Students of Color are Motivated Agents of Change

Why Aren't We Joining Your Programs?

Research for improving
campus climate and inclusivity

I WAS HESITANT TO JOIN THE DIVERSE SCHOLARS PROGRAM BECAUSE I FELT LIKE I WAS PUTTING MYSELF INTO A 'POOR YOU' SPACE. BUT WHEN I WENT AND FOUND WHAT IT WAS ACTUALLY ABOUT, DIVERSITY MEANS A LOT OF DIFFERENT THINGS -- RACE, WEALTH, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER IDENTITY. IN THE 3,000 PERSON BUSINESS SCHOOL, THERE HAD TO BE AT LEAST ONE PERSON THAT I IDENTIFIED WITH. I WENT ON THE RETREAT AND FOUND THAT I WASN'T THE ONLY ONE EXPERIENCING THESE THINGS. I FOUND THAT I HAD A SUPPORT GROUP OF PEOPLE TO CELEBRATE OR HELP WHEN I'M FEELING DOWN.
--UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT OF COLOR

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to share research findings on how staff and faculty can make spaces on campus better for Students of Color, and improve leadership and civic engagement programs through learning about Student of Color experiences from face-to-face interviews. The question that drove this research project was, "What can we learn from Students of Color about student engagement and activity to help inform the strategic planning of university programs?"

The research team consisted of six undergraduate students, one graduate student, and one university professor. Our team represented cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity; including Mexican-American, African American, White, Jewish, and African immigrant students. Several of our team members were first generation in their families to attend college.

Methods

Participatory action research is a research philosophy in which the people who are impacted by an issue collaborate to do the research themselves. Participatory action research allows for research teams to be able to work in a more democratic way in which all members have a say in how the project is conducted.

We conducted 15 qualitative interviews with undergraduate Students of Color from a wide variety of majors and backgrounds. We coded the interviews and surfaced themes. We held a member check where we shared our findings with our interviewees, and elicited their feedback.

Findings

Students are Motivated to Engage in Campus Organizations

Throughout the data, many students mentioned that they were motivated to take part in organizations throughout campus because of self-empowerment, giving back to their home or campus communities, meeting people, and accessing resources.

Features of Safe Spaces

Safe spaces provide resources for underrepresented student success, like academic support and materials. Safe spaces are places where students can know that they can engage in conversations in which their voices are heard and their ideas are respected. Students can go to these spaces and not be judged by their peers.

What Non-Safe Spaces Feel Like

Extracurricular or service learning spaces that are described as non-safe lack cultural diversity, which can make it hard for a Student of Color to feel comfortable joining the space. Additionally, non-safe spaces fail to account for the fact that campus is white-dominant and lack cultural responsiveness or intention to support Students of Color.

Implications and Recommendations

Financial resources

Programs should be creative in finding ways for students to get financial resources or academic credit through their involvement in the program, so that underrepresented students who need financial support can be involved without financial burden.

Communication between groups

Different on-campus organizations that have common goals or work with similar groups of students should intentionally create opportunities for collaboration, including shared programming and networking events.

Get to know the complexity of your students

Faculty and staff should work to learn about their students individually. Students have a wide variety of experiences and perspectives, and they will be encouraged to share if leaders create space that values their individuality.

Recognize community wealth

It is important for teachers and leaders to recognize the wide variety of strengths in their students, and help find ways for underrepresented students' strengths to be highlighted and utilized within academic and extracurricular settings.

Meet Our Research Team and Authors

Melissa Arreola-Pena
I am a senior studying Ethnic Studies with a double minor in Women and Gender Studies and Political Science. I am interested in expanding my research experience and knowledge to later pursue research on underrepresented populations. I want to do research on how to close the education gap in societies to learn how to build a better and stronger America. I am very passionate about being able to give back to my community and learn how to increase underrepresented populations in higher education.

Yohannese Gebremedhin
I am a 4th year student studying Mechanical Engineering. I was introduced to this participatory action research project via a fellow student, and was excited to work towards bringing the thoughts of Students of Color to the forefront. I have seen first-hand the lack of comprehensive representation of students of all backgrounds and that made me even more motivated to collaborate in this work.

