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A Student-Led Study of African American Academic and Career Experiences at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater: Educational Bridges, Spaces, and Safety in 2020

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SUMMARY

This report represents the findings from a student researcher-led project focused on the high school, college, and career preparation experiences of African American and Black college students at the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater (UWW), a predominantly White institution (PWI) in rural southeastern Wisconsin. With the goal of dismantling systemic barriers to equitable African American student college-to-career transitions, especially at PWIs, a team of three researchers designed and carried out a qualitative study to (1) collect African American student college and career narratives and (2) better understand African American students' experiences at UWW. Key findings from the study include the elucidation of student perspectives on the strong connections between high school experiences, mostly in and around Milwaukee, and students' college and career trajectories; the challenges involved in navigating campus spaces at a rural PWI; and the psychological, social, and educational effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is novel to 2020, and police racial profiling, which is not. The study also identifies key strategies for creating additional space for African American self-authorship, including through student organization advocacy and involvement, faculty or staff mentorships, and cross-campus and cross-community conversations.

Introduction

This report focuses on the results of a qualitative research study focused on the high school, college, and career preparation experiences of African American and Black college students at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater (UWW), a predominantly White institution in rural southeastern Wisconsin known primarily for its business and teacher education programming. UWW is a comprehensive public university enrolling 10,196 undergraduate students. Of these, 82.1% identify as White, 7.8% identify as Hispanic or Latinx, 5.4% identify as African American and Black, 3.2% identify as Asian or Southeast Asian, and 0.9% identify as American Indian or Alaskan Native. UWW is located within a town of just under 15,000 people that is about an hour's drive from both Madison, the state's capital city, and Milwaukee, the state's largest city.

Using semi-structured interviews of student volunteers, the study's goals were to (1) identify the sociocultural and institutional factors that impact the career trajectories of African American and Black students at UWW, and (2) document effectively the educational and career perspectives and voices of these students as they navigate the sociocultural and institutional terrain, as well as the upheaval associated with COVID-19, campus closures, social distancing from friends, classmates, and faculty/staff mentors, and continued police violence and civil unrest in 2020.

Background

Data suggest that 70% of employment opportunities will demand some kind of college credential by 2027 (Carnevale, 2019), making the attainment of a two- or four-year degree essential for the next generation of workers. More African American and Black students are entering higher educational institutions than ever before, yet only 42% of African American students enrolled in colleges or universities graduate within 6 years, as compared with 66% of White students (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The experiences of African American students in predominantly White institutions (PWIs), where the overwhelming majority of these students enroll, have been the subject of a wide body of scholarship that seeks to better understand these disparities.

Only 42% of African American students enrolled in colleges or universities graduate within 6 years, as compared with 66% of White students.

Research shows that African American students and White students have profoundly different experiences in PWIs. Various precollege factors have been shown to mediate these experiences, including the communities in which students grew up (Woldoff et al., 2011), students' connections to family (Guiffrida, 2005), participation in bridge programming (Strayhorn, 2011), and the racial makeup of high schools they attended (Hall et al., 2011). However, many African American students have not had the experience of being racial minorities in predominantly White environments before attending PWIs (e.g., Alvarez et al., 2009). The stress of these new encounters, coupled with exposure to explicit and implicit forms of stereotyping and hostility, lead to feelings of culture shock, exhaustion, and loneliness (e.g., Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Mills et al., 2020). In the face of these stressors, the specter of persistent race-based restrictions on labor market opportunity and access can often seem insurmountable to college-credentialed African Americans (e.g., Byars-Winston, 2010).

Research provides avenues for unpacking, and beginning to dismantle, systemic barriers to equitable African American student college-to-career transitions. On PWI campuses, previous work has pointed to the importance of physical and social spaces where African American students can comfortably express themselves without unfair judgement or scrutiny (e.g., Harwood et al., 2018). African American student clubs or groups are an important source of social support and validation, and encourage feelings of social and academic membership among African American students on PWI campuses (e.g., Museus, 2008; Sedlacek, 1999). Faculty and staff mentors on campus have also been singled out as a significant channel for information and support that can not only help African American students succeed on their own terms (Griffith et al., 2017), but also provide students with employment knowledge and advice that can improve career trajectories after college (Parks-Yancy, 2012). Seeing racially or ethnically similar peers or mentors accomplish certain goals can increase the feeling that one can accomplish similar goals, an important source of “vicarious self-efficacy” (Hackett & Byars, 1996).

