americans. He also touched on the major beneficiaries of the trillions of dollars of wealth accumulated through the appreciation of housing assets secured by federally insured loans between 1932 and 1962. It is on record that 98 percent of FHA loans made during that era went to whites via the openly racist categories utilized in the agency’s official manuals for appraisers (Wald, p. 112-113). With these two events just scraping the surface of how wealth was built for whites in America, the next time you find yourself asking, why is it that people of color are

usually in the socioeconomically disadvantaged and marginalized group, think of the Homestead act of 1862, and the history of mortgage loan recipients in America during the early to late 1900s.

Angela P. Harris furthered this argument of how racism is woven into the United States justice system, through the use of specific laws that were made to push immigrants out of the land they own. She states, “ In the early parts of the twentieth century, the west adapted to the post-reconstruction legal racial regime by passing “Alien Land Laws”. These states prohibited “aliens not eligible for citizenship” from owning property. The laws were proposed by white farmers who pleaded for an economic monopoly in the name of white racial purity.” (Harris 2000, p. 1948)

It would be an oversight to talk about racism, segregation and inequality in American society without talking about the laws that further perpetuate this system. For many years white America laid the foundation for much of the inequality and prejudice against people of color that exist in today’s society, due to the laws that further exacerbated the matter at hand. In *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (2017), Richard Rothstein discusses specific events and laws that were put in place that targeted people of color which further marginalized them. Rothstein, touched on the housing crisis and residential segregation. He stated that “Today’s residential segregation in the North, South, Midwest, and West is not the unintended consequence of individual choices and of otherwise well-meaning law or regulation but of unhidden public policy that explicitly segregated every metropolitan area in the United States” (Richard Rothstein, vii-viii). This observation is particularly important because when a person usually tells you a great deal about their socioeconomic status, if you have any knowledge of history and the inner workings of society and the history of housing

segregation in the U.S. you would have an informed understanding of the rationale of America's inequality.

Additionally, another factor is the G.I. Bill that is also relevant to this point. In 1944, "the G.I. Bill was adopted to support returning servicemen. The U.S department of Veterans affairs not only denied African Americans the mortgage subsidies to which they were entitled but frequently restricted education and training to lower-level jobs for African Americans who were qualified to acquire greater skills" (Rothstein 2007). This emphasizes the importance of going beyond beliefs and prejudices and asking oneself, why one holds them and even more importantly are they held by one's family or by society? These questions are especially important because we can sometimes find ourselves inheriting hate and prejudice for a particular group indirectly, while never questioning the basis of said prejudice or hatred.

At this point, an important question comes to mind, which is, how do these events relate to the matter at hand? The experience of Students of Color at predominantly White institutions serves as a legacy of much of what has taken place in America during and after the colonial period. Segregation and racial inequality have cast a long shadow over the educational experiences of students of color at predominantly white universities in the United States. Despite legal strides toward integration, systemic barriers persist, impacting academic achievement, mental health, and social inclusion for these students.

Firstly, the legacy of segregation left a profound mark on the distribution of resources within educational institutions. Predominantly white universities often allocate fewer resources to departments or programs focused on issues relevant to students of color, such as ethnic studies or multicultural initiatives. This was a personal experience for mine when seeking out the Africana Studies Department. There wasn't much marketing for it, it was frequently advertised on the school page, and the office is in the hallway to the library where if you're ever in the

slightest hurry you might miss it. This lack of institutional support can hinder the academic success and sense of belonging for students from marginalized communities.

Moreover, racial inequality permeates campus culture, manifesting in microaggressions, discrimination, and a lack of representation in faculty and leadership positions. Students of color frequently report feeling isolated and marginalized in predominantly white environments, leading to heightened levels of stress and anxiety that can adversely affect their academic performance and overall well-being, a topic I plan on touching on in the upcoming chapters. Additionally, the absence of diverse perspectives in the curriculum limits the educational experience for all students. A Eurocentric curriculum fails to adequately address the contributions and experiences of people of color, perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing existing power dynamics.

Segregation and racial inequality continue to undermine the educational opportunities and experiences of students of color at predominantly white universities in the United States. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges historical injustices, promotes diversity and inclusion, and actively works to dismantle systemic barriers to equity and access in higher education. Only through concerted efforts can universities truly fulfill their promise of providing a quality education for all students, regardless of race or background.

Chapter 2 - Two Birds One Stone.

College life and barriers

Two birds one stone highlights the idea that while there are many other factors at play in colleges such as, race, diversity or lack thereof, finance and equity etc, both students of color and white students are faced with one obstacle or “stone,” which is the grueling process of college. In this chapter, I plan on identifying how our journeys can sometimes overlap, but especially how it is also different with a goal to create a sort of common ground in the end.

I would like to start this chapter off with a quote from Santiba D. Campbell (2019), “[t]he significance and meaning of success and satisfaction for all college students is not the same. At times, success is only thought to be achieved once the goal of graduation is completed. Others view the steps and milestones towards college graduation to be as important as reaching commencement” (Campbell et al, 2019). This claim resonates with many. Much of my peers have felt the same where at some point it was no longer about being in college for the experience and educational benefit, but rather seeming like a tedious chore that needed to be completed. I believe that this perspective emerges when colleges fail their students in delivering the experience and guidance that is usually promised, but never adequately given.

