

**The Retention of Students of Color at Predominantly White Institutions**

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Take a minute to visualize yourself as a student of color preparing (SOC) for college. As you get this image in your mind, take yourself back to your senior year of high school. You are visiting different colleges, taking all standardized test requirements, getting ready for senior activities, and you have finally finalized your top five choices. May 1st, National College Decision Day is quickly approaching, and you are patiently awaiting your final acceptance letters. Days are passing, your acceptance letters are rolling in, and you are now ready to make your choice. You would have never thought that this would be one of the most difficult decisions of your life. You have to choose between one of the most well-known Historically Black College or Universities (HBCUs) and a prominent Predominantly White Institution (PWI). Time is winding down and you must make a choice. May 1st comes, and you have decided, you will be spending the next four years of your life at the PWI, or so you think. Fast forward to mid-semester of the fall and you are now questioning whether or not you made the right choice. Transferring is the only thing on your mind, yet you are trying to find a reason to stay. In this study, I will be discussing the retention of students of color at predominantly white institutions.

Retention is defined as a program outcome in which a student continues their enrollment at the same institution (Giordano, 1996). With an increase in population growth within the United States, the number of people of color is increasing at a rapid rate (Banks & Dohy, 2019). This growth has also led to an increase in the number of students of color seeking higher education at four-year institutions. Higher education professionals have begun noticing a trend in the increasing numbers of SOC attending PWIs. Although HBCUs and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) exist to serve specific populations, students of color are mostly attending

PWIs (Doan, 2015). In order to retain students of color at PWIs, universities must ensure that their campuses are inclusive environments. Different things such as, diverse student organizations, faculty of color, and multicultural centers are a few factors of things that could influence retention rates in a positive manner. There are two approaches that will be taken to investigate the retention rates of students of color at PWIs. I will be taking a quantitative approach which would allow for statistical analysis or you could take a qualitative approach which would allow for more effective examination and in-depth understanding of organizational relationships, complex processes, and experiences (Giorgano, 1996). In this study, I will be using a mixed-methods approach to address the following research questions:

1. Why do students of color (SOC) attend predominantly white institutions (PWIs)?
2. Does the presence of faculty of color affect the retention of SOC at PWIs?
3. How do SOC experience a sense of belonging at PWIs?
4. How much does mentorship increase the retention of students of color?

### Literature Review

One of the most important decisions in a students' life is determining where you want to spend the next four years of their life after high school. However, for students of color (SOC), that decision is a little more difficult. The choice between wanting to be involved in your culture or venture on to new experiences becomes very challenging. The choice of whether they want to be surrounded by individuals with similar characteristics to them or none could be a huge determining factor for high school seniors when they are choosing what four-year institution they want to attend. For students of color, their decisions weigh heavily on being comfortable or exploring new experiences. With all these thoughts in the back of their minds, they must

remember that this choice will determine the next four years of their lives. Throughout this study, I will review the literature regarding challenges students of color face at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and how those challenges impact the retention rates of these students.

What leads students of color to explore PWIs for their postsecondary education?

Financially, it tends to be the best option. On average, 60% of SOC receives funding through the Pell Grant (Banks & Dohy, 2019). PWIs tend to offer underrepresented students or students of color more funding to attend their universities. Funding is often the main determining factor when students are choosing where they want to go (Ramos, 2019). They often go where the money is. The inclusion of different scholarships or award offers tends to benefit in institutions' favor when it comes to retention as well.

Retention rates are often defined as the percentage of first-year students who continue their enrollment at their institution (Giordano, 1996). Not only do retention rates matter to colleges and universities, but prospective students also pay close attention to them. Not only are retention rates important, ways that universities are retaining students matter just as much. Most students graduate within four years of beginning their degree, that is considered the "normal" thing to do. However, on average, the six-year completion rate for SOC is 20% less than their white peers (Mungo, 2017). SOC face several challenges that often impact their enrollment at universities. Different challenges include poor academic preparation, lower educational aspirations, lack of support, limited parental involvement, insufficient funds, and limited knowledge about a post-secondary education (Ramos, 2019). In addition to personal challenges that students may face, some factors impact SOC success in college. According to Zamani (2002), those factors include but are not limited to, personal, demographic, cultural, and institutional characteristics, and institutional climate. Personal characteristics can be anything

along the lines of motivation, intellectual ability, and previous achievements; while demographic characteristics deal with age, gender, and race. Zamani also mentioned that institutional characteristics and climate can be anything within the realms of campus location, student-faculty interaction, and student activities. With a college degree almost being required to advance in life, colleges and universities have begun exploring new methods to enhance the retention rates of SOC (Mungo, 2017).