Rebecca G. Kaplan
I am a doctoral student in the school of education. I am interested in how teaching and research can be approached through anti-oppressive pedagogy. One of the ways I've seen powerful work in this area is through participatory action research, which is the research approach you'll find reflected throughout this report. I believe many educators want to support inclusion efforts, but rarely do we ask students themselves how to best do this. In this research, Students of Color and allies engaged in doing just that. I believe the findings in this report provide a valuable springboard for reflection and dialogue on how we can better support Students of Color within institutions which have historically excluded them.

Additional research team members from 2014:

Nurta Mohamed
Fredah Rajab

Gyslaine Kabisa Kadima
I am a senior studying International Affairs and French. I got involved in this group with the help of my supervisor Sabrina Sideris, the program director of the INVST Community Studies Program. I expressed to her that I didn't feel like I belonged in my International Affairs classes because my voice was not being heard and because I was put in a spot where I had to speak for the entire continent. With this in mind, I felt like it was important for some professors to know how hard it is for Students of Color like me on this campus. I wanted my voice to be heard and to make sure no one goes through what I had gone through. After I expressed to Sabrina how I felt, she connected me with CU Engage, and that's how I became part of this wonderful group.

Ben Kirshner, PhD
I am Faculty Director for CU Engage and an Associate Professor in the School of Education. In my work I try to design, enact, study, and understand learning ecologies where people from marginalized and privileged groups work together to critically analyze the world and take action to change it. With the launch of CU Engage, I thought it was necessary to apply our critical analysis tools to the university campus and focus specifically on our campus' track record with community engagement. I worry that too often community engagement programs are designed for White, privileged students. I hope this study plays a role in broadening our pathways to and opportunities for community engagement.

Katie Raitz
I am a senior double majoring in Ethnic Studies and Women and Gender Studies, with a minor in Education. I am involved in two CU Engage programs, the Puksta Scholars and Public Achievement. I am excited about the prospect of strengthening these programs' cultural responsiveness to Students of Color and underrepresented students, especially because the majority of community members we work with in these programs are People of Color. I am excited to use my academic knowledge of critical race and social justice theory in practice to make campus spaces more welcoming and inclusive for Students of Color at CU.

About Our Study

Rationale

Community engagement has the potential to transform and revitalize student learning in higher education. Too often, however, engagement opportunities are structured in ways that privilege affluent students who can afford to volunteer or rest on deficit-based assumptions about the community being served. Service learning and civic engagement programs are often implemented in ways that privilege students from affluent families (Charles, 2005). Volunteering, for example, takes away from time available for paid work. Additionally, the ideologies of service learning can be off-putting to students of color or those who grew up in working class neighborhoods, particularly if service learning is framed in individualistic, decontextualized ways that reinforce deficit perceptions of the target community (Countryman, 2012; Mitchell, 2008; Novick et al., 2011). These issues of access and equity for higher education community engagement programs call for student-driven participatory action research, and we were called to take part in this research because of our experiences with non-inclusive spaces on campus and a desire to improve the campus climate at CU.

Research Background

This research was funded by the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program and CU Engage, a new center for community-based learning and research. Housed in the CU School of Education, CU Engage is focused on student learning opportunities through civic engagement; it provided the institutional support for our work.

The goal of our research was to discover the ways in which we can make spaces on campus better for Students of Color, and improve leadership and civic engagement programs through learning about Student of Color experiences in face-to-face interviews. Our objective was to discover what we could learn from Students of Color about student engagement and activity in order to help inform the strategic planning of CU Engage. We derived our recommendations based on the perspectives and experiences of current Students of Color at CU, using qualitative interview methodologies, guided by the participatory action research philosophy of inquiry.

> THE FEARS OF APPEARING OVERLY SENSITIVE ABOUT ISSUES OF RACE SEEM TO BE UNDEREXPLORED IN THE SCHOLARSHIP ON STUDENTS OF COLOR AND COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING.
> --P. 4, NOVICK, SEIDER, HUGULEY (2011)

Participatory Action research

IN THIS PROJECT I HAVE BEEN ABLE TO BE PART OF THE PROJECT FROM DAY ONE AND HAVE BEEN ABLE TO DESIGN, ARRANGE AND CONDUCT INTERVIEWS ON MY OWN. WITH PAR I HAVE ALSO HAD A CHANCE TO WORK WITH OTHER STUDENTS OF COLOR AND HAVE BEEN ABLE TO CONNECT MY OWN EXPERIENCE TO THEIRS. BEING ABLE TO HEAR OTHER STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES HAS ALLOWED ME TO GET THEIR VOICE HEARD AND CREATE AN IMPACT ON THE CU CAMPUS.
--MELISSA,
RESEARCH TEAM MEMBER

Research For Change

In participatory action research (PAR), people who are impacted by the focus of the research collaborate to do the research themselves. As Students of Color and allies on this campus, we have a personal investment in this research. We started as a group of undergraduate Students of Color collaborating with Dr. Ben Kirshner and PhD candidate Rebecca Kaplan, and then invited Katie, who we consider to be a white ally. It is important to us that allies are a part of this conversation, because part of the PAR approach involves working toward action to make a difference.

