

PART ONE: UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH PEERS AND ACADEMIC STAFF

In the first of two articles exploring the experiences of black and minority ethnic students at British universities, **Douglas Guiffrida, Oliver Boxell, Stephon Hamell, Ivonne Ponicsan and Rotimi Akinsete** consider the impact of lack of social integration and academic support, and highlight the importance of the support and advocacy that counsellors can provide for such clients



This is an unprecedented moment to reflect on the black student experience in British universities. Student retention, degree attainment, and labour market disadvantage, especially for minority groups, are now emerging as a priority in university performance measurements and in education research and policy development. This follows the sustained efforts and successes over the past quarter of a century to improve both the quantity and diversity of black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) students in UK higher education.¹ Sian points out, for example, that BAME university participation increased from 13 per cent in 1994–5 to 23 per cent in 2008–9.² Additionally, Crawford and Greaves found that BAME students are actually more likely to attend university than their white counterparts.³

These raw gains in participation, however, do not tell the whole story about the black British experience in UK universities. For example, BAME participation continues to be unevenly distributed throughout the higher education sector in favour of lower prestige universities.^{2,4} In addition, black university students are much more likely to drop out than their white peers. Keohane and Petrie analysed data for 114 British universities and found that the proportion of black students at a university was a statistically significant, positive predictor for drop-out rate.¹ They also cite Teaching Excellence Framework data that suggest that 10.3 per cent of black students drop out, compared with 6.9 per cent of the general student population.¹ In a separate analysis, the Office for Fair Access found that black students were 1.5 times more likely to drop out than either white or Asian students.⁵

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Research also suggests that black students who graduate tend to earn lower grades compared with white students. In her summary of the Higher Education Academy's Ethnicity Summit, Stevenson discusses data that show white students obtained

RESEARCH... INDICATES THAT MANY BLACK STUDENTS DO NOT FEEL THEY RECEIVE ADEQUATE MENTORING AND SUPPORT AT UK UNIVERSITIES

first or upper second undergraduate degree classifications at a rate of 66.5 per cent, while black students received such grades at a rate of only 38.1 per cent.⁶

One argument regarding the lower academic achievement and persistence rates among black students is that they tend to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and may not have the same level of academic preparation as their white peers.⁷ However, recent research has found that black university students continue to underperform and graduate at lower rates than white students even after controlling for factors such as academic preparation and socio-economic status.⁸⁻¹⁰ These data suggest that there is more contributing to the black/white student achievement and persistence gap than just academic preparation or family socio-economic status.

Research has recently highlighted potential differences in university experiences between black and white students that may contribute to a widening academic achievement and persistence gap. Several studies have found that black students tend to rate their overall satisfaction with university as lower than white students at the same universities.¹¹ Additionally, a study by Parker et al found that while a sense of belonging was the same for white and BAME students at the beginning of their undergraduate studies, it rose significantly for white students and declined for BAME students throughout their time at university.¹² These data suggest that black students may experience additional challenges at university that contribute to their academic underachievement and higher drop-out rates.

University counsellors are uniquely qualified to assist black university students with the sociocultural challenges they may face by providing support and initiating systemic changes. However, little attention has been paid in the UK university counselling literature to understanding the black undergraduate student experience or to identifying ways of supporting black students. In this issue of the journal, and the next, we present two articles to review the research on the experiences of black

British undergraduates in order to enhance university counsellors' abilities to effectively support their black students. In this first article, we focus on understanding students' participation in student organisations and their experiences with academic staff. In a second, forthcoming article, we examine the role of students' relationships with family members on academic achievement and persistence. In both articles, we compare these findings with similar but more extensive research conducted in the United States, where parallel patterns of underachievement and attrition exist among African-American students.

