The Warner School

Margaret Warner Graduate School of Education and Human Development at the University of Rochester

The African American Student Experience at Predominately White Colleges: Implications for Educators and Advisors

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The Problem

Retention

Bachelor's degree or higher completion rate, age 25-29, 1947-2002 (Mortenson, 2003).

- Asian- 69.7%
- White- 54.6 %
- *Black- 33.8%*

Achievement

Bowen and Bok (1998)- College and beyond data base- over 80,000 students from 28 selective universities

Blacks have significantly lower GPAs than Whites

Evolving Perspective

- Historically attributed to poor preparation and Affirmative Action (i.e., Thernstrom & Thernstrom).

- More recent research questions that assumption (Cabrera et al., 1999; McCauley, 1988; Sue, 1983; Eimers & Pike, 1996).

- Bowen and Bok (1998)- Black class ranks lower after controlling for SAT scores, hs GPA, SES, school selectivity, & major. Blacks performed lower than predicted by SAT and hs gpa in every school except one.

Non-academic factors Influencing Persistence

- Involvement in Extra-curricular activities
- Relationships with Family and friends from home.
- Faculty and Academic Advisors

See the following website:
http://www.rochester.edu/warner/faculty/
guiffrida.html

Faculty/Student Relationships

- Impact student satisfaction with college (Astin, 1984), academic achievement (Astin, 1993; Terenzini & Wright, 1987), and retention (Tinto, 1993).

- Research indicates Blacks at PWIs may not glean these benefits (Flemming, 1984).

- More apt to seek help from family, friends, or academic counselors than faculty.

- More contact, less satisfaction with institution (Eimers & Pike, 1996) and with faculty (Mayo, Murguia, & Padilla, 1995).

- Indicates they may be seeking something unique

Problems with White Faculty

- Students do not view White faculty as realistic role models (Burrell, 1980; Sedlacek, 1987; Tinto, 1993; Willie & McCord, 1972).

- They perceive them as culturally ignorant or insensitive; i.e., stereotypical comments, asking students to "give Black perspective" in class, fail to acknowledge culturally diverse views (Feagin, et al., 1996; Flemming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Sedlacek & Brooks, 1973).

Looking for More

- Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) "go beyond the call of duty" (p. 321) & Fries-Britt (1995) White faculties who were "sincere and interested" (p. 12).
- Did not specify but indicates there is more to successful relationships than providing Black role models and avoiding egregious stereotyping.
- Also indicates potential for strong Black student/White faculty relationships.

Purpose of Research

- Much is known about obstacles to White faculty/Black student relationships, less is known about ingredients to successful relationships.
- Purpose- understand, from the students' perspectives, the faculty characteristics that facilitate meaningful relationships with African American students.
- Assist college faculty, administrators, and counselors in supporting and retaining them.
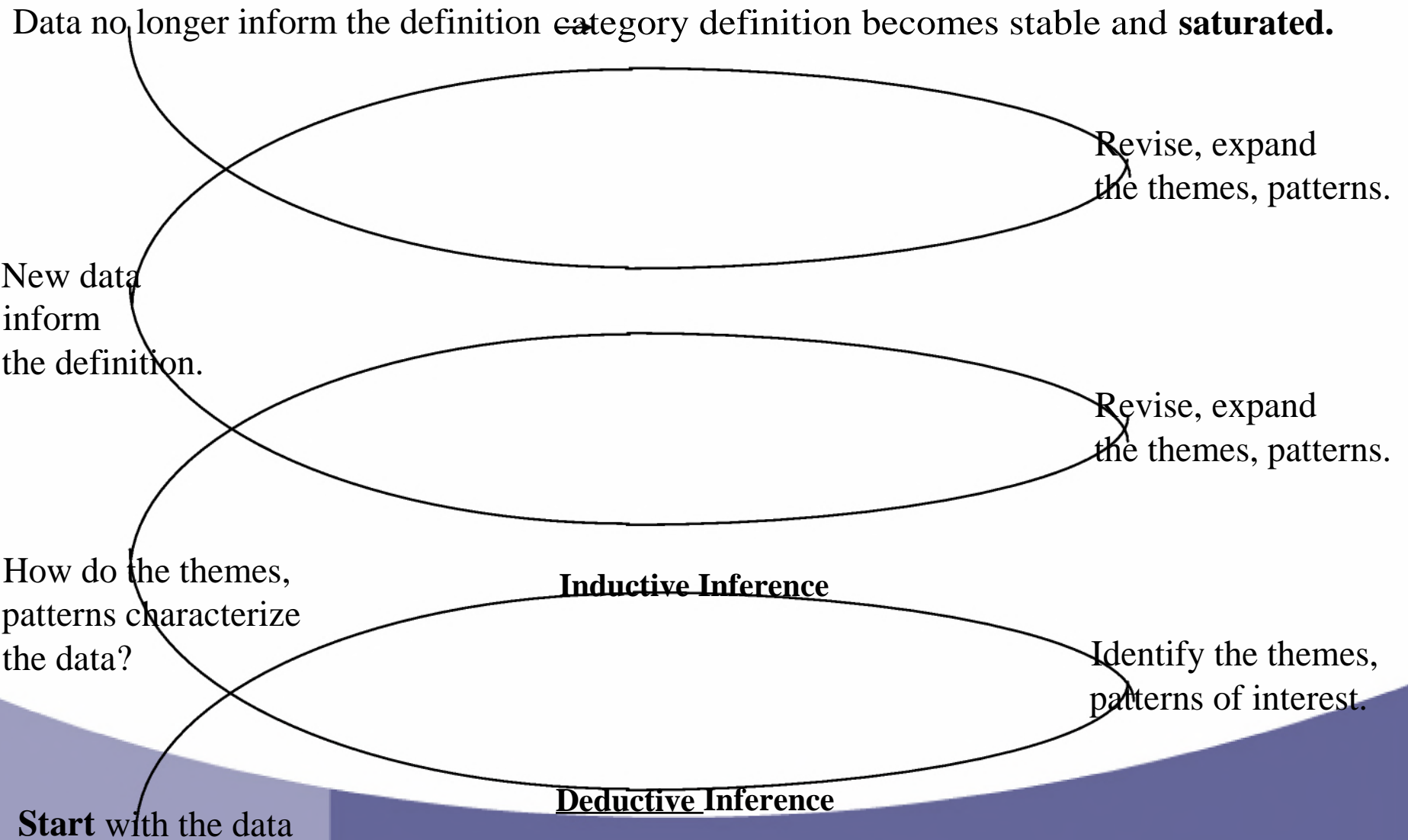- Assist school counselors in preparing students for college.