Democratic Process

We took a democratic approach to working on our research team. First, the undergraduate team members had authentic ownership over the project. Our interests and desires for campus change drove the inquiry process. For example, the project goals were not initially focused on campus climate, but as we developed our question protocol, we realized that campus climate was one of the main issues we were interested in. The question of what makes a safe space became integral to our findings and our recommendations. The second way we intentionally crafted the research space was by having a diverse research team. This diversity ensured that Students of Color would be well represented and that their voices would be at the forefront of our inquiry. We also included allies because of our belief that inquiry can be informed by diverse perspectives, and solutions strengthened by including diverse stakeholders. One issue that had came up was that we had initially had focused our research question around the topic of "civic engagement" and that did not reflect what we were trying to address. The questions we were asking moved in the direction of "climate" issues as that seemed to be more of a concern to the Students of Color we had in mind. Realizing that this was the case, we collectively decided to switch the focus of our research to adequately answer the the concerns of Students of Color.

Another key example of this method is that we rotate the facilitation of each meeting in a democratic fashion. We as undergraduate researchers meet up with our graduate advisor prior to our meeting to work through the creation and refinement of our agendas every week. Because of this, everyone has authentic ownership over our work.

Methods

Data Collection

We started our research by conducting a word association poll with Students of Color using the words: civic engagement, leadership, social justice, and campus climate. We brainstormed an extensive list of questions and goals for our inquiry together. Then our undergraduate researchers split into pairs, decided which questions they wanted to ask, and interviewed each other, noting which questions elicited meaningful stories and which felt unnatural. When we came back together as a research team, we shared notes and finalized the research protocol. We then began to reach out to students we knew from our own networks to ask if they would be willing to be interviewed as a participant in our study. Each undergraduate researcher conducted at least one interview per week, and we used our research team meeting to conduct ongoing analysis of these interviews.

Sample

We chose to focus our data collection on Students of Color, because we were most interested in Student of Color experiences and using their collective knowledge to improve campus spaces.

Table 1: Interviewees' self reported ethnic and racial identities.

	Word Association	*Interview*	*Total*
Female Identified	7	11	**18**
Male Identified	3	4	**7**
African-American/ African	4	7	**11**
Hispanic/ Latino/ Mexican-American	4	4	**8**
Pacific Islander/ South Asian/ Palestinian	1	4	**5**
Total	**10**	**15**	**25**

Methods

Our sample was academically diverse. We interviewed students from many majors within Arts and Sciences, including social sciences, hard sciences, and interdisciplinary fields like ethnic and gender studies. We also interviewed students from the Engineering, Journalism, and Business Schools. The diversity in academic programs helped to provide a more full understanding of student experiences on campus, because students from different fields interact differently with the spaces across campus. Also, each of these programs have different social climates, which impact Students of Color differently. For example, the Engineering School and Business Schools are typically characterized as white and male dominated, and have been discussed as having more "color-blind" discourses within learning environments. By "color-blind," we mean spaces where race and ethnicity are rarely discussed inside the classroom. These schools are often contrasted with certain Arts and Sciences programs, where race, gender and other topics surrounding privilege and oppression are discussed more often in classrooms.

The sample is also diverse in the amounts and ways students are involved on campus. We interviewed both self-identified "non active" and "active" students. We were able to hear about experiences, needs and desires from students who have found opportunities to find meaningful engagement on campus, as well as from students who felt that they had not gotten involved on campus outside of class. We also interviewed students from a variety of programs. We spoke with people from civic engagement programs, programs designed to support underrepresented students, student groups, and resource centers

Data Analysis

Once we completed our interviews, we engaged in a deductive coding process. First, we analyzed one interview as a team. We discussed the themes which surfaced and considered language and patterns that we had heard throughout our ongoing analysis. From those themes, we developed a set of codes. Then, we split into pairs to code a second interview-- entering any emergent codes into our shared code book on google drive, and color coding the data chunks to match the associated code. We then split up the rest of the interviews to code on our own.

