Students of Color and Higher Education

A Burden that Deters our Dreams and Aspirations

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Abstract

Students of color who come from under-resourced schools and under-represented communities are put on a different educational standing in comparison to their counterparts. By not having been immersed into the college environment, their transition was more difficult. They are deprived from resources, guidance, mentorship, and social networks. Being low-income, first generation, and undocumented are few of the obstacles presented. Many students remain silent due to the stigma associated with students of color who seek professional help. Despite their hardships, students of color pursue their academic dreams with the help and support of family, friends, and social networks. In conclusion, this paper was written with the intention of bringing awareness to an issue that is often left in the shadows to be left unspoken about.

Keywords: students of color, minority, higher education, African American, Latino/a, first generation
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Introduction

The concern with students of color, especially those in the United States pursuing higher education, has become a crucial topic discussed amongst colleges and universities around the country.

For the past years, colleges have focused on eliminating the lack of diversity in institutions by admitting students of color who have met and excelled the qualifications expected by the admissions committee. Unfortunately, after admitting a student who considers themselves as someone of color, institutions know that having admitted that student could be a risk—they are not academically prepared to excel in post-secondary education. Students of color are considered “minorities” for their unequal treatment in society, socioeconomic status, and ethnic stratification.

The ladder is a prevalent issue that explains why students of color face a burden when wanting to pursue higher education. They attend under-resourced public high schools in the inner-city that do receive enough funding to guide students and ensure that they do not fall on the cracks. Education inequity amongst students of color is a burden that deters the dreams and aspirations to pursue higher education.

Transition to College

When discussing higher education, individuals tend to shame both parent and student without taking into acknowledgment the barriers coming in between their college opportunity (Rios-Aguilar, & Kiyama, 2012).

For many students of color, the first obstacle faced before stepping foot onto a college campus is based on economic differences. If that is the case, tuition and financial
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aid awards are the leading factors that students rely on when making their final decision to attend college (Perna, 2000). Questions and concerns that constantly run through their minds are: What is the yearly price tag to the college of my choice? And the ladder, which is also the most imperative, how am I going to afford college tuition?

A large percentage of Latinos live in low-income communities where the only educational system available are under-resourced high schools that make the pursuits of postsecondary education a challenge (Cerezo, Lyda, Beristianos, Enriquez, & Connor. 2013). In an attempt to further explain the transition to college for students of color, which in this case study were Latinas, author Margarita Jimenez wrote a narrative about her family’s experience. Her younger sibling, Norma Jimenez, had a common experience to what many students of color who have also attended inner-city high schools face throughout their educational career. Having gone to a public education system, college counselors and faculty were not always of great help. Norma felt as if her high school had little to no resources, which limited her educational career by not acquainting herself with the college application process. She realized that the curriculum had not prepared her, or any other student to be academically challenged in college (Jimenez, Margarita. 2009).

Even before students have prepared their transition to college, or are in the process of transitioning, socioeconomic disadvantages and education inequity are two imperative issues acting as social forces. Oftentimes, students become discouraged to attend college, leaving them no option left but to pause and even stop their educational career.
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Influence to Pursue Higher Education

Hispanic/Latino Student Perseverance

Despite not having the same educational standing like other students in the United States, and the barriers in between their path, Latinos have a desire to pursue higher education. A majority of Latino/a students are labeled as “first generation college students,” who neither mother nor father attained a college degree (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). Carrying the label of “first generation” on top of their shoulder brings along a history of family and cultural values that engrain students the norms and responsibilities to be a successful POC (person of color) in the United States. Researchers (e.g., Arellano & Padilla. 1996) found that Latinos gained their inspiration and motivation to seek mobility in higher education by having been witnesses of their parent’s struggles, hardships, and desire to strive for the “American dream.”

Family members are not the only people who play an important role for college-bound student of color. In fact, their college-attending friends are able to provide assistance, mentorship, advice, and encouragement (Cerezo, Lyda, Beristianos, Enriquez & Connor. 2013). Having parents who are not knowledgeable about college (application process, financial aid, requirements, etc.) and also having attended high schools that do not offer the proper resources to guide students through the application process, results in students perceiving support from their peers who have also been in their shoes. In the face of experiencing discouragement by under-resourced high schools and communities in under-represented neighborhoods, students are able to overcome barriers by taking
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strength from the reassurance received by their family and friends (Cerezo, Lyda, Beristianos, Enriquez & Connor. 2013).

*African American Student Perseverance*

Just like Hispanic/Latino/a students, African American’s also face different educational standings. Having numerical data show that the percentage of graduating h.s seniors is below 50% (Greene & Winters. 2006), has brought awareness and shed light to contemporary innovative strategies used to promote higher education. For instance, EMPOWERMENTODAY, that is described as “An innovative and interdisciplinary strategy developed by two social work educators, linking public and higher education, public health, hip-hop culture, and other strategies to enhance the personal and academic success of adolescent make African Americans,” (Travis & Ausbrooks. 2012) has become available for students to take advantage of.