Student unions

One salient ingredient to university student retention is for students to form strong relationships with peers.¹² However, research suggests that black students are much less likely than white students to express satisfaction with peer relationships at university or to feel part of university life.¹³ In addition, research suggests that black students often experience barriers when attempting to form relationships with white peers.¹⁴ As a result, they are likely to socialise primarily with other black students, thus limiting the ability of all students to form relationships with diverse peers.^{6,12} This type of segregation can be particularly troubling to black students who attend universities that promote marketing materials with images of students having diverse social relationships at university.⁶

Research suggests that involvement in student unions provides one important means of connecting students with peers.¹⁵ However, research also indicates that student unions are often not inclusive of black students. For example, a study by the National Union of Students (NUS) found that black students comprise only 20 per cent of NUS membership and only four per cent of the elected officers nationally.¹⁵ According to Mai-Sims, one way in which some universities have sought to increase black student participation in student unions is to initiate special 'black officer posts' in each union that can only be held by black students.¹⁵ Such positions, Mai-Sims argued, show potential not only to increase black student participation in student unions, but also to increase the attention that these associations pay to issues of inclusiveness and fighting racism on campus.

Another way to foster black university student engagement and social integration is through membership in black student organisations such as African and Caribbean student societies. While there is potential for such groups to isolate black students from the larger campus community, research on BAME students has indicated that participation in

these groups can assist in retention by allowing students opportunities to socialise in ways that are comfortable and by connecting them with successful BAME mentors from the university and the wider community.¹⁴⁻¹⁶

While research has not extensively explored the potential benefits and limitations of involvement in black student organisations in the UK, there is research on participation in African-American student organisations in the US that is useful to consider when conceptualising the potential of these groups to support black-British students. Guiffrida, using qualitative data collected from 88 African-American students, identified a number of ways that participation in African-American student organisations facilitated the social integration of African-American students.¹⁷ Consistent with the suggestions from research conducted in the UK, African-American students in Guiffrida's US study stated that their involvement in black student groups helped connect them with African-American professionals who provided them with mentoring.¹⁶ Additionally, the black student organisations allowed students opportunities to advocate for diversity issues at the university and in the wider community, including multicultural education and anti-racism efforts. Involvement in black student organisations also provided students with opportunities to socialise with other black students in ways that

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were comfortable and, in many ways, different from the traditional white student parties. The socialisation opportunities also allowed students a safe place where they could be themselves without concerns about racism or feeling the need to be constantly guarded in their presentation to white peers to avoid perpetuating stereotypes about African-Americans.

While there are numerous benefits of participation in black student organisations, one concern is that these groups can divert students from their studies.¹⁸⁻²⁰ To better understand how African-American student organisations can help or hinder academic achievement, Guiffrida conducted interviews with African-American students of varying levels of academic achievement who were heavily involved in African-American student organisations.²¹ Results suggested differences in how academically high- and low-achieving African-

American students defined success. The high-achieving students tended to prioritise grades above all else when defining their success, whereas the low-achieving students tended to value service to the university, including advocating for diversity and social change, above academic achievement when defining success.

Guiffrida also found differences in the ways in which high- and low-achieving students defined their leadership styles.²¹ High-achieving students described leadership styles that were systemic, meaning they tended to share duties and leadership responsibilities with other members. Low-achieving students, on the other hand, described themselves as having leadership styles that were much more hierarchical, which is when leaders tend to make decisions for the group unilaterally and take on a disproportionately large amount of the group's work. He concluded that student definitions of success and leadership styles were important factors in shaping whether involvement in black student organisations became an asset or a liability to student academic achievement.

While there are numerous differences between UK and US university experiences, results of research in both countries suggest that student unions and other student support services departments provide potential to assist black students in becoming socially integrated into university life. University counsellors and advisors, therefore, can assist black students who are feeling socially isolated by encouraging them to become active participants in these organisations, while also teaching them systemic leadership skills that allow them to actively serve the groups without compromising their studies. Additionally, counsellors and advisors can encourage students who report feeling socially isolated to join or even start groups targeted specifically to the needs and interests of black students, such as faith, race, or culture-related interest groups and societies.