In order to learn how to construct empirical claims about data, we engaged in a simulation activity where we practiced identifying themes and making codes. For this practice, we looked at data describing teachers in movies, and then went through the steps of identifying themes, categorizing themes into codes, and then generating claims based on our codes. After practicing the process, we looked to our actual data set. We triangulated each theme with published research and an in-depth member check.

Methods

Managing our Biases

In order to manage our biases, we engaged in two specific practices. First, we articulated our assumptions and values to each other. In doing so, we made our assumptions visible to the rest of the group, which then made it easier to see what was in our data and whether it was different from the assumptions we brought with us as we began the research. Second, we worked in teams to code data and articulate our claims to each other. This forced us to ground our interpretations in supporting evidence from our data, as we needed to justify our claims to the rest of the group. For example, Katie thought that a theme that would arise was the notion that people within activist spaces would experience "policing" of their activism - or criticism that their political analysis was not adequately developed. Becca, another team member who benefits from white privilege, also thought that this would be a theme in our data. However, we realized that this theme did not appear in any of our interviews, and that it didn't fit with our findings. This is an example of the ways that our discussion of our biases helped us look critically at the data to ensure that we weren't making claims that were based on our own assumptions or experiences.

Member Check

We invited all of our interviewees to attend a preliminary presentation of our findings, in order to provide feedback and inform changes. Ten students joined the research team to dissect and discuss our findings over pizza and soda. Our interview respondents challenged ideas, asked questions, and provided clarifications. We incorporated the feedback we received during our member check, which made us more confident that we would represent our interviewees well as we began to present our findings to the public. To date, we have presented our research on three different occasions to a) a mixed audience of more than 70 faculty, staff, and students, b) more than 30 academic advisors, and c) more than 100 staff and administrators involved in student affairs.

OUR INTERVIEW RESPONDENTS CHALLENGED IDEAS, ASKED QUESTIONS, AND PROVIDED CLARIFICATIONS. WE INCORPORATED THE FEEDBACK WE RECEIVED DURING OUR MEMBER CHECK, WHICH MADE US MORE CONFIDENT THAT WE WOULD REPRESENT OUR INTERVIEWEES WELL AS WE BEGAN TO PRESENT OUR FINDINGS TO THE PUBLIC.

Findings

Our study looked at several features of student experiences and perceptions. We organized our analysis around the following guiding questions:

•Why are Students of Color motivated to join extracurricular programs?

•What spaces do students chose?

•What makes a safe space appealing?

•What makes a space uncomfortable?

•How are programs designed with Students of Color in mind appealing or uncomfortable?

Finding 1: Students are Motivated to Engage in Campus Organizations

Students of Color are often viewed through a deficit lens, which is the attribution of negative schooling outcomes to individual failure or choice, rather than structures that disadvantage Students of Color disproportionately (Valenzuela, 2010). Questions about lack of engagement have often been directed at students' motivations, rather than on how a space is welcoming or unwelcoming to students of diverse backgrounds and experiences (Valenzuela, 2010). However, every student we interviewed, including self-identified active and non-active students, revealed that they were motivated to be involved on campus. This is significant, because our findings showed that motivation was not a factor in determining why some students become "active" students, while others don't. Therefore, our research shifted to be focused on what specifically motivated students to join programs, and what were the barriers they faced when looking to get involved.

We identified four reasons Students of Color gave as to why they were motivated to participate in programs outside of class. They discussed how their engagement in programs helped them improve in their own classes and become better supporters for younger students who share similar experiences. In our interviews, Students of Color were motivated to join diverse programs in order to gain a sense of self-empowerment, give back to their community, meet people, and access resources. We will describe the first three motivations here, and the fourth will surface in our second finding.

