Campus Climate, Gender, and Achievement of

African-American College Students

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The academic and social experiences of African-American students in higher education have received increased research attention since the initiation of postdesegregation legislation and policies. A dominant subset of this work examines student life at predominantly white institutions and focuses specifically on perceptions of the racial climate on campus (Colon, 1991, Sedlacek, 1987, Smedly, Myers & Harrell, 1993, Smith, 1981). The influence of campus environments on the educational experience and outcomes of African-American students is a consistent thread in research on students in higher education (Allen, 1985, Fleming, 1984; Nettles, 1988). Of particular importance has been the observed link between perception of campus racial climate and students' academic achievement. Hurtado (1992) argues that campus racial conflicts are connected to elements in institutions' racial climate that sustain the relationship between African-American students and their white peers, faculty, and administration. Whether considered to be a positive or a negative influence, conceptions of campus climate that include race relations are critical for understanding educational experiences and subsequent outcomes of African-American students (Hughes, 1987, Oliver, Smith & Wilson, 1989, Sedlacek, 1987).

Many institutions are concerned about the possible negative effects of increased racial intolerance and perceived hostile environments on students at predominantly white campuses (Ferrell and Jones, 1988, Green, 1989, Hurtado, 1992). Research on campus climate however rarely includes a race relations dimension. When campus climate is conceived as including perception of race relations along with indicators of traditional institutional support, its importance for students' experiences becomes even more consequential, especially for African Americans. The purpose of this review is to gain a better understanding of the relationship between academic performance and campus climate as perceived by African-American students when background and other college-level factors are considered. This article presents a brief review of data on campus climate and gender differences Black students attending predominantly white colleges and universities.

Black Students and College Experience

African Americans have gained increased educational opportunities since desegregation policies changed the demographics of most higher education institutions. Only three decades after these corrective reforms began, however the nation is witnessing a distressing ebb in the tide of educational opportunity and access for African

Americans in the form of a decrese in the quality of their educational experience. This decrease is occurring paradoxically, at a time when the move to desegregation has seen progressively sharp increases in the number of African-American students at predominantly white institutions (American Council on Education, 1994, Anderson, 1984). The movement of African Americans into predominantly white institutions of higher learning has spawned optimism as well as some concern that negative race relations will affect the quality of students' experiences and educational outcomes (Allen, 1992, Altbach & Lomotey, 1991, Nettles, 1987).

Several studies suggest that there are two salient nonacademic factors that influence black students' academic experience and performance at predominantly white institutions: general institutional support and perceptions of racial climate and race relations (Allen, 1988, Hughes, 1987, Oliver, Smith, & Wilson, 1989, Sedlacek, 1987). The student-faculty relationship has long been noted as a significant predictor of academic achievement along with other outcome variables such as educational aspirations, attitudes toward college, personal development, and persistence (Pascarella, 1980, Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978, Tinto, 1987, Tracey & Sedlacek 1985). Similarly, Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) review of the literature on student-faculty contact and college outcomes suggests that the quality of the contact between students and faculty should be examined in greater detail in determining the academic outcomes of students. A student, for instance, may have very little contact with the faculty, but what contact there is may be so positive (or conversely, so negative) as to have a significant effect on the student's academic performance. Previous findings clearly suggest that African-American students' perception of campus climate is linked to student-faculty relationships and thus has an influence on achievement related outcomes, such as college grades (Allen & Haniff, 1991, Smith & Allen, 1984).

Although previous research indicates that some African-American students are doing well academically on predominantly white campuses, too many exhibit a marked decrease in performance from their high school grades over and beyond what is generally expected for adjustment to college-level work (Allen, 1988). Most African-American students report that their relationships with faculty members and peers are negative, and they avoid interaction with them inside and outside the classroom. Also, African-American students have very limited participation in cross-racial social activities and events, and surprisingly many report rarely even attending black sponsored events (Allen, 1988, Fleming, 1984).