College life is often romanticized as a time of freedom, exploration, and self-discovery by almost all prospective students, especially the students who decided to go away from home for school. However, beneath the surface lies a myriad of challenges and dangers that students may encounter, from academic stress to social pressures and health risks. The college experience can be fraught with hazards that can impact one's well-being and future success. This chapter sheds light on identifying how both of our journeys – students of color and white – influence each other despite our race, and that no matter what color we are and what our background is, we

have one thing in common that remains certain, that is, the title of being a student, and occupying space at a higher education institution. This is hard no matter your race.

A day in the life of a college student can take many forms, so instead I will describe a general day, at least, in freshman year. You start your day at 8:00 am or 8:30 am at the latest, since most classes you take in your freshman year are general education (Gen Ed) courses which are usually taught early and sometimes are not very interesting. Then, there is a good chance that you probably didn't have time to grab breakfast. Now you are rushing to a class you are not interested in on an empty stomach in a classroom that represents nothing that you are.

I paint this brief and general picture of how most college students start their days to draw attention to the fact that college is not always what it seems. Granted some of the stereotypes, both good and bad, are very true, but it is also true that it is the small things that really chip away at students over time, and this chipping away usually starts in the freshman year. It starts with choosing which friend group you want to be a part of, and it doesn't end there. It also continues with peer pressure and doing things you never thought you would, which is usually dangerous. John P. Bumpus, Angel L. Harris and Scott M. Lynch, states that “One particular factor that may contribute to shaping college decisions is school culture (Coleman and Hoffer 1987; McDonough 1997), which can be described as the prevailing ethos based on the aggregated norms, beliefs, and values within schools.” (Bumpus, et al, p. 1). This quote suggests that at the outset of a student's college experience, student's morals are influenced by the beliefs and values of their school and surroundings. As a result, their original personal moral values, held before college, begin to align with those of their new environment. The article also mentioned that “A common feature of research on subcultures is how marginalized groups or individuals from social categories create and maintain a defiance or resistance to dominant groups' norms. In this context, variation in academic culture within schools as it relates to an “us” versus “them”

mentality is an important topic of study regardless of the outcome” (Bumpus, et al, p. 4). The quote reinforces the need to fit in, which can sometimes interfere with your moral value, especially at a PWI, where the “us” versus “them” mentality is more prevalent than ever. Mix all of these pressures while choosing your major, dealing with financial aid, and finally living with bad roommates and you've got yourself the college student starter pack.

The pressure to excel in classes, maintain high grades, and meet deadlines can take a significant toll on students’ mental and physical health. The competitive nature of higher education can exacerbate this stress, leading to anxiety, depression, and burnout. Moreover, the fear of failure and the constant need to prove oneself academically can create a toxic environment that undermines students’ well-being and hampers their ability to learn effectively.

The idea of having to prove oneself is especially applicable to Black students at predominantly white institutions, being that Black students usually are about 4 out of a class of 30 white students. We often feel the pressure to “represent” the “race” especially since professors are constantly overly interested in what we have to say in representing the community. I once had a professor ask me an outlandish question about Africa, because I’m Black, while not knowing that I actually do in fact know quite a bit about African history. But my goal here is to underscore the dangers of generalizing that all Black students are from Africa instead of respecting us as individuals with our own unique perspectives, just as they do our white peers.

The article by Talisha Adams and Juliann McBrayer discuss the experiences of Crystal, a student being surveyed, who, due to lack of diversity in her classes was feeling the pressure to be a spokesperson for her race and feeling compelled to answer any race-related questions that arise (Adams & McBrayer, p. 744). However, another student, Chris, nonchalantly acknowledged being the only African American in his classes, but does not let it impact him negatively (Adams & McBrayer, p. 748). These experiences heavily weigh on the mental health of Black students

and the pressure is sometimes unbearable especially if your opinion seems forthright, and the professor continues to ask you to further explain your statement making it seem as though you have no idea what you just said, in fact invalidating your point. The invalidation of Black students' responses to questions in class can create a sense of alienation and further the unhealthy and untrue narrative that they do not belong and do not meet the standard of the course work in higher education.

College is also a time of social transition, where students are exposed to new environments, experiences, and peer groups. While this can be an enriching experience, it also exposes them to various social pressures, including the pressure to fit in, experiment with substances, and engage in risky behaviors. The desire to be accepted and liked by peers can sometimes lead students to compromise their values and engage in activities that are detrimental to their health and future prospects. Being new in a large school and looking to explore and step out of your comfort zone can actually be dangerous—for all students, in any University.

I wanted to go out of my comfort zone when I chose to study a foreign language. Unfortunately, I ended up in the Department of Romance Languages that did not welcome me. It seemed that everything conspired to show me that I did not belong there, including the clubs that I tried where I felt like a total outsider, not because I am not friendly, I am actually an extrovert in welcoming situations, so I know my social skills were not the problem. It was more the university's failure to cultivate an environment where Black students are welcomed to try something like water polo if they felt the desire.