Self-empowerment

Self-empowerment meant something different to each individual. Some felt empowered in extracurricular spaces because they were able to find their real passions and interests; others felt empowered because their opinions were heard and considered by peers, staff, or faculty. All of our interviewees were able to use past experiences and personal struggles to empower themselves to exercise their voice and opinion on campus. Students understood that they were in a disadvantaged and vulnerable situation when they first began their college careers but they became aware of how they could navigate their interests and become stronger and more determined students through their involvement in engagement programs. For example, one student mentioned, "Social justice is a passion of mine. I am always reading about current events to inform me about what is going on. I at least take a ethnic studies class every semester or an education class just because I like them." Another student mentioned, "WOW (big smile) I love being an active student because I get to meet a lot of awesome people to learn from. I've made a lot of good friendships, and watched allyship take place in various communities. I love being a part of something and feeling like my voice matters." Every Student of Color we interviewed described different ways they were able to motivate themselves to continue fighting institutions of oppression. Our interviewees all wanted to get the best out of their college experience which meant being able to find

Findings

ways to navigate uncomfortable situations. Students were able to find sources of empowerment within the college in order to prevent or traverse stressful situations.

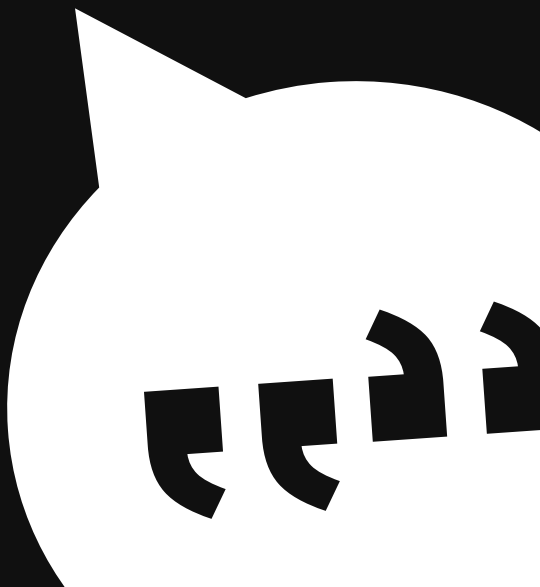
Giving back to Community

Throughout our interviews, interviewees constantly mentioned that they wanted to be able to find other students with similar backgrounds, interests, passions. Because Students of Color struggle to find a community or support system within classes, they join programs and groups to find a larger support system and develop friendships. Students also mentioned that giving back to the community meant helping younger generations succeed at CU, which meant making a direct impact on the CU campus. For example, one of our interviewees mentioned that she wanted to go back to her high school and be a pre-collegiate counselor to be able to support and educate Students of Color. She felt the need to make students aware of the resources that are out there for them and persuade them to come to college. Students want to create a safe space in which they can navigate their experiences while contributing a positive impact in their community.

Familial Empowerment

Family was a common theme that surfaced in our interviews. Students described wanting to have a sense of home and community on the CU-campus as well as being able to share common histories or experiences with others who allow them to feel understood. Students want to be able to join programs where they can meet people with their same interests, backgrounds, and experiences, oftentimes explicitly stating that they wanted to meet people who "look like me." Students described feeling a sense of belonging within programs or groups that included members from the same ethnic or racial background as themselves. For example, one of our interviewees mentioned that she joined a program because there were a lot of students from her high school who had a similar ethnic background and similar interests allowing her to build a stronger connection to the program. Because many Students of Color feel alone and cannot relate to the greater student population, it is very important for them to find other students, groups, and/or organizations that will allow them to feel welcomed and safe.

AFRICAN STUDENT ASSOCIATION IS A COMMUNITY. NOT EVERYONE IN THERE IDENTIFIES AS BEING AFRICAN; IT'S JUST A COMMUNITY OF PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT ALLYSHIP AND CONNECTING.
--UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT OF COLOR



Findings

IF YOU'RE NOT PART OF A COMMUNITY HERE IT IS EASY TO GET LOST IN THE SYSTEM.
--UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT OF COLOR

I ALMOST JOINED ... BUT THEY ARE ALL WHITE, UPPER CLASS. THEY GREW VERY DIFFERENTLY THAN HOW I DID SO WE SEE THINGS DIFFERENTLY.
--UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT OF COLOR

Finding 2:
Features of Safe Spaces

The prior section demonstrates the fact that Students of Color have a variety of reasons that they are motivated to engage in leadership opportunities and on-campus organizations. The following section presents evidence about the ways in which spaces can be welcoming and attractive to Students of Color. The following information can help inform the ways programs develop outreach and become more culturally responsive.