Methods

- Quantitative failed to capture complexities involved in understanding minority students (Hurtado, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendon, Jalamo, & Nora, 2000).

- Tinto (1993) "departure hinges upon the individual's perception of his/her experiences within an institution" (p 136).

- Phenomenological nature allowed constructs to emerge from students' perspectives

- Not verifying hypotheses or making generalizations- but seeking to uncover patterns that open new paths for future research.

Participants

- High-achieving African American undergraduates enrolled at a midsize (under 11,000) PWI (less than 7.5% AA) that embraced "diversity" as mission.

- 19 students (2 fresh, 5 soph., 6 juniors, 6 seniors).

- GPA: 2.8-3.9 (avg. 3.2)

- Financial need: 11- high, 6- medium, 2- low/no need.

Data Collection and Analysis: A Grounded Theory/Constant Comparative Approach (Glaser & Straus, 1967)

Data no longer inform the definition category definition becomes stable and **saturated.**

Revise, expand
the themes, patterns.

New data
inform
the definition.

Revise, expand
the themes, patterns.

How do the themes,
patterns characterize
the data?

Inductive Inference

Identify the themes,
patterns of interest.

Deductive Inference

Start with the data

Data Collection

- Small (2-4 students) focus groups lasting 1 ½ to 2 ½ hours. Open-ended "describe assets and liabilities".

- Individual follow-ups- 60 minutes. More focused to follow-up on earlier themes.

Results

- Faculty arose often as asset and liability
- Most "student-centered" faculty were African American
  - More likely to incorporate diverse curricula
  - Were perceived as realistic role models
  - Less likely to stereotype.
- Supports existing research
- Expand by understanding characteristics of "student- centered faculty"

Going Above and Beyond

- Comprehensive advising regarding:
  - career guidance- patiently listening, giving advice, professional connections
  - academic issues

  "The [African American faculty] that I had would make you schedule offices hours and make appointments and you would have to come by. And so it wasn't easy when you had nothing to say and you had to sit there for 1/2 hour or 45 minutes and sit there like hi how are you? But I even appreciated those times too."

Personal issues

"I think that a Black professor and a Black student, there is always going to be that bond. Like he would always ask me how are you doing in your other classes? How are things going? We would speak a lot about web sites and how's your family? How was your vacation? Where are your parents from? Stuff like that while other professors may not really take a personal interest in you. I mean there is professional and there is friendly but [White professors] don't get really personal."

Support and Advocacy- extra tutoring, locating jobs and financial aid, talking to their families, etc.

"Like there's this girl who wants to study abroad in Africa next year and her parents, well, her mother isn't really liking it too much. He is taking her best interest by talking to her mother for her. He is going to try and have her mother come up here this week and they can talk about the importance of her going to Africa."