Alcohol and drug abuse are also some things that students might resort to when they are in an environment that rejects them. I can honestly say that this wasn't the case for me. But it does not mean that I didn't have my own problems and I did not find other ways to cope. I remember the first time I reached out to the university counseling center I noticed that out of

Binghamton University's entire staff of counselors, there were probably only two Black counselors. I checked recently and now there is only one. The question that this resource underrepresentation raises is: How are Black students and especially Black male students supposed to navigate an environment that rejects them constantly when the resources where they are meant to seek out help don't even represent them? A white man or woman cannot speak on what it means to be a Black student occupying this space neither can they sympathize about emotions they have no idea about. This does not at all discount their professional skills in any way. I am sure they are competent at what they do. But I am also sure that if you ask them how many students of color they have had come to their office and have seen an improvement in their situation, the number would be minuscule. The fact remains that white people do not know what it means to be Black, therefore, counseling at Binghamton University for Black students is not effective.

I must say that I was lucky to have had a Black counselor the times I went to Binghamton University counseling center. Because my counselor was Black, she was able to draw parallels to my situations in order to get through to me. I say this because, in a University setting, Black students and especially Black male students face a pattern of issues. I don't plan on generalizing, but more often than not, it is almost always related to our race and how our environment interacts with it, and also our economic or social status in relation to the University environment. I was able to glean this from my six years of being in college and meeting many male Black peers while having open dialogs of some of the things we were struggling with. Our stories were always the same.

Regardless of what a counselor may know from their training and years of schooling, counseling is a very personal profession and in the case where Black male students express some struggles they may be facing in a predominantly white environment, a white counselor may

struggle with truly being effective in such cases because who feels it knows it. It is impossible to walk a day in a Black person's shoes and even more complicated to sympathize and give advice on something they do not live. This is another aspect where Binghamton University fails Black students. The resources that these students require and would depend on are not adequately available.

We can all agree that the transition to college life can be overwhelming for many students, especially Black students. It can also trigger or exacerbate mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. The pressures of academic performance, social expectations, and newfound independence can create a perfect storm for mental health crises. For Black students this pressure can be heightened even more because some of the extracurricular activities that are meant to take your mind off of the everyday stress of college are not always easy to indulge in.

Unfortunately, stigma and lack of awareness often prevent Black students from seeking help, leading to untreated conditions and escalating problems. Promoting mental health awareness, providing accessible counseling services, and fostering a supportive campus community are essential steps in addressing this critical issue.

While colleges offer a wealth of opportunities for personal and intellectual growth, it is essential to acknowledge and address the dangers that accompany this transformative experience. By raising awareness on the fact that the journey through college is different for white students and students of color, fostering a supportive campus environment, and providing resources for students' physical, mental, and emotional well-being, colleges and universities can help students navigate these hazards effectively and thrive during their academic journey. Ultimately, empowering students to make informed choices and prioritize their health and safety is key to ensuring a positive and fulfilling college experience.

The social disconnect of white students

In college I have come across many instances where I would make meaningful connections with my white peers. Whether it be in the classroom setting while doing group work or even outside of the classroom for class related projects. However, what I have also noticed is the cold shoulder I get whenever I see my white peers outside of the classroom and outside of academic work. They act as if they have never seen me before, and if they are with their white friends, I become totally invisible to them. I never quite understood this. My aim in this section is to make sense of this strange occurrence.

Throughout my college experience, there has always been an interesting dynamic between white students and students of color. We occupy the same classrooms, the same dining areas, the same gyms and public transportation, but yet we seem so estranged. Coming from Guyana, a country where we love foreigners no matter where they are from, we are usually welcoming to everyone from anywhere in the world. I believe we have this approach to life because we do not take life so seriously all the time. We occupy communities where we understand and respect the value of our neighbors, this does not always mean the people living around you, but it can also be a stranger on the street. Our society has created a system in which we see each other, we are not constantly overstimulated with the everyday hustle and bustle and most importantly, we are not sugar coaters. I made these points because Americans are the complete opposite. This is not necessarily a bad or good thing, but rather an observation as an immigrant with double consciousness, meaning that I have two and even more worldviews of society because I have lived in more than one place. My observation is that Americans want to be liked, and they sometimes go to great lengths to achieve this goal. On the other hand, people where I come from almost never concern themselves with being liked, but rather, value being respected. This

difference allows us as Guyanese and most people from the West Indies to navigate society much differently, it gives us the advantage of spotting someone who is insincere.

In college, it was hard navigating relationships and keeping these same sentiments with my white peers especially in a predominantly white institution. I believe that in the classrooms they care about Black history, our successes and struggles, both social and economic. However, when they are outside of the classroom, they act as if they don't know us. This is worse when they are with their white friends. This is problematic because the behavior further perpetuates the feeling of isolation and alienation amongst students of color that ultimately creates a hostile learning environment. I can speak for myself when I say that my goal may not always be seeking out friendship with my white peers, but rather having a warm, sincere interaction outside of the classroom. This sometimes makes your day. A college campus can be so huge that sometimes you get lucky if you see one familiar face, imagine seeing that person and they act as if they don't know you. There isn't anyone I know who would feel good after that.

Erianna Jiles, a previous student of North Dakota State University, states that “My peers would talk a lot in class about embracing diversity and people from different cultures. But they didn't live those ideals. These same people preaching diversity would pass me in the dining center or common areas as if I wasn't even there. I wondered, “How is it that we spent 40 minutes in class getting to know each other, working on projects and now, all of a sudden once we leave class, I'm invisible?” (Jiles, 2020). This quote further explains how students of color become invisible to their white peers outside of their classroom, which has many implications. Maybe that one hour or 40 minutes in Erianna's case might be the time our white peers choose to tolerate us and our history, but after that, they go back to their bubble where we don't exist. These types of interactions are unfortunately very common at predominantly white institutions.