In 2013, a study conducted by Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, and Yonai, examined how stress and campus climate amongst SOC and white students impacted retention rates. Bean and Eaton's Psychological Model of College Student Retention was used to highlight the role that the campus environment played on students. Bean and Eaton had two assumptions about students; the first one assumes that students come to college with attitudes and beliefs about whether they will be successful in college, in turn, these beliefs and attitudes influence the academic, social, and bureaucratic interactions that SOC have at their institutions (Johnson et al., 2013). The study was conducted at a PWI and the ultimate goal was to understand what factors contribute to the student experience and enhanced retention. The results of this study discovered that the student experience and campus climate play a huge role in the retention of SOC.

To provide background information on why sense of belonging and campus climate has become a factor in discussing the retention of SOC, Jimmy Doan (2015) examined how campus climate and culture and student involvement in organizations played a part in the experience that SOC had at PWIs. Although historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and tribal colleges were created to serve selected groups of students, SOC still chose to attend PWIs over others (Doan, 2015). In 1960, black students gathered together to create the Black Student Movement of the 1960s. Black students around the world felt that it was time for their culture to

be recognized and be included not within programming within the university, but academically and administratively as well (Doan, 2015). This movement sparked the introduction of Multicultural Student Centers on many PWI campuses. With SOC now having a space to call their own, they began creating their own organizations, or Ethnic Student Organizations. The creation of Ethnic Student Organizations allowed a safe space for students to establish connections with other ethnic student communities (Doan, 2015).

However, the creation of the centers and organizations just was not enough to increase retention rates of SOC. To improve these rates, institutions needed to begin creating welcoming environments on their campuses (Ramos, 2019). The question of “what will keep students of color at our institution,” began to circle around. Would having faculty of color (FOC) do it? Would mentorship do it? Would service-learning or extracurricular activities do it?

To begin, having faculty of color at PWIs is key when seeking SOC. Students feed off of being in an environment with individuals they share similarities with. must begin adapting inclusive frameworks into their institutions. This can be done by identifying key FOC, white allies and administration, institutions with missions that are similar to their own, faculty and administration at those institutions, and plan different workshops to provide skills to improve their inclusiveness (Benitez et al., 2017). If students see faculty that looks like them at their institution, this will make them want to stay and feel more welcomed. FOC and SOC have so much in common, they both thrive off of lived experiences. FOC are more likely to include conversations about race and ethnicity in the classroom, introduce active and collaborative learning, and attend to peer interactions during class (Benitez et al., 2017). Due to FOC of color also having the feeling of not being welcomed or belonging, they relate well to SOC. According to Guiffride (2005), faculty and student relationships thrive off of the students’ satisfaction with

the university. These relationships also impact academic achievement and retention. Having faculty who are student-centered, meaning they put the students first, is imperative when wanting to increase SOC retention. FOC tend to go above and beyond for SOC and are more likely to demonstrate positive beliefs in these students (Guiffride, 2005). Students often go to FOC when they need support which tends to expand into a form of mentorship amongst the students and faculty.

Mentorship is a developmental relationship amongst two or more individuals that inspires learning, socialization, leadership, and career development within students who are developing their knowledge base (Ramos, B.N., 2019). In the academic area, SOC seek out professions who are willing to give advice in all aspects of life. Mentors provide students with support, guidance, and lots of opportunities. According to Ramos (2019), mentorship fosters genuine connections amongst those involved. Most mentors utilize storytelling when providing advice to students (Ramos, 2019). Their lived experiences provide students with the feeling that they can get through things they never thought possible. FOC serve as incredible mentors for SOC because they can advocate on their behalf for different programs or opportunities that may encourage students to remain at these institutions.

When it comes to programming within postsecondary education, universities seem to be well-versed in this area. Almost all institutions have some sort of campus activities departments that allow students to be engaged on campus (Doan, 2015). A study conducted at a university in Michigan provided a small sample of how involvement within service-learning programming and experience could increase retention rates at institutions. The study included 2,728 first-year students. Although classroom involvement is important in higher education, the study proved that service-learning opportunities enhanced retention. Of the 2,728 students who were observed

participating in service-learning programs, 27% of these students graduated from the university, 35% remained enrolled, and 39% withdrew from the university (Mungo, 2017). Involvement in programming and other activities allows students to gain a sense of belonging that universities hope they achieve.