[White faculty] might say come by, but they wouldn't understand. Like my one friend, he wasn't able to find a job so one [White] professor was like, oh that's bad. She was sympathetic but [a certain Black professor] helped him get a job and that's what he needed. He didn't need sympathy; he needed someone to help him find a job. She [the Black professor] called her friends and was like, could you possibly need a student to organize your desk or answer your phones or something? And she found another professor who was like sure, and he was able to get a job, which he needed. It was more like she helped the situation instead of being empathetic.

Negative Case Data

I was taking a course once and I couldn't afford the book, then I got the money and had to spend it and I went to [the professor] and explained and she wasn't upset- she actually went and copied the material to make sure I did good in her class. She was White; I don't think her helping me had anything to do with me being African American. She worked with me hard and helped me pass and actually caught me after the exam to tell me I got an A

Believing in students/Pushing them to succeed

- Some White faculty demonstrated lowered expectations of them by giving inappropriate praise:
  - "you speak well"
  - "you are smart"
  - show the rest of the class how to get their "hips into it"

- Student-centered faculty demonstrated positive beliefs and pushed them to succeed
- Perform at higher levels to be viewed equally: "raising the bar"

Raising the Bar as Asset

"[Black faculty] are going to expect you to do well in their class. I mean they are not going to let you slide through. [Black students] should appreciate it, because, basically, they are pushing you to excel. In other classes, you come and go as you please. The only way [the professor] knows if you are there is if you sit in the same exact seat everyday. But, an African American professor would be like, 'You haven't been to class in 2 days. Why haven't been to class? You're supposed to have this paper.' They'll trash your paper in a heartbeat but you'll realize that their trashing your paper made your paper writing skills better for you in other classes. If you did your work they really didn't bother you but they will totally call on you. You can't sit there and think it's an African American professor and I don't need to do any work [because] they will let me slide. They won't. They will hold you to a higher degree.

Raising the bar as liability

"There are a lot of Black faculty in [her major] and my advisor is Black and he is like, talking to me, he is always like, 'You have to work harder. My role is to get my, get ya'll out of here; get my people out', and that's good, that boosts me but at the same time, I am like, why do I have to work harder? And lot of people look at that as a compliment: Like I expect a lot from you. No, that's not a compliment! Judge me on me! If I do wrong, then I'm wrong but what I do does not have any effect on what the rest of the Blacks in this room do just because they are Black. No! What I do is based on me and that's not, I don't know, that's, that whole notion of representing everyone or being the voice for everyone, that doesn't sit well with me."

"They expect so much of you all the time when you are working in class and I was like, I am no different than Sally over there, you know, leave me alone. We had one Black professor, he is my advisor, and he was the worst. Like the one Black person, who we thought would be nice to us, and he was just a bastard! He was like, you know, I am expecting a whole lot from you guys [the Black students] and you better not let me down. Like, he would make us work three times harder in classes so, he would make me do all kinds of crazy stuff and the White kids would be like, 'oh wow, that's horrible. That's messed up.' And then they would go and do their just real simple things and I would be in the corner just crying because I can't do it and it is so unfair! And all of us [Black students] except one felt that way about him. He was just so mean to all of us."

Discussion

- Not surprising that many students did not feel they received adequate advising (Astin, 1993).

- White students may have expressed similar concerns; however, Black students perceived this expanded, even intrusive relationship as crucial in defining faculty who were student centered.

- Many models of multicultural teaching but few have advocated for such a holistic approach.

Othermothering (Foster, 1993)

- "Women who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities" (Collins, 2000)
- Practice began with education of slave children but continued into segregated schools.
- Attend not only to academic development, but social, psychosocial, and moral development.
- Establish kin-like relationships with students' families,
- Believe in and push all African American students to succeed
- Studies by Foster (1993), Case (1997), Lomotey (1990).

Data suggest:

- Some AA students expect faculty to go above and beyond their roles by providing extensive academic, career, and personal advising; advocating and supporting them; and pushing them to excel.

- Perceived White faculty as sympathetic, but not as willing to fulfill their definition of student-centeredness. Expect it from AA faculty.

Raising the Bar

- Black faculty were perceived as more likely to believe in Black students and push them to succeed, which is essential to success (Steele, 1997; Tierney, 2000).

- While many students valued this approach, some became frustrated that higher standards were imposed on them.

- 4 females, interacting with male faculty.

Recommendations

- Hire more AA faculty
- Continue to train White faculty to incorporate diversity, be less stereotypical.
- Teach more holistic approach- evaluating faculty on advising and rewarding outstanding advising
- Expand academic advising and counseling services
- Encourage AA male profs. to exercise caution in implementing a "raise the bar" approach to motivate students, especially female students.
- More research: expand sample (larger, multi-institutional), faculty perspectives, interviewers