Now, I'm not necessarily questioning whether my white peers are genuine, but rather I'm highlighting the fact that they may come from environments where Black history isn't cared for or even acknowledged. It makes me think of the phrase: "If you can't beat them, join them". I think of the phrase because, if they are the majority, and we, as Black students, are the minority, after some time we are forced to assimilate with them leaving behind our values, because what we are cannot exist in totality in their world. Don't get me wrong; they may very well care about and want to learn about Black history, but when they get around their white peers who couldn't care less, they revert and move into their white bubble again. This has been a struggle for not only myself but I'm sure for many other Black students. There have been countless times where I have created good bonds with white students from my classes— mostly Africana Studies classes, given that those classes are set up in a way in which students get more independence to think critically, leading to a constant exchange of ideas and perspectives, which overtime form bonds. However, when my white peers see me outside of the classroom, they do not bother to acknowledge me, and if they were with friends, the chance of it happening becomes slimmer.

Do not get me wrong. I am not on a friendship quest. But, when you work closely with a person for months at a time, it is hard to ignore them and not to say hello when you see them outside of that setting. But this phenomenon is very rampant in predominantly white institutions. Over time, Black students would either choose to be by themselves or with students who look like them, due to this phenomenon of "white segregation". Eduardo Bonilla-Silva spoke on this phenomenon, he stressed that "Although they [whites] abhor what they regard as Blacks "self segregation", they do not have any problem with their own racial segregation, because they do not see it as a racial phenomenon." (Bonilla-Silva, p. 142). This quote further explains the fact that some white people (students) may dislike a system even though they serve as the catalyst for it. Socialization also plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' perceptions and behaviors. White

students, particularly those from predominantly white communities or privileged backgrounds, have been socialized into environments where racial diversity is minimal or marginalized. This lack of exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences can perpetuate stereotypes and biases, making it easier for white students to distance themselves from Black peers in social settings. To reiterate a point made either earlier, or later in my writing, most of the white students at my PWI are from predominantly white towns and High Schools. I'm able to make this claim confidently because almost all of the white students I have met in my four years at Binghamton University are from Long Island, a place known for its lack of diversity in most parts. Therefore, it can be easily inferred that overtime some bias and stereotypes around race can develop which is also evident in the lack of diversity in the population in Long Island.

Furthermore, issues of implicit bias and racial microaggressions contribute to the social dynamics at PWIs. Even well-intentioned white students may unknowingly engage in behaviors or make comments that signal to Black peers that they are not valued or included. These subtle forms of discrimination can create barriers to genuine connections outside of the classroom, reinforcing feelings of isolation and otherness for Black students. Typically when this happens Black students and students of color respond to white marginalization, created by them, by only socializing in friend groups that are mostly Black, which then furthers that divide.

Racial trauma is rampant in PWIs. Unfortunately, this is usually seen as students of color being problematic or victimizing themselves. Sometimes schools go as far as referring students to majority Black populated schools where there are students that look like them. This was something that happened to a very close friend of mine at Binghamton University, unfortunately they took that advice, transferred, and today are no longer in school.

According to the article on “Navigating COVID-19 and racial trauma as a Black student at predominantly White institutions” by Samantha Francois, “Studies have found that some

students experience backlash from professors and faculty, when speaking out against racial microaggressions and other injustices. According to Sue Derald Wing et al. In the article referenced by Samantha Francois, titled “Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice,” they stated, “Calling out someone on a hurtful comment or behavior in public may provoke defensiveness or cause an ugly backlash that does not end microaggressions but increases them” (Francois et al., 2023, p. 139). In my case this was one of the main reasons why it sometimes took me a while to call out my professor or just not say anything all together when they said very questionable things. I was scared for my grades and I was also scared that if I went to their higher ups they would ignore my complaint.

In a survey in the article titled, “It Was Really Tough’—Exploring the Feelings of Isolation and Cultural Dissonance With Black American Males at a Predominantly White Institution” (2021), Anthony F. Patterson spoke to a few male Black students, one of whom mentioned how the way he was perceived in the classroom affected him (2021). Junior stated, “I have definitely run into a few teachers and TAs who have been a little on edge around me. I’ll just ask them a question and occasionally they will look a little intimidated or scared and I feel a little confused. Because as big and imposing as I may or may not be I am literally just asking you what the homework is . . . It does put me off a little bit as far as returning and asking more questions” (Patterson, 2021).

Power dynamics also play a significant role in shaping intergroup relations at PWIs. White students often occupy positions of privilege within these institutions, benefiting from systemic advantages that perpetuate their dominance in social spaces. This imbalance of power can create unfavorable dynamics where Black students feel marginalized or tokenized, further complicating efforts to establish meaningful relationships across racial lines. Evidence of this is shown a lot where professors would mostly select white students over students of color to be

teaching assistants (TAs) for courses that may be a bit more rigorous compared to others. Sometimes these opportunities are only broadcasted to white students where the professor would send them an email directly or speak with them in person without sending out a department wide email that will encourage Black students to apply. I have seen and had personal experiences too many times where Black students including myself, were better at a class than the TA the professor selected.