Resources like EMPOWERMENTODAY, encourages students of color to pursue higher education because the help reciprocates a feeling of comfort and support, which is often not shed in their lives. The program focuses on the academic aspect of higher education and “the importance of education that extends beyond the classroom and school walls.” (Jackson. 2007). Having a mentorship connection with students of the same racial background is comforting. Instructors and members of the program are able to guide each other through the college application process. Just as (Cerezo, Lyda, Beristianos, Enriquez & Connor. 2013) have reported—students of color are able to overcome institutionalized barriers with the reassurance received from their peers.
Latinos in Higher Education: Challenges Faced

*Academically Challenged*

The primary reason behind why Latino/a’s are competitively disadvantaged in academics is due to the under-representation amongst the public high school system (Miller. 2005). Curriculum followed by teachers is neither academically challenging nor engaging. Students are taught to memorize facts from books and regurgitate back the exact information to their teachers instead of learning the material.

Researchers (e.g. Cole & Barber. 2003) have indicated that generally, Hispanic students perform academically lower in comparison to their White and Asian counterparts. Generally speaking, despite the racial or ethnic background of a student, the majority of students admitted to the same college have relatively similar high school GPAs and SAT scores. However, when comparing their cumulative college GPA, Latinos tend to perform worse than those who are not of color. Many refer to this as “over-prediction” because it is evident that the high school GPA of a student of color will not reflect, or be any similar to the one in college.

*Race and Disconnection*

From the moment students of color step foot onto a college campus, especially a PWI (predominantly white institution), they are immersed into a different culture and environment. Students are forced to face an experience completely unfamiliar and peculiar to their daily living, feeling neglected due to the lack of similarities shared with other people.
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Culture shock—in other words—is the best term to describe what many students of color feel when attending a PWI. For the most part, Hispanics and African Americans tend to create their social networks amongst other students of color. They arrive to college with a strong sense of ethnic identity—proud to be a person of color who thrived and succeeded despite the barriers put in between his or her way. However, a PWI continues to create social and academic challenges for students (Pyne & Means. 2013).

Legal Status

Undocumented students, or as many refer to by the name of “Dreamers” are students whose residential status in the country becomes an obstacle to pursue higher education. Many children who have migrated to the United States are only months old with no memories of their homeland. The only place they consider “home” is in the United States, but this “home” impedes their right to pursue higher education by putting barriers in between their way.

Dreamers face a financial situation that is more complicated than other students because their privilege of receiving financial assistance from the federal government is snatched away. At the same time, institutions expect students to pay out-of-state tuition because they are not residents. In hopes to help alleviate the problem, policies such as the Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors (Dream Act) have been created to ensure that undocumented students can also attain a college degree by not having to pay out-of-state tuition.

Undocumented students know very little about the college application process due to the lack of information given. Unfortunately, high school guidance is not well acquainted with information that should be shared with undocumented students. Often
time’s miscommunication and the wrong advice are given, making students feel hopeless and crushing their academic dreams.

Once attending college, undocumented students find themselves facing a challenge that seems impossible to overcome. In other words, by not receiving the same financial support as other students, Dreamers have to work the extra mile in order to be financially stable. Balancing academics, work, and social life all in one day is no easy job.

“A challenge that I face, of course, is financial aid, with no qualifying for money and work-study is involved. I mean I would have so much free time to do activities with a job on campus. Since I don’t have that, I have to go to Spokane every day in work. Then by the time I get out of work, the school offices are closed and my professors are gone. I never have the time to go to a club meeting or just wander around campus [and] talk to people.” (Contreras. 2009. Pg. 621)

The conversation about a student’s residential status is often left in the shadows due to the fear of deportation.

African Americans and Higher Education: Challenges Faced

Stereotypes and Academic Experience

In comparison to students living in suburban and rural places, research has shown that students who live in urbanized areas are more vulnerable to suffer from financial and social barriers that place them at risk for school failure (Chau. 2010).
In the United States, African American students have been recorded to have one of the lowest graduation retention rates that have received a Bachelor’s degree within six years, which has caught the attention of educational researchers (e.g. Hurtado. 2012). Hurtado conducted a research to further comprehend and explain how social factors have negatively impacted students’ academic experience. The data collected helped explain why many African American students were not excelling in higher education. The majority of African American students reported that stereotypes were a threat that was getting in between their academic success, resulting in lower academic achievement (Fischer. 2010)

Common stereotypes targeted to this racial group have falsely labeled them as unintelligent and lazy (Johnson. 2008) making students feel that they do not have an equal standing in the education system (Valencia. 1997). How would students feel about themselves after having overheard a conversation pertaining to African American stereotypes? Indeed, awful. In fact, being consciously aware about stereotypes impairs academic performance because students carry within themselves the false labels society has added to their racial background. Stereotypes discourage students to work at their full potential, resulting to depressing test scores, and psychological issues. Many refuse to look for help, which can later result into depression (Johnson. 2008).

