BECOMING THE REFLECTION

Exploring the Experiences and Sense of Belonging of Black Women Graduate Students at Indiana University - Bloomington

RESEARCH QUESTION

What contributes to the sense of belonging, academic pursuits, and social support of Black women graduate students during their time in academia?

PURPOSE

To explore the experiences and sense of belonging of Black Women Graduate Students at Indiana University - Bloomington. This study aimed to highlight the stories of Black women graduate students to bring attention to their experiences while providing implications for faculty and staff in the Bloomington area and campus community.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Black Feminist Thought: Black women's experiences and identities are inextricably linked and their socialization must be understood through the system(s) in which they are situated (Porter et al., 2020)

Environmental Theory: Discusses students' success, and highlights the importance of adopting a holistic, learning-oriented framework for optimizing the impact of the college environment, and bridging the divide between student and academic affairs (Kinzie & Arcelus, 2016)

Transition Theory: The events, transitions, relationships and assumptions that are impacted with Black women in regards to mattering at institutions (Patton et al., 2016)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Black women in graduate programs have been found to experience a higher degree of isolation and dissatisfaction than their White and male counterparts suggesting that many Black women struggle silently in doctoral programs (Shavers & Moore, 2017)

The participants reveal feelings of exclusion from spaces in academia, stress from financial expectations, and sacrifice of their well being to continue in the program. On a positive note, they placed strong emphasis on mentorship which they found through valuable experiences with faculty women of color (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017)

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Methods

- Semi-Stuctured Qualitative Interviews
- Screening Questionnaires
- 45-60 min Zoom/in-person interviews
- 15 participants
- Thematic Coding Analysis

Results

From our interviews we were able to categorize our transcriptions into common themes. However the themes that were prominent from our study are:

- Isolation -the intense feeling of an individual being detached from their environment.
- Representation - portraying the role model of inspiration of a group, in this case upcoming Black women.
- Contentment - the mental or emotional state of peace, happiness, and fulfillment
- Despondency - a state of low spirits caused by the loss of hope or courage..
- Authenticity of Self - the mental state of being able to be one's true self regardless of environment

Recommendations

- IU hiring more faculty of color to serve as a support system or inspiration for Black women graduate students
- Having non faculty of color educating themselves and the non students of color when discussing Blackness and Black women
- Financial support via stipends for the assistantships, assistant instructor roles, etc. that Black women graduate students hold
- Increase in funding for current Black spaces, like the Neal Marshall Black Culture Center
- Creation of Black women spaces for mentorship and camaraderie
- Acknowledgement of IU's systematic racism that still impacts Black students today
- Implementations of Black owned businesses in the IU and greater Bloomington community (hair salons, soul food restaurants)

Selected References

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