University counsellors might also consider implementing a more active, advocacy-based approach that is consistent with the recent multicultural and social justice counselling movements in the US.²² For example, in addition to empowering students to become involved in student unions and to make changes on campus that allow these groups to be more inclusive and responsive to the needs of black students, university counsellors and support staff can also collaborate with and, in some cases, even initiate efforts to make these changes at their universities. Counsellors may even

consider helping black students form black academic honours groups or black social organisations that are similar to those available to students in the US as a means of providing students with social support.

Academic staff

A second component to student success is having supportive relationships with academic staff, and research suggests these relationships may be particularly germane to the success of black students because of the unique psychosocial and academic challenges they often encounter.^{14,23} Unfortunately, research also indicates that many black students do not feel they receive adequate mentoring and support at UK universities.^{6,24} In fact, results of a report by the National Union of Students concluded:

‘Concerns over academic support appeared more frequently than any other theme when respondents were asked to speculate why there might be a degree attainment gap between black students and their white UK and Irish peers.’¹⁵

Research indicates that one reason black students feel unsupported by university academic staff is because of racial stereotyping. In a comprehensive review of research that explored black student experiences in UK universities, Singh identified numerous ways in which academic staff exhibit racial stereotyping, including increased surveillance of black students, measuring black students against

white norms, and making stereotypical comments about them.¹⁴ Another form of stereotyping that can be particularly damaging to black students is when academic staff demonstrate lowered expectations of their academic abilities, which can decrease their academic self-efficacy and sense of belonging.^{6,9,25,26}

A second reason that black students may feel

unsupported in British universities concerns the lack of black role models to which they are exposed.¹⁴ In the 2012–13 academic year, only 0.49 per cent of UK professors were black, compared with around seven per cent of the total student population.²⁷ Furthermore, in 2015–16 there were no black academic leaders, defined as ‘managers, directors, or senior officials,’ across the entire UK higher education sector for the third consecutive year.²⁸

In addition to providing black students with realistic role models who avoid racism and stereotyping, research suggests that black academic staff may tend toward providing more holistic and culturally sensitive mentoring and instruction to black students than white academic staff. Qualitative research conducted by Guiffrida in the US found that African-American college students described black academic staff as more likely than white staff to provide them with comprehensive academic, social and personal support; to demonstrate high expectations for black student academic achievement; and to integrate culturally diverse perspectives into their lessons.²⁹ The study also concluded that students not only preferred this type of comprehensive and culturally sensitive advising and instruction, but many of them actually expected it when entering university. Guiffrida connected African-American student expectations of comprehensive academic mentoring and support to the concept of ‘othermothering,’ which is an African-American tradition of education and mentoring that dates back to the first slave communities. Evidence from the UK supports the notion that black students often expect this level of support from academic staff and are critical of institutions that do not provide it.^{6,16}

Clearly, prioritising the hiring of black academic staff remains paramount to the success of black and other BAME university students. However, research also suggests the need to support black academic staff more effectively, as they often experience racial stereotyping and microaggressions as well.² For example, black British academic staff are less likely than white staff to receive promotions, job interviews, or job offers; are more likely to be heavily scrutinised by supervisors; and are less likely to be well mentored.^{30,31} Put together, this creates an academic environment in which the role models for black students are themselves the subject of racial stereotyping and bias, which may lead students to anticipate similar treatment and alter their thinking and behaviours accordingly.