The perpetuation of stereotypes and narratives in popular culture and media can further influence how students perceive and interact with one another, especially in this case, white students with their Black peers. Negative portrayals of Blackness and the normalization of racial hierarchies can reinforce subconscious biases and contribute to the social distancing observed among white and Black students at PWIs.

Ultimately, the phenomenon of white students acting as if they don't know Black students outside of the classroom at predominantly white institutions is a multifaceted issue that reflects broader dynamics of race, privilege, and socialization. Addressing this issue requires a collective effort to challenge systemic inequalities, promote diversity and inclusion, and foster genuine cross-cultural understanding and empathy among all students at predominantly white institutions. By confronting the root causes of racial segregation and discrimination, PWIs can create environments where all students feel valued, respected, and empowered to form meaningful relationships across racial boundaries.

Diversity and its Importance

Throughout my college career, diversity has been one of the most important reasons for my smooth transition from High School to College. I was fortunate enough to attend SUNY Delhi right after High school, so I was able to see the impacts of diversity. SUNY Delhi may

have a larger white population compared to Black students, however, SUNY Delhi understood the importance of diversity, which is shown in their events, and the overall feel of the campus. The college's efforts are more than I can say for Binghamton University's.

Diversity is a key component to any sector of society including and especially in predominantly white educational institutions and it cannot be overlooked. These institutions are notoriously known to lack diversity on racial, ethnic, and cultural levels, which robs the students who occupy these spaces the opportunity to be exposed to different perspectives and experiences. To recognize and make a keen effort to promote diversity at PWIs not only makes the experience dynamic and enriching but also prepares all students to thrive in a diverse world where having a different approach to life and situations is one of the most valuable commodities. Veronica A. Jones and Richard J. Reddick argued that sometimes the administration leaves the task of creating diversity up to the student body as opposed to taking on a task that was promised to students initially. Jones and Reddick highlighted that an “Administration Relying on Student-Led vs. Institutional Efforts Participants shared that the University relied on student-initiated efforts to promote diversity, rather than investing in institutionally based programming” (Jones and Reddick, 2017). They further explained that funding from these schools are often put aside for other events and students are then tasked to conduct their own funding initiatives. They argued that, “ There's a portion of funds saved from the year [before], but . . . if you want a successful program, you're going to have to raise \$4,000, \$5,000 on your own.” Courtney, a student leader further remarked, “[administration] funds [Friendship Camp].” Patterns of funding for university programming is labyrinthine at best, but the perception that other programming receive greater administrative support was concerning. Respondents perceived that programming supporting Black students wholly came from the efforts of students.” (Jones and Reddick, 2017). Both ideas

state what the issue is, they show that even if students work up the courage to self efficacy, there is still a long journey ahead before having a successful program.

The definition of diversity is very important at predominantly white institutions because it challenges students to think critically, question assumptions, and approach complex issues from multiple angles. In classrooms where students come from diverse backgrounds, discussions are enriched by a variety of viewpoints, leading to deeper understanding and more innovative solutions to real-world problems. Moreover, interacting with peers from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds helps students develop empathy, cultural competence, and communication skills that are essential for success in today's globalized society.

Additionally, diversity can have positive effects on the overall campus climate and foster a sense of belonging for all students. When individuals from underrepresented groups see themselves reflected in the student body, faculty, and curriculum, they feel valued, validated, and supported in their educational journey. This was major for me whenever I saw an advertisement with a Black student or a Black faculty or staff. It made me feel as if I can actually exist and thrive in this space. This sense of belonging was critical for my academic success, mental health, and overall well-being. On the other hand, when institutions fail to prioritize diversity and inclusivity, they risk perpetuating feelings of isolation, alienation, and marginalization among minority students, hindering their ability to thrive academically and socially.

Moreover, diversity at PWIs is essential for promoting social justice and equity in higher education. Historically, these institutions have been a projection of privilege and exclusivity, perpetuating systemic inequalities that disproportionately disadvantage marginalized communities. By actively recruiting and supporting students, faculty, and staff from diverse backgrounds, PWIs can begin to dismantle these structures of oppression and create more equitable opportunities for all members of the academic community. Additionally, embracing

diversity sends a powerful message that every individual, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status, has inherent worth and deserves equal access to education and opportunities for success.

In today's globalized society, success often depends on the ability to navigate diverse cultural landscapes, collaborate with people from different backgrounds, and adapt to rapidly changing social and economic conditions. By engaging with diverse perspectives and experiences during their College years, students are better equipped to navigate the complexities of the modern world and contribute positively to diverse workplaces, communities, and civic institutions.

Finally, diversity is not only desirable but imperative at predominantly white institutions. By fostering inclusive environments that celebrate and embrace differences, PWIs can enrich the educational experience, promote personal and intellectual growth, enhance campus climate and sense of belonging, advance social justice and equity in higher education, and prepare students to thrive in a multicultural and interconnected world. Embracing diversity isn't just a moral imperative—it's a strategic investment in the future success and well-being of all members of the academic community.

Chapter 3 —Where Do We Go Forward From Here?

Looking Back to Move Forward.

Given our explorations and our understanding of the importance and necessity for diversity, inclusivity, equity, and an end to racial bias in predominantly white institutions, how do we go forward from here?

There are many systematic changes that are necessary at predominantly white institutions. The first is administrative improvement across the board. The diversity ratio should not be a disproportionate imbalance of white students which is considered 50% or more.