We identified three main trends that contributed to creating spaces that felt safe for Students of Color on campus. First, students discussed how programs that felt like safe spaces and community often provided resources such as financial support, academic resources, and mentoring. In one student's words, these resources were "opportunities to level the playing field." For example, the BOLD Center in the Engineering Center provides tutoring services, and SORCE provides blue books for students, both of which are tangible resources that students appreciated. Second, students described safe spaces as places where students feel a sense of community, respect, and that their voices are being heard and represented. The student government office was described as a space where everyone was working towards a goal for social justice - and where their voices were valued and respected. Finally, students described safe spaces as environments where students can go and there would not be any "haters;" they would not feel judged nor be fearful of being judged. In the best case scenario, a space free from judgement leads to openddiscourse, as noted by Novick et al. (2011). Students of Color in these spaces felt comfortable speaking openly, whereas other spaces on campus made students feel that they needed to self-censor (Novick et al., 2011). The Women's Resource Center was cited as a space on campus that creates a sense of understanding and support.

Finding 3:
What Non-Safe Feels Like

The reality we found in our data includes that of spaces that are not considered safe for Students of Color due to a lack of diversity and cultural responsiveness. This theme came up many times in our data. Novick, Seider, and Huguley (2011) refer to "spotlighting" where Students of Color feel "racially hypervisible" (Novick, et al., 2011, p. 6). Spotlighting refers to

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situations where members of majority groups, particularly the instructor, puts unwanted attention on Students of Color. As a research team we became more perceptive of the attention that is brought upon the students we had interviewed. One of the people we interviewed recalled how she had realized when first arriving to the campus that she was more visible than the white students on campus. She described being"the only person like yourself and getting] stared at a lot." This came up in many of the conversations we had with students. With the extensive work that the team has done, we have become more aware of the imbalance between the representation of Students of Color and white students in the classroom. Not only did we notice the inequity on our campus but we also had the language to identify and describe the structures that caused those inequities.

In a class spotlighting can feel unavoidable, but when this happens in programs and clubs outside of class, it can deter students from participating. One student we interviewed experienced spotlighting when she tried to join a group on campus. This person reflected on her experience to us about feeling like she couldn't relate to the group, stating, "I don't know how to say it so I don't sound all mean, but they are all white, upper class. They grew up very differently than how I did so we see things differently." This student ended up deciding not to join the program. When spaces lack diversity, Students of Color often feel like they cannot relate to the experiences of others in the room and this can limit their participation in programs.

Of course, sometimes Students of Color do join programs made up of mostly White students because they are passionate about the topics advertised by the group, but then find that members do not practice what they preach. One student recounted his efforts to join a group focused on social justice but felt his voice was unheard and that the group was not addressing the issues he cared for.

Due to the fact that students are experiencing these struggles, some students have been forced to look into means of navigating through institutions that are not created with Students of Color in mind. Students of Color experience pressure to be hyper aware of the way their actions represent their ethnic and racial groups since they are so visible on campus.

IT IS HARD TO APPROACH A ROOM WHEN I AM THE ONLY STUDENT OF COLOR IN THE SPACE. WHEN I WALK INTO A CLASSROOM, EVERYONE NOTICES THAT I AM THE ONLY STUDENT OF COLOR, INCLUDING MY PROFESSOR. I HAVE TO BE AWARE AND ACCOUNTABLE OF HOW I ACT IN THESE SPACES BECAUSE I FEEL LIKE I AM REPRESENTING MY ENTIRE CULTURE.
--YOHANNESE, RESEARCH TEAM MEMBER

Implications and Recommendations

How Can Faculty and Staff Help Students of Color Have a Better College Experience?

There are numerous ways that people on campus could help us have a better experience as Students of Color. The following recommendations for our campus faculty, staff, and fellow students are informed by our data and findings.

Financial resources

Our first recommendation is to provide financial support and resources to students. Because of structural inequity, many Students of Color are faced with financial barriers to participate in programs. A disproportionate amount of Students of Color have to work to pay essential bills while taking classes. Given that some extracurricular programs are time consuming, staff and faculty should come up with creative ways to relieve the financial barrier for students. One possible way for professors to provide financial support is by writing a UROP grant with undergraduate students to collaborate with each other and conduct research. Program Directors can consider applying for work-study positions and using the position to support Students of Color in engaging in diverse programs.

Communication between groups

Besides providing financial resources to Students of Color, we also encourage the creation of opportunities for communication between and across groups that serve Students of Color. Sometimes groups which serve the same purpose of supporting Students of Color tend to be isolated from one another. It would be helpful to create opportunities to collaborate with other groups and encourage open communication and networking. This can help Students of Color feel more connected to the campus and can illuminate more supports for students to access.