In addition to hiring more black academic staff, another equally important mandate for improving black student academic achievement and retention is for universities to provide a more welcoming and inclusive environment to black students that is free of racial stereotyping and biases from white academic staff. Iverson and Jagers make the point that racial stereotyping will only change by overtly acknowledging and challenging it.³² However, educators may frequently find it psychologically hard to accept the presence of racial stereotyping

in their institutions, associating it more with other sectors like the criminal justice system than with education.³³

As leaders in diversity and social justice, university counsellors are well positioned to highlight the existence of covert racist practices at their institutions in order to initiate change. University counsellors can also offer professional development venues for academic staff that help them recognise their own biases toward black students and avoid egregious stereotyping. Additionally, university counsellors can assist academic staff to integrate culturally appropriate pedagogical strategies such as the Constructive Approach of Inclusive Education.³⁴ This particular approach may resonate with counsellors because it is based upon a model of counselling and psychotherapy clinical supervision.^{35,36}

Culturally responsive university counsellors can also assist black students in negotiating the various forms of racism they may experience. Black British students frequently arrive at university having learned to mitigate the effects of racial stereotyping with their own cultural capital. Wallace found that black secondary school students in the UK often learn from their caregivers that knowledge of cultural norms and interpersonal communication styles can be the foundation of a productive relationship with their teachers.³⁷ University counsellors may help students understand the value of their own cultural capital and help them to build resilience against racial stereotyping by implementing an advocacy-based intervention that is consistent with the foundations of Critical Race Theory.^{38,39} Counsellors who form relationships with black clients that are underwritten by black cultural capital allow black identities to be expressed and understood within the therapy session. This process can encourage students to extend these new understandings of their own cultural capital to other experiences in the academic and social systems of the university, thus providing them with a foundation upon which to withstand and challenge racial stereotyping. University counsellors can also actively support black academic staff who experience racism at the university with similar interventions. Combined with advocacy, providing culturally sensitive counselling and support to black academic staff will assist them in navigating and challenging racist practices at their universities. This can help to provide a more inclusive environment for staff and students alike, while also creating a framework in which to leverage and integrate black culture on campus.

University counsellors can also assist black students in recognising that they may experience disappointment with the perceived lack of mentorship from university staff and can help them express and process painful emotions that may be associated with this lack of support. Counsellors can help students form realistic expectations about the level of support and mentorship they may receive from academic staff, as well as helping them find alternative sources of support. This can include connecting students with advisors and tutors, both internal to the institution and external, who are trained in holistic and culturally sensitive approaches to mentoring that are consistent with an othermothering approach.

Summary and conclusions

Research that has examined the experiences of black students at British and US universities clearly demonstrates the sociocultural challenges black students face that can impact their academic achievement and persistence. These include experiences with stereotyping, structural bias, and outright racism from peers and academic staff. Involvement in student unions provides one important venue for black students to become socially integrated into university life. University counsellors can assist in encouraging student unions to be more responsive to the needs of black students by advocating for the foundation of, or an increase in, black officer posts in student unions that allow black students leadership opportunities. Such posts not only allow student unions to be more inclusive of black students, but they may also increase the attention these organisations pay to diversity issues and social justice initiatives. Similarly, university counsellors who are responsive to the social needs of their black students can also encourage students to join or even start black student organisations such as African or Caribbean societies or black honours associations similar to those at US universities. University counsellors can additionally caution black students about the dangers of overinvolvement and teach them skills of systemic leadership that allow them to be actively involved without compromising their academic achievement.

Research indicates that culturally sensitive mentorship and support from academic staff is central to black university student success. University counsellors can improve the experiences of black students by advocating for a more inclusive and culturally sensitive university environment

that is free of racism and stereotyping of black students. This can begin by offering professional development opportunities to academic staff that assist them in recognising their own biases and the potential of these biases to manifest in racist or stereotypical treatment of black students. University counsellors and support staff can encourage academic departments to implement culturally sensitive pedagogical practices that integrate diverse perspectives into their curricula and provide comprehensive support to students that is consistent with the othermothering approach. However, in addition to becoming change agents at their universities, counsellors can assist and support black students who experience racism with peers and academic staff. Implementing counselling interventions informed by the tenets of Critical Race Theory can empower black students to leverage their own cultural capital in negotiating university environments and addressing systemic inequities. ●



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