When considering acceptance into these universities, in this case, Binghamton University, students of color should also be considered more often than not, in efforts to fix the diversity imbalance, not solely because applicants are Black, but because they also live up to the “academic prestige” that Binghamton University so tirelessly markets. I stress this claim because some students and professors assume the narrative that students of color didn’t get into Binghamton University because of academic accolades, but rather through specialized programs, and even when that is the case, these students in specialized programs often outperform their white peers who did get in through supposedly, high academic achievement.

For some of our white peers, it is hard for them to believe that Black students, especially Black male students, can be successful and occupy the same space as them. These suspicions manifest in different ways; like asking you what school you go to when out in social settings.

Since there are two schools in the area, Binghamton University and Broome Community College, the latter is looked down upon because of its community college status. This is a prevailing prejudice in the area and in higher education that causes harm. The prejudice from our peers is reflected in the disbelief on their faces when you tell them that you go to Binghamton

University. Now, you might be thinking that this question can come from anyone, but more often than not, it is from our white peers. Most Black students know what it feels like to be “othered”, therefore we almost never raise such kinds of questions that keep the cycle of othering active.

Junior, a male Black student that appeared in Patterson’s article (2021), shared an important observation. He said “ I feel that isolation and dissonance happens at the University because students are coming from a lot of different places where these schemas and stereotypes are in place and so you kind of get buffeted by all of these different views of people of color. Not all of them are positive. Even in terms of just tailgating [entering a secure building behind someone with access] into a dorm, I don’t feel comfortable with that especially behind a White person because they’ll give you that look, like, are you even a student?” (Patterson, p. 67). These actions are always harmful because they further intensify the feelings of alienation among students of color, not to mention the imposter syndrome that many of us feel while occupying these spaces.

Another potential solution is that students of color should be able to occupy more spaces of importance within predominantly white institutions, and not be discounted because of something like owning a motor vehicle, such as the policy of Harpur’s Ferry, our school’s ambulance service, at Binghamton University. I learned in my Race, Philosophy and the Law class of the unintended racial impact of this policy on Black students and other students of color from downstate. The underlying racial factor in this policy is the known fact that most Black students from New York City – Queens, Brooklyn, Manhattan, The Bronx, and Staten Island – do not have drivers licenses since public transportation is more efficient in the New York City area. Thus, Harpur's Ferry’s policy of insisting on a driver’s license for employment became an indirect way of eliminating downstate students from any positions. Angela Harris’s law article “Equality Troubles” (2000) speaks on a similar issue in the section on “Discrimination as

Differentiation” (2004). She discussed the case of *Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Peña* (1995) and the Supreme Court ruling after *Adarand*, a white small business, challenged federal affirmative action policies. Raising questions about balance in promoting diversity and ensuring fairness in government contracting, they argued that these policies, giving preference to minority-owned businesses in government contracts, were discriminatory. The Supreme Court agreed and ruled that any government racial classifications should face strict scrutiny, requiring a compelling government interest and narrow tailoring. This decision had far-reaching implications for affirmative action programs nationwide. It signaled a need for careful consideration and limiting of race-based policies. (Harris 2000 .2004).

David S. Freire and Noelle M. Hurd (2023) highlighted the impact of racial discrimination on Black students' mental health. They noted that “Acts of discrimination within the college environment may cause minority students to doubt whether they deserve to be at their institutions of higher education. When students experience unfair treatment from faculty, staff, or peers (e.g., microaggressions within the classroom, racist online messages, etc.), they may experience this unfair treatment as messaging that they are not welcome at their college.” (Freire and Hurd, p. 656).

Based on Freire and Hurd’s findings, I believe that it is the administration's job to also promote Black departments and Black events a lot more on the school’s public page and banners. This can influence students of all races to attend and get involved, which can foster a community that is more cohesive and promotes diversity. Drawing from my experience, it took me a full year to figure out that the Africana Studies department existed. This state of affairs is simply not okay, since, I believe that if I had started out as an Africana Studies major sooner, I would have had a different experience academically. Even though I was interested in languages I would have loved to have an option like Africana Studies in the beginning.

Offices like the Multicultural Resource Center (MRC) would have also gone a long way in shifting my experience at Binghamton University, if it had been marketed more and not be in the labyrinth of a basement in the University library. These are all small steps that can be taken by the administration.

Amanda Eakins and Sheldon L. Eakins touched on the topic of Black student retention in their article, “African American Students at Predominantly White Institutions: A Collaborative Style Cohort Recruitment & Retention Model” (2017). They highlighted areas where administration can make promising strides towards this initiative by tackling these issues. In their view, “According to The American Council on Education (ACE), four factors add to attrition rates of African American Students (1) Sense of Belonging (Campus Climate and lack of diverse Faculty and staff). If students do not feel welcome on the University’s campus they will not return the following academic year; (2) Students are not prepared due to inadequate K-12 Education; (3) Large percentage of the African American student population are nontraditional students with little to no family support with their academic studies; (4) Finances; in fact, 2/3 of African American students do not complete college because of finances. (Eakins and Eakins, 52). These are all barriers that are a part of society at large that impacts Black and brown student’s experiences at predominantly white institutions.