Other findings suggest that students who do better academically report that they are on better terms with faculty members and find the institution to be generally supportive of their educational needs. Consequently, they appear to make a greater effort to interact with their professors and peers of other racial and ethnic groups (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985). Allen (1985) posits that there is a mutual attraction cycle between African-American students and university faculty and administration. In essence, students who perceive a supportive campus climate are less likely to avoid informal contact with faculty and administrators than students who do not perceive a positive climate. Consequently, faculty and administrators respond more actively to African-American students who foster informal contact with them, and this relationship affects academic performance both directly or indirectly.

Black students at predominantly white colleges report that racial discrimination occurs with much greater frequency there than at other types of institutions (Allen, 1987, 1988). Similarly, it has been suggested that these students are only minimally integrated into campus academic and social life. Perception of campus racial climate is often at the core of black students' estrangement, and it influences their academic experiences and limits their achievement (Allen, 1992). According to Fleming (1984), exposure to prejudice and discrimination on campus has a significant effect on black students' cognitive and affective development at predominantly white institutions. These negative effects have been shown to be particularly pernicious for black males' social and academic development (Davis, 1994). Others have shown that experience with racism and discrimination on college campuses along with other noncognitive factors such as self-concept are more important indicators of academic performance traditional cognitive factors such as previous academic background and performance (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984, 1985). Additionally, research by Suen (1983) and Loo and Rolison (1986) has focused on the lack of congruency between black students' cultural background and the social milieu of predominantly white institutions that tends to marginalize their experiences and alienate them socially. This idea of racial congruency origined in student-institutional fit models (Bean, 1982, Tinto, 1987).

The experience and outcomes of black students at predominantly white college and universities are often undergirded by gender differences. However, very little within-race analysis of gender has been done to disentangle the differential experience of African-American students in predominantly White college settings. In one study, Fleming (1984) found that Black males reap more benefits, both socially and academically by attending historically Black colleges; conversely, attendance at majority White colleges appeared to retard the development of Black

males. In one other study, academic interaction while attending a predominantly White College was found to have a negative effect on the academic self-concept of African-American males (Pascarellla, Smart, Etherington, & Nettles, 1987).

Other factors differentially affecting the academic and social experiences of Black males and females are important in developing and maintaining institutional support that meets the need of all students. For instance, previous work has shown that black females have lower educational aspirations (Gurin & Epps, 1975), while males are more likely to be withdrawn, unhappy and feel they are being treated unfairly treated by faculty and peers (Davis, 1994, Fleming, 1984). While exposure to a climate of prejudice and discrimination on campus has significant effects on black students' cognitive and affective development, there are important variations based on gender (Pascarella, Smart, Ethington & Nettles, 1987). Unfortunately, most research on African Americans in higher education fails to recognize the salient importance of gender and how it differentially circumscribes college students' experiences (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991).

 Conclusion

This brief review has revealed two shortcomings in the literature: (1) limitation of campus climate measures and (2) scarcity of gender analysis. Interpreting the findings from the aforementioned studies is difficult because campus climate is often vaguely and differentially defined. In some of these studies, for instance, campus climate may have been defined as one's response to a sole item on a questionnaire.

To strengthen the validity of the campus climate variable and to address the conceptual shortcomings of previous research, future studies should operationalize campus climate to include a race relations dimension. Specifically, research would benefit from using perceived campus climate as an attitudinal variable that reflects an individual's (a) perception of general institutional support received from members of the university community and (b) perceptions of race relations and discrimination on campus. If campus climate plays a significant role in the college achievement of Black students and can be demonstrated by a more inclusive measure of the construct, then the urgency of studies further examining this relationship is apparent.

In summary, the idea that campus environments influence the educational experiences of college students is a consistent thread throughout research on African Americans in higher education. Unfortunately, little work has

focused on variations in the gender experiences for these students. Without focusing on how gender often

circumscribes academic and social outcomes, institutional strategies

aimed at integrating all students into the mainstream of campus life

are less informed.

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