Chapter 4

College–Going and College–Staying Capital: Supporting Underrepresented Minority Students at Predominantly White Institutions

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ABSTRACT

When underrepresented minority (URM) students from high-poverty, high-minority K-12 schools enter college, they often encounter academic, financial, and cultural obstacles in addition to experiencing discriminatory events. This chapter, focusing on the narratives of five URM students, explores the relationships, experiences, and strategies that enabled college-going capital, in addition to the relationships, experiences, strategies, and policies that created college-staying capital for these students at predominantly white institutions (PWI). Utilizing research and the students' experiential knowledge, recommendations are made that supportive teachers, dual enrollment courses, and scholarship programs enable URM students to overcome obstacles upon entering college. Once in college, overcoming cultural differences and discriminatory occurrences was most aided by strong student communities (in the form of Black Student Unions, multicultural clubs, and supportive friendships) and confidence in their racial identity.

INTRODUCTION

As this collection highlights, the 21st Century university landscape is composed of students with varied identities and needs, and as such, gaining a deeper understanding of the college experiences of Students of Color provides important insight for this discussion. While much research refers to a so-called achievement gap between Students of Color and White students, an understanding of institutional racism in the United Sates provides a context for why there are racial differences in college enrollment and attainment.

Acknowledging the systemic obstacles that Students of Color encounter during high school and college enables a better understanding of the need for strategies, policies, and practices that create and sustain college-going capital and college-staying capital. Using data gained by the author's qualitative study (Kuehn, 2018), the narratives of underrepresented minority (URM) students at predominantly white institutions (PWI) provide a wealth of knowledge regarding the experiences of URM students at PWIs for educational leaders to utilize as they seek to create more inclusive 21st century campuses.

When White students enter a four-year, predominantly white institution, they meet students, faculty, and administrators who look like them, sound like them, and have similar backgrounds—this is a privilege that not all students experience. The college experiences of Students of Color are quite different than those of their White peers (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Yosso, Parker, Solórzano & Lynn, 2004). Black, Latino, Native American, and Pacific Islander students are underrepresented minority (URM) groups on college campuses; when they enter college, they often experience discriminatory events in the classroom, in their dormitories, or at school events (Hurtado & Alvarado, 2015). These experiences are most pronounced for URM students who attended high-poverty, high-minority K-12 school districts (Davis & Palmer, 2010; Kozol, 2005). The varying levels of access to and experiences during college—consequences of America's history of racism within its institutions—leads to differences in success between White students and Students of Color (Bohrnstedt et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Kezar, 2011). Given that URM students who attend PWIs have different experiences than White students, it is imperative that the non-dominant stories are shared and utilized by institutions of higher education as a means of creating more inclusive campuses, thus creating more equitable access to, experiences during, and success throughout college for URM students.

BACKGROUND

Attainment

The percentage of 18-24-year olds enrolled in college has shown continual growth since 1970; however, college enrollment is lower among Students of Color than White students. While there is a difference in enrollment percentages, additionally, there is a variance in degree attainment. The racial differences in enrollment and degree attainment has not only persisted since the 1800s, it has steadily grown since 1995 (U.S. Department of Education, 1993; Eberle-Sudré, Welch, & Nichols, 2015; Kenna et al., 2016; Snyder, de Brey & Dillow, 2016). The enrollment difference between White and Black students has held at a near-steady rate of approximately 10% (11.6% enrollment gap in 1970; 9.6% gap in 2014) (Snyder, de Brey & Dillow, 2016). Looking forward, if these gaps persist, 60% of White 25-34-year olds will earn a college degree by 2041, while this same percentage of achievement for Black, Latino, and Native American students would not be achieved until 2060 (Smith, 2018).

American mythology leads some who examine these so-called achievement gaps to blame a lack of effort (Holmes, 2007) or a general deficit in a racial group (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). However, the imbalanced achievement is due instead to structures of institutional racism that have led to educational disenfranchisement.

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