Room for Improvement

In the matter of Financial-Aid, colleges should be a little bit more conscious about what they accept money for, keeping in mind the current need in regards to the student population. In this case, students need grants to finish up their degree. Accepting 60 million for a baseball field to be built, for a sport that the school isn’t necessarily known for might not be wise, especially since students drop out of school every semester because they couldn’t afford to come back, or,

students are homeless, or going hungry because they don't have the funds. Most importantly, students are swamped in student loans after school.

Although I am in no position to tell the University President how, and who to accept money from, or to tell donors what to do with their money, but, I believe the president has a moral duty to make astute decisions for their students. Such a duty should ensure that all students have the best experience where they actually want to stay at Binghamton University and love it so much that they talk about the great time they had and write lovely statements about it. Not looking back at the years spent thinking, “wow that was hell, but I am better because of it”.

That 60-million donation for a baseball field would have solved so many student problems. We probably would have made a huge stride as a school where we may have been among the first schools to forgive our students' loans. The forgiven loan doesn't have to be for every student that has ever been to Binghamton University; that would be up to the discretion of the donors. Even if it wasn't mine or people that I know whose student loan is being forgiven, I would feel great pride to have gone to a school where our President prioritized us that much. I would have felt hopeful that it may inspire other donors to donate to other universities. My frustration is not with the donors, but rather with the University President, for not advocating on his students behalf.

A student reported in one study in not having enough funds to participate in co-curricular activities, even though his white friend had no problem paying for his participation, which shows the clear gap in finances that exist between male Black students and White male students. One Student stated, “My friends [with money] would say, “You just put in the application and it is \$50 and then you have to pay for your plane ticket.” I’m like (laughter) OK, going to a different country [but] that is expensive. So I kind of shied away from opportunities like that.” (Patterson 2021, p. 68).

Patterson emphasized on this point a bit more, saying, “The financial costs associated with participating in certain types of campus engagement, recreation, and leisure experiences were important. However, lack of exposure and cultural dissonance might have also played a role in decision-making. For instance, not being exposed to international travel and making assumptions about costs deterred Luther from applying to an international co-curricular program.” (Patterson, p. 68). This goes to show that sometimes these issues are deep rooted in cultural norms not by choice but by circumstances. Nevertheless, donors or not, the administration as a whole should put more effort into assisting students who aren't able to pay for school and not make it an illusive process with forms that are sometimes hard to access, or have instances where the website is filled with links and information that isn't the actual application. I'm especially familiar with this issue because I have applied for the Cares Act grant in the past and didn't have much of an issue initially but the second time around, I did. I'm not sure why the system changed. It is important to highlight that accessibility is a component to this equation that can go a long way when it comes to helping students.

While I am on the topic of accessibility, it is important to ask how many students even know what is available to them on college campuses? Resources that many students can find useful are usually discovered much later, after experiencing the brunt of the problem and this shouldn't be the case, especially since there may be potential solutions to it. So I call on the administration to ensure that students are more familiar with all that they have access to.

Filling in the gaps

When it comes to education and awareness, comprehensive diversity training programs for all staff and students should be implemented to increase awareness about racism, its impact, and how to combat it effectively. Just as we have the mandatory sexual harassment training in

most places, there should be a training surrounding racism, that provides students, staff, and faculty with basic information about racism and microaggressions, how to spot it and how to confront it in a way that is safe for both the offender and offended. I truly believe that students might feel much more empowered to call these injustices out if they are informed about its history.

To quote Amanda Eakins and Shaldon L. Eakins, “If institutions are serious about increasing the diversity of their student population, first they will need to implement diversity strategies for recruiting and retention in their strategic planning to ensure accountability of their efforts” (Student Affairs Department at Minnesota State Colleges and University, 2015; Wilson, 2015). These efforts have to be seen as more than just the responsibility of the admissions department”, (Amanda Eakins and Sheldon L. Eakins, 2017, p. 52).

A zero tolerance policy should also be implemented and introduced to students surrounding racism on campus. These allegations should be investigated and taken seriously including providing education to perpetrators about why their actions were harmful. Most people just repeat what they hear and do not actually know the history behind it. If most white students today actually educate themselves about Black history, they may change their entire perspective on what they think about Black people. Far too many times I have heard , “Wow I have been a history major for all these years and never learnt anything about African history and why they struggle so much, until now”. This was what one of my classmates said, exactly one week before he graduated, which worried me because that one semester didn’t even scratch the surface of African American history in the U.S. This is one way in which the predominantly white institution school system fails white students and students of color at large.

There is also a strong need for curriculum review, where Black and brown history should be mentioned across every major, not just for the sake of diversity, but explicitly because it’s

relevant! Especially since we do not occupy a homogenous society. Most departments can insert some aspect of influence on culture all round.

In Tim Wise's talk, "White like me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son," he mentioned a salient point surrounding the way most white people are conditioned. He claimed that "When you're not a part of a dominant group, you're not spending your time trying to figure out how you fit in or about your privileges as a member of the dominant group might affect others who don't belong. (Wise, 2013, 11:23). This is also another phenomenon where whites are so busy existing in their privilege that they won't bother to question where it comes from, or be interested to know how it affects the other groups surrounding them.