In all, students are only going to stay where they feel welcomed. Universities must start or continue fostering new ways to improve inclusiveness within their institution. Low retention rates among university students of color often reflect poor student to college fit. The importance of multicultural offices, curriculum, faculty of color, and a wide range of programming could increase retention rates. Students of color are more likely to shine in institutional environments that are welcoming, diverse, programmatically inclusive, and supports them as a student (Zamani, 2002). If universities want their retention rates to improve or increase, they must fix things from the inside out. They must start with themselves and recognize things that they may have been doing wrong and fix those problems. Although this looks several ways, institutions could start by analyzing and evaluating current programs and how SOC react to them. Program assessment data will allow university systems to confront their issues head-on and improve them for the well-being of the entire university (Giordano, F.G., 1996). This will not happen overnight, but one must remain hopeful that steps will be taken soon to improve the experiences for students of color.

Although the literature provides thorough and necessary information, my study will provide a bit more context as it pertains directly to my research questions. The study that I will conduct will focus more directly on the why and how of this topic. The results of the study will be more intentional as it relates to why SOC make the decisions they make when choosing to attend a PWI for their higher education.



### Methods

The retention of students of color is becoming more and more popular within student affairs. Universities are exploring their numbers, programming, and even recruiting tactics to increase the retention rates of SOC (Dwiwardani et al., 2020). The purpose of this study is to explore the retention of students of color at predominantly white universities (PWIs) and discover the sense of belonging and community these students experience at PWIs. This section will address the following research questions:

1. Why do students of color (SOC) attend predominantly white institutions (PWIs)?
2. Does the presence of faculty of color affect the retention of SOC at PWIs?
3. How do SOC experience a sense of belonging at PWIs?
4. How much does mentorship increase the retention of students of color?

### Sample

This study will consist of undergraduate students of color who attend PWIs and faculty of color who are employed at PWIs. The student group will consist of a minimum of 150 participants from any academic programs at the institution. All SOC will be emailed. Their information will be gathered through the online database that hosts all student information. The faculty group will consist of a minimum of ten participants from any department at the institution. The study will be conducted at a mid-sized institution that has more than 12,000 students. This will allow for a broad sample and inclusive group of students. At a minimum, this study will require 160 participants (150 students and 10 faculty or staff members).

### Instruments

This study will be conducted utilizing a survey and questionnaire. The responses from the survey will provide us with the quantitative data that is needed whereas the questionnaire will

provide us with our qualitative data. The survey will be made up of fifteen questions relating directly to campus climate, identity, and demographic information. The questionnaire will consist of five open-ended, essay-based questions directly related to their experience at their PWIs.

### **Procedure**

The steps on how to conduct this study will be outlined in a list format. This list will lay out each step that needs to be done to complete this study. The steps are:

1. Create a survey that includes questions regarding campus climate (whether the environment is welcoming or not), identity (sexuality, race/ethnicity/, etc.), and demographic information (age, classification, hometown, major, etc.).
2. Create a questionnaire that includes open-ended questions regarding their experiences (sense of belonging, inclusive programs, etc.) at their university.
3. Retrieve student contact information from the university database to gather email addresses for SOC.
4. Type the email that will be sent to SOC requesting their participation in the study.
5. Send the email out to all SOC.
6. Allow the students one week to respond, be sure to send a reminder email midway through the week to remind them to participate. For example, if the initial email was sent on a Sunday, follow up on Wednesday to remind students to get their response in.
7. Once all participants have responded and agreed to participate, the survey will be sent out and participants will have five days to complete this section of the study.
8. Once the responses are received from the survey, the participants will be given two days before the questionnaire is sent out.

9. After the two days, send the questionnaire out and allow the participants five days to respond.
10. Compile two separate spreadsheets, one for the survey which will compare the answers of the participants and one for the questionnaire which will allow me to interpret the themes within their answers.
11. Data from the survey and questionnaire will be used to answer the research questions.
12. I will take an inductive approach which allows the research to determine the themes for themselves.
13. Send out a final email to the participants thanking them for participating in the study.

The data will be compared by utilizing the spreadsheets with the results from the instruments used. The survey data will provide us with quantitative data due to the questions being more demographically based. The questionnaire data will provide us with qualitative data due to the questions being more open and narrative based.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study include honesty, comfortability, and trustworthiness. Honesty is a limitation due to some students fabricating information when answering the questions. Comfortability is a limitation because I am sure that some students will be a bit hesitant to answer some of the questions, especially if they do not know who I am. Trustworthiness is a limitation because it is going to take a lot for students to trust someone who may be a stranger to them with some personal information. I intend to establish a level of trust with the students in the sample during the initial email. I am hoping that when I share my story on why I chose a PWI for my undergraduate and graduate school experience, it will allow them to see that the space that I am offering them is open and welcoming. It is also a limitation

because I have to trust that the students are providing me with true and accurate information. If the students do not trust me or are not honest in their answers, the reliability of the study will be risked.

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