Stress and Psychological Issues

Stigma with Seeking Psychological Help

According to Benton (2003), the frequency rate of mental health problems surrounding college campuses has become more prevalent. It has increased by a
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significantly large amount, yet students continue to neglect resources, such as psychological help. Throughout the academic school year, REM (racial and ethnic minority) college students appeared to have the highest percent who dealt with psychological problems and also the lowest percentage that sought for professional psychological help (Loya, Reddy, & Hinshaw. 2010).

Leong, Wagner, and Tata (1995) drew attention to the idea that cultural variables such as cultural norms, ethnicity, and cultural identity were imperative when considering the inequality presented amongst psychological treatment. Some argue that the adherence to ethnic and cultural values were associated with stigma when reaching psychological help (Obasi & Leong. 2009). In fact, when speaking of a student’s ethnic and cultural values, a history of oppression and dehumanization begins to unravel, making one feel racially discriminated amongst their peers. Pescosolido, Martin, Lang, and Olasfsdottir (2000) proposed the Framework Integrating Normative Influences on Stigma (FINIS) that outlined macro level factors, such as racism and discrimination to play the role of a deterrent when seeking for mental health treatment.

Being a POC in a PWI affects how students psychically and mentally feel about themselves. The majority of their daily interactions are with different ethnocultural groups, which reciprocates on cultural disconnections because for many students, having interactions with a White person is something completely new. Feeling like nobody around them understands where they are coming from results in depression.

Social Networks

Institutions

Once in college, are social networks expanded and accessible for students to reach
out for? Interestingly, in comparison to high school, in college, looking for social networks becomes an imperative role. The majority of time students of color are coming from high schools where social networks were not difficult to find because they existed within the same racial and ethnic groups.

Abel, a first-generation college student, reported that finding social networks within a PWI became imperative to his academic career and social life (Jimenez-Silva, Hernandez, Luevanos, Jimenez & Jimenez A. 2009). Having struggled during the first two years of his college career made him realize that the lack of social networks was negatively impacting him.

“I discovered a club on campus called Mexican American Engineers and Scientists (MAES), where I found the additional social and academic support that would help me get through my remaining years of college…. If I hadn’t been in MAES, I wouldn’t have been able to stay in the engineering program and in school. That was the turning point of my academic focus at UCI.” (p. 736)

Social networks are imperative because they provide an extra hand, whether it is academically, psychologically, financially or socially.

Standardized Tests

Achievement

As reported by the College Board organization and argued by Camara & Echternacht (2006), the SAT (Standardized test used for college admission) is an accurate predictor of college success. According to statistical data, students of color have not
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achieved higher test scores in comparison to their White and Asian American counterparts.

Standardized exams (e.g. SAT and ACT) define students solely on numerical data, ignoring their socioeconomic background, high school resources, parental level of education, and factors that get in between their success of achieving “well” on tests. This concern sparks to my next question: Why are students of color not performing as well in comparison to students who are not of color? Perhaps because tests like the SAT are culturally and statistically biased against low-income students (Freedle. 2003).

As opposed to students whose parents are acquainted with the college admissions process, parents of first generation college students do not have a clue about the importance of standardized exams in regards to higher education. Parents who are aware about standardized exams and are in a good economic standing, usually hire a private tutor so their children receive “hands on training” on how to excel on college entrance exams. Evidently, low-income families do not have the resources to hire a private tutor, limiting the student to academic resources. Instead, students have to go out of their way and seek for help, which unfortunately, is extremely often hard to find.

Politics and Law

Affirmative Action

In 2002-2005, Hispanics represented only 14% of high school graduates of whom 11% received an Associate’s degree, 7% a Bachelors, 6% a Masters, 5% professional degrees, and 3% Doctoral degrees (NCES. 2008). African Americans have similar, if not lower percentage rates of students pursuing higher education. The question presented after reading this data is: How can colleges make sure that students of color have an equal
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standing in our education system? In the 1960’s, affirmative action was the answer. This policy took race, ethnicity, and gender into consideration to ensure that under-represented groups in the United States had an equal standing in institutions and organizations (Phelan & Rudman. 2011). Ever since higher education institutions stopped using affirmative action to admit students of color, the percentage of POC has declined.

Conclusion

Education should not be a human oppressor—a burden that destroys the dreams and aspirations of so many students of color around the United States. Stepping foot onto a college campus is a big accomplishment, but stepping out of one with a diploma is beyond extraordinary. It would be amazing to see more students of color pursue their dreams and aspirations just like any other student of their same age. Students are the future leaders of this country—our education system needs to stop excluding individuals based of their background.
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