Other ways in which predominantly white institutions can help fill in the gap is by hiring more Black faculty members, which goes a long way in helping diversity and fostering a better campus climate surrounding the experience of students of color. In a study conducted by Talisha Adams and Juliann McBrayer, "The Lived Experiences of First-Generation College Students of Color Integrating into the Institutional Culture of a Predominantly White Institution." Qualitative Report 25 (2020), they talked about the impact of a diverse faculty staff. "Same-race faculty makes a difference. Participants proclaimed that having a faculty member of the same race did make a difference and aided in their persistence at the institution. One participant stated, "The African American faculty show appreciation. I can definitely say that. That's one of the main reasons I stay. They make it their business to reach out to us." Participants reported that they had taken a class taught by a faculty member of the same race as them, between one and three times. Miguel described an encounter with a Hispanic faculty member that made him feel welcomed and understood at the institution" (Adams and McBrayer , p. 749).

Mentorship can also go a long way in helping with the overall experience of male Black students and students of color in general. Allison Sinanan foregrounds this topic in her article

“The Value and Necessity of Mentoring African American College Students at PWI’s” (2016), she states, “research suggests gender differences may exist among African Americans on college campuses. Given that African American males are represented in fewer number on PWI campuses compared to females (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996), they may be more vulnerable to the impact of discrimination in that they may feel more hyper-visible and less socially connected, as there are fewer males like themselves to look to for social support when instances of discrimination occur. Another possibility for further inquiry is that for the African American women at PWIs, feeling hyper-visible may be less prevalent due to "gendered" classroom and institutional practices” (Allison Sinanan, 2016).

Conclusion

For many years going to and completing university has been and remains at the pinnacle of achievement in today’s society. I am sure it may stick around for years to come. Students from all around the world chase after this major accomplishment for various reasons. For some it is knowledge seeking, for others, it is simply following a tradition that has been in their family for generations. Others might be the first to ever do it in their families whatever the reasons. I hope that my thesis was able to draw on the fact that it is no easy walk in the park.

I say this directly to students of color and especially Black male students. There are many barriers and challenges that Black male students face alone and have to overcome in predominantly white institutions. Our everyday struggles go unnoticed and may sometimes be recognised by our smileless faces. Everyday we learn and experience the legacy of racism and class prejudice that is alive and kicking in our society. These negative experiences are magnified in PWC where we dare to seek knowledge and re-write our family's history. I am here to say that there is a need for immediate and permanent change, because it not only has a lasting effect on

the students who are having these unfortunate experiences, but especially because colleges like SUNY Delhi show how positive impactful diversity can be. It can bring a campus together and create a sense of belonging, which is necessary for any students leaving the comfort of their homes and neighborhoods to pursue a college degree.

Change is also needed in how we value Black students in these spaces, who have so much value to bring to the table if only they are allowed. Change in how we advocate for equity, and diversity within the classrooms and especially outside the classroom — on and off campus. Change is needed in how we cater to Black students' needs regarding financial aid and support which does not always have to be monetary. but a simple advisor, someone to keep track of their account and let them know when they may be in jeopardy of losing their scholarships, especially since poor advice creates a ripple effect of many financial perils. The service of advisors should equally be extended to all students. Black students will benefit tremendously, given that many systems in society are not exactly created for our progress, not forgetting the legacy of racism that has been laced in them. There is still a long way to go.

Ultimately, there should also be initiatives to market all resources around campus that Black students can benefit from, like advertising Black events campus wide. During Black history month there should be a series of events campus wide, not just those hosted by Black students but also by non-Black student clubs and organizations. Professors can provide incentives to students where if they attend these events and learn something new, they get extra credit, just as they do for other events that students might not find beneficial later on.

Furthermore, the school should implement a no tolerance policy, surrounding racism and microaggression as discussed earlier in chapter 3. This creates a space where people are educated on a matter that affects us all, as a collective campus body.

Finally, while my time at Binghamton University could have been significantly better, I'm grateful for all that I endured, because today I have learned from it and have grown so much in spite of it. To use a quote from a student surveyed by Chapman-Hilliard, Collette, and Samuel T. Beasley; "I think that the whole experience is kinda empowering because we are at a PWI and still learning about ... the history of a people who were able to overcome ... It's kinda like a warm feeling. Okay, I can get through this, if they [i.e., ancestors] did it, I can do it" (2018). This was a thought that constantly kept propelling me forward every spring semester when I saw students that look like me graduate from Binghamton University.

My experience at Binghamton University reminded me of my strength and tenacity, during some of the toughest years of my life. It has opened my eyes to the realities of the world in some of the most grueling ways possible, but nevertheless I remain grateful and eager for what's next to come.

Postscript

Looking back on my four years spent at Binghamton University, no matter how harsh my experience was, it has truly prepared me for the harsh realities of institutional racism in the real world. My time as a college student showed me how important it is to be educated on the things that matter to not only yourself but also to the people you love, things like racial biases, microaggression, and blatant racism. Being educated on these issues is especially necessary because when it comes down to it, you never want to be stuck with just emotions, but rather, knowing how to put your emotions into words and support it with hard evidence, goes a long way.

This is how change comes about. When you become educated on your struggles and are able to translate it to anyone who cares to listen, especially if they hold the power to enact

change. With me, I take away these experiences, and I am better in spite of them. I am more empowered and have learned the tough lesson of how imperative self advocacy is. I know that there is still so much out there for me to learn, and I welcome those future learning opportunities with open arms. Nevertheless, I am happy that I was able to complete an important chapter of my life, and I hope my thesis was able to shed light on a topic that affects others who may not have the means to put their struggles into words.

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