A WHITE MALE MIGHT HAVE BEEN GIVEN BLUEBOOKS BEFORE ENTERING SCHOOL, BECAUSE HIS FAMILY KNEW HE WOULD NEED THEM.
--UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT OF COLOR

Implications and Recommendations

Get to know the complexity of your students

During our research, we found out that Students of Color experienced two interrelated problems: invisibility and spotlighting. Some have felt like their experiences have been invisible and not valued because in most cases there are only one or two Students of Color in a classroom. Students of Color experiences are sometimes dismissed because they do not reflect the dominant idea of cultural capital. For instance, their experiences may not appear in class textbooks and oftentimes no one else in the class, including the instructor, can relate to them. Students of Color end up feeling left behind and feel the need to be more like their white classmates in order to be successful. Students of Color also experience spotlighting, in which they described being put into situations where they were expected to speak for their entire race or ethnicity. Some students who identify as Students of Color fear that sharing their opinion about race in class would make them feel like representatives of their race or they would be seen as overly sensitive (Novick, et. al, 2011).

With this in mind, we recommend that instructors should make an effort to know who is in their classes in order to create a comfortable environment for Students of Color. According to our findings, Students of Color want to be seen and acknowledged. This is why we recommend faculty and staff make an effort to get to know their students and find the balance between spotlighting and ignoring them. We want our faculty and staff to value the individuality of Students of Color while acknowledging and understanding the ways in which systems and institutions in our society have positioned groups differently.

Professors who teach big classes may find this recommendation challenging. But even in big classes, there are some simple things you can do. For example, try to be open minded about different experiences that students bring to class. Invite students to office hours and be a good listener. Taking the time to understand your students creates a positive environment for them, so that even if they do experience invisibility or spotlighting, they will feel comfortable enough to express their frustration.

Recognize community wealth

Students of Color bring different types of knowledge and cultural wealth into the classroom (Yosso, 2005). Yosso categorizes these forms of cultural wealth as aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital navigational capital and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005). Together, these forms of capital are important tools for the success of Students of Color in their communities, and if these forms of capital were to be valued in institutions,Students of Color would benefit. If professors understood and adopted Yosso's community wealth model, Students of Color would feel more valued. They would not feel the need to catch up to the knowledge of white students, rather, they would feel invited to express their community knowledge. In this way, Students of Color can share experiences that become a source of knowledge for white students who may be unaware of the inequities in society (Yosso, 2005). Adopting a model of community wealth will benefit not only students of color, but white students as well.

A NOTE FOR THOSE TRYING TO BE ALLIES

IT'S WONDERFUL TO HAVE ALLIES. BUT SOMETIMES PEOPLE WHO WANT TO BE ALLIES BUT LACK CULTURAL RESPONSIVITY AND AWARENESS BECOME INVOLVED IN PROGRAMS AND SPACES THAT WERE CREATED WITH STUDENTS OF COLOR IN MIND. THIS CAN MAKE THE SPACE THAT HAD BEEN SAFE FEEL FRUSTRATING FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR.

Appendix

A note on our group's process

We strove to live up to what we learned through our research and reading in our work together as a research team. We intentionally planned our space and time together to maximize opportunities for diverse experiences to be honored and for our team to feel empowered by their time and work in the group. Another way that our approach reflected the findings of our research was that we brought a critical framework to all of our conversations. As a group, we were continually committed to looking at the root causes of the many problems we saw, rather than focusing on the symptoms only. Additionally, we read and discussed articles about Students of Color experiences in schools and Critical Race Theory from the beginning of our work together, so that we could keep our eyes open to different trends that we saw in our own experiences and data collection. Finally, we encouraged each other to bring personal experiences into our work and research space. For example, we had a research team meeting the day after the grand jury decided not to indict the police officer who killed Mike Brown. We spent that meeting discussing how the tragedy and the aftermath of how it had affected us. This was immensely beneficial for all of us, because we had a space to share, process and be in solidarity for racial justice and an end to violence together. Throughout the process, we have found connections between our work and our everyday lives, and those experiences have been welcomed into the research space, which has made the researchers feel more personally personally invested, strengthening the quality and depth of our inquiry.

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CU Engage would like to catalyze and support PAR projects. If you would like to talk about starting a PAR project, findings from this report, or other issues related to CU Engage, please email Ben Kirshner, Faculty Director, at ben.kirshner@colorado.edu.