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“Queering the Educational Color Line: Experiences of Black Gay Collegians on Campuses of HBCUs”

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*“We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.”
-Paul Laurence Dunbar (1896)*

*“The Black homosexual is hard pressed to gain audience among his heterosexual brothers; even if he is more talented, he is inhibited by his silence or his admissions. This is what the race has depended on in being able to erase homosexuality from our recorded history. The ‘chosen’ history. But the sacred constructions of silence are futile exercises in denial. We will not go away with our issues of sexuality. We are coming home.”
-Essex Hemphill “Loyalty” (1992)*

Introduction

While many studies have examined concepts of academic achievement (Allen, 1992; Hrabowski III, Maton, & Grief 1998; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terezini, 2004) and persistence (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1992; Donovan, 1984; Harper & Davis, 2006; Strayhorn, 2005) relating to African Americans in college, very little of this work has focused on Black gay males. Researchers have recently begun to shed light on “invisible” marginalized subgroups on college campuses (Patton, 2011; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & Devita 2008); yet this focus has been primarily on the undergraduate experiences of Black students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) with little to no explicit attention to historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

Our focus on HBCUs is substantiated in several ways. First, previous researchers have identified that African American students attending HBCUs are less likely than their same-race peers at PWIs to face the racial hostility that research has shown as detrimental to their academic achievement (Allen, 1992). Similarly, though results are mixed, substantial evidence supports the notion that labor market outcomes--such as job satisfaction and occupational status--are greater for Black HBCU graduates, compared to those who attend PWIs. Likewise, HBCUs provide a unique cultural site for developing social/cultural capital networks, which contribute to one's academic achievement (Brown & Davis, 2001; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). Still, it has been documented that queer students of color attending HBCUs may encounter institutional homophobia (Patton, 2011), although its less clear whether Black gay men attending different HBCUs experience the same forms of homophobia across geographic locations.

Indeed, uncovering the experiences of Black gay male collegians at HBCUs is important in developing a comprehensive knowledge of Black male collegians. Also, learning how Black gay male collegians negotiate multiple identities at HBCUs can provide useful knowledge for practitioners who work with such students. The absence of information in the scholarly literature about this subpopulation of Black males has contributed to a lack of both contextual and theoretical understanding of the challenges such men face as well as insufficient data on the support that enable their success. The current research is designed to fill in this gap, drawing upon data from a multi-campus qualitative research study.

This qualitative study was designed to gain in-depth information about how Black gay male collegians at HBCUs negotiate their multiple social identities in ways that enable them to succeed (i.e., academic achievement, retention) in college. Specifically, the current study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do Black gay male collegians describe the nature and climate of their experiences on campus, particularly across geographical locations?
2. How do these perceptions of campus climate contribute to successful navigation through college?
3. What social/cultural capital networks do Black gay male collegians develop that assist in academic achievement?

Methods

To successfully address the gap within the literature, this study is centered upon an epistemological approach that is anchored in the constructivist tradition to generate knowledge, understanding and meaning through human interactions (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006) as well as inquiry into understanding multiple identities (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Data collection will not begin until Fall 2011, therefore, we briefly outline our plan for collection. Data will be collected via a series of focus groups at multiple HBCUs. Focus groups are particularly useful for providing detailed insights into a target audience's perceptions and motivations (Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2005). Focus groups have been utilized as an appropriate means for generating knowledge among Black male college students (Watkins, Green, Guidry, & Stanley, 2007) and even Black gay male collegians (Strayhorn & Mullins, 2011), thereby providing an opportunity for open discussion and dialogue among participants. Focus groups, in the present study, will take place on campuses, lasting approximately 90-120 minutes on average. All focus groups will be digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed by a professional. Analysis will be completed in two phases. Specifically open-coding will be utilized to identify any initial codes, which will be collapsed, where possible, into broader categories and then these categories will be collapsed into larger themes (Palmer & Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & Devita, 2008). Participants also will complete a demographic background questionnaire that will be administered by a trained focus group facilitator, ensuring that complete confidentiality is kept after completion of the signed consent for participation.

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“Toward an Integrated Self: Making Meaning of the Multiple Identities of Gay Men in College”

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Introduction

Over the past decade, scholars have looked to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1995), a concept stemming from Critical Race Theory, as a means to explore the multiple social identities of college students. Intersectionality provides insight on the knowledge constructed at the intersection of one's multiple identities, at the individual, group and systemic levels (Crenshaw, 2007). Jones and McEwen (2000) and Abes, Jones and McEwen (2007)'s Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity have served as one conceptual model framing how college students come to make meaning of their holistic sense of self. This movement towards looking at one's holistic development addresses a prevalent critique of traditional student development theory: that those foundational theories were developed using participants who reflected college campuses at the time: White, upper- or middle-class, heterosexual (or likely closeted) men (Davis & Laker, 2004; Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2010).

Additionally, arguments have been made that these theories represent the college male perspective; however, scholars on men and masculinities in higher education argue that these theories have largely ignored the role of one's gender in one's cognitive, psychosocial, or social identity development (Edwards, 2007; Harper & Harris, 2010; Harris, 2006; Laker & Davis, 2011). To further compound the lack of research in this area, there is a dearth of literature on the experiences of gay men making meaning of their gender and sexual orientation in addition to other social identities such as race and ethnicity. As a result, a significant gap in the literature exists on understanding how gay men in college make meaning of their multiple identities.

This qualitative study aims to understand how traditionally-aged gay men in college come to make meaning of the intersections of their multiple identities, specifically their gender and sexuality. This research will assist higher education professionals in understanding how gay men in college come to understand one's self as well as understand the impact, either positively or negatively, of specific services, programs, and experiences on one's meaning-making process.