

Chapter 52

Peer Support of Graduate Students of Color Through a Formal Graduate Student Association

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the experiences of graduate students of color and examines the support systems in place to promote their success in the academy. The authors provide an overview of the relevant literature and pertinent theoretical frameworks, including critical race theory and self-determination theory, as they relate to the experiences of graduate students of color. Furthermore, the chapter describes the initiation and early development of a Graduate Students of Color Association at Merrimack College, a private, Catholic college in New England. The chapter includes both benefits and challenges of participating in and sustaining the group, while offering recommendations for future practice and research. It may be of particular interest to graduate students of color; faculty, staff, and administration in graduate education; and researchers focused on graduate degree attainment among individuals of color.

INTRODUCTION

Across the United States, enrollment of students of color in graduate programs is on the rise (Okahana & Zhou, 2017). Okahana and Zhou (2017) reported increases of 11% and 7.8% between Fall 2015 and 2016 in graduate enrollment among LatinX students and Asian and Pacific Islanders, respectively.

Despite the growth in graduate program enrollment, students of color experience high attrition rates (Granados & Lopez, 1999). The United States maintains a fifty percent attrition rate for all graduate

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8547-4.ch052

students and a seventy percent attrition rate for minority students (Brunsma, Embrick, & Shin, 2017). Furthermore, nearly two-thirds of African American/Black doctoral candidates do not complete their degrees (Joseph, 2012).

Graduate education presents numerous challenges, especially for students of color. Granados and Lopez (1999) explained that students of color “confront different issues and challenges because of who they are and what they represent” (p. 136). The systematic oppression of people of color, in the context of graduate school, hinders the socialization process of graduate students of color, resulting in an often exhausting and unpleasant graduate school experience (Twale, Weidman, & Bethea, 2016).

Literature asserts that there are a multitude of variables that differentiates the graduate experience for students of color such as the persistence of racism and microaggressions, increased isolation, and unsupportive faculty and environments (Brunsma, Embrick, & Shin, 2017; Granados & Lopez, 1999). These obstacles are detrimental to the engagement, well-being, and performance of graduate students of color (Granados & Lopez, 1999).

Racism and Microaggressions

Experiences of racism are common among graduate students of color. Overt or direct racism are words, actions, policies, or processes that explicitly oppress nonwhite people, such as use of derogatory racial slurs directed at people of color. According to Truong, Museum, and McGuire (2015), graduate students of color are susceptible to vicarious racism as well as direct racism. They explained that vicarious racism involves racist actions directed at family and friends, or even observed racism directed at strangers, which may impact an individual’s sense of safety and well-being.

A common example of racial harm is exemplified by microaggressions; which are both vexatious and debilitating. Clark, Mercer, Zeigler-Hill, and Dufrene (2012) argue that microaggressions are one of the most harmful forms of racism students experience. Racial microaggressions are defined as, “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). The effects of microaggressions are considered as damaging as incidences of overt racism. Covert racism results in students of color feeling ignored, undervalued, and disrespected because of their race (Sue & Constantine, 2007; Clark, Mercer, Zeigler-Hill & Dufrene, 2012).

For example, in a study of the effects of microaggressions on African-American college students, researchers found that microaggressions resulted in feelings of intimidation, discouragement, frustration, and exhaustion (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Some students even considered leaving the academy as a result of the trauma inflicted by microaggressions. The compounding effects of racism and microaggressions influence how a graduate student of color experiences the people and environment of the academy.

Isolation

Students of color are also likely to experience social, cultural, and intellectual isolation in the pursuit of advanced degrees (Brunsma, Embrick, & Shin, 2017; Clark, Mercer, Zeigler-Hill & Dufrene, 2012). Some students anticipate isolation based on the history of higher education institutions. A doctoral candidate at Miami University wrote, “Given my awareness that academia is inherently a white supremacist and male dominated field, I anticipated that my journey as an Asian American womxn of color in higher education may be one of solitude” (Ashlee, Zamora, & Karikari, 2017, p. 100). A study which explored

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