With this background in mind, scholars and practitioners foregrounding the cultural and social aspects of career identity formation and decision-making further point to several critical strategies for fostering career development among African American college students (e.g., Byars-Winston, 2010; Parks-Yancy, 2012), including the continued recognition of racial discrimination as well as African American resilience, a commitment to strong family and campus social connections, and the importance of African American self-authorship (Storlie et al., 2018). While research has shown that the latter can be advanced through college and career narratives that allow students to describe their career development experiences, there is little research that focuses on the meaning African American students at PWIs make in this regard. Instead, studies typically focus on either college persistence or career development, though these issues are inseparable and can be viewed along a common trajectory. Here, we seek to analyze this as a single process as we also engage African American students at a rural PWI in the actual research process, a study design meant to bridge multiple gaps in previous work.

Educators must recognize racial discrimination, resilience, as well as the importance of African American self-authorship all at once.

Methods

We undertake a qualitative interview study to better understand African American and Black student perspectives on college and career development at a PWI. This approach often uses participants' in-depth descriptions of their own lived experiences to explore a phenomenon of interest (e.g., Marriam & Tisdell, 2016). Our study is based on student interviews, which the research team believed could most appropriately document student collegiate and career development narratives.

The study focuses on students who are enrolled in, or recently graduated from, the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater (UWW), a rural PWI. Professor Toms, who identifies as an African American woman and who is the current assistant vice chancellor for student diversity, engagement, and success at the institution, emailed information on the broad outlines of this study to current UWW undergraduate students identifying as African American or Black. The email further asked for possible student researchers who would be interested in co-

leading the project. Two undergraduate students who identify as African American men, Mr. Devin Lewis and Mr. Isaiah Fitzgerald, volunteered and were hired. In March 2020, they began qualitative research training with Dr. Benbow, who identifies as a White man.

As this research training progressed and as the research team engaged in discussions about the goals of the project, Mr. Lewis, Mr. Fitzgerald, and Dr. Benbow designed a semi-structured interview protocol to elicit academic and career narratives from student interviewees. Questions focused on salient aspects of African American and Black student experience from the literature including high school and bridge programming experiences; decisions to attend college; the UWW social and cultural environment and African American culture; and career goals. The protocol also included questions on student perspectives on the recent upheaval to education and social life associated with COVID-19 and the racial justice movement following the Minneapolis police murder of George Floyd.

After testing this protocol, the team sent one recruitment email to all African American and Black students at UWW asking for interview volunteers. Fourteen interviewees ultimately volunteered for the study and were interviewed (Table 1).

Table 1. Interviewee Attributes (n=14)

| Attribute | N | % |
|---------------------------|------|------|
| Gender | | |
| Female | 9 | 64.3 |
| Male | 5 | 35.7 |
| Undergraduate Major | | |
| Arts and Humanities | 2 | 14.3 |
| Business | 6 | 42.9 |
| Education | 2 | 14.3 |
| Social Science | 4 | 28.6 |
| Enrollment Status | | |
| Second Year or Sophomore | 2 | 14.3 |
| Third Year or Junior | 1 | 7.1 |
| Fourth Year or Senior | 7 | 50.0 |
| Fifth Year or Higher | 1 | 7.1 |
| Graduated | 3 | 21.4 |
| First Generation Students | 5 | 35.7 |
| Mean Age | 22.9 | - |

Interviews, which typically lasted about an hour, were audio recorded and transcribed. Next, transcriptions were entered into NVivo 11, a widely used software program for analyzing qualitative data. In NVivo, interviews were read and “segmented,” or separated into discrete parts, by interview question, which allows researchers to compare statements by interviewee on the particular topics about which interviewees were asked. After reading through the data and taking notes on several important themes that aligned with our study goals—typically ideas that resonated with the experience of student researchers as well as ideas that were much-repeated among interviewees—the team conducted a much more detailed, line-by-line inductive analysis (Saldaña, 2015) of specific interview segments speaking to these ideas. These segments included interviewee descriptions of their preparation for college, the trajectories that brought them to UWW, and their experiences on campus and in the Whitewater community, through their entire tenure at UWW as well as through 2020 specifically. As this process unfolded, the team wrote notes on prominent ideas, views, and perspectives within each area of importance, noting specific points within each area that were shared or contested among interviewees, as well as interviewee quotations that represented these points well. Eventually, this process allowed the analysts to delineate and define four prominent themes from the interviews: high school bridges, Whitewater paths and space, African American community, and health and physical safety. Descriptions of these four themes are presented below.

Findings

Table 2 displays the four major themes discussed in the research findings for this study. These themes are presented in detail below.

Table 2. Major Themes

| Theme | Definition |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| High school bridges | Salient links between high school and hometown experiences—including preparation and/or resources from urban/suburban or African American /White majority high schools, bridge programs, or neighborhoods—and college and career trajectories |
| Whitewater paths and spaces | Financial, geographic, and family/community paths to UW–Whitewater, a campus students describe as both familiar and alienating because of the lack of African American students and visible culture, stereotypes of African Americans, and implicit and explicit discrimination |
| African American community | Whitewater-specific social and cultural interactions and spaces in which African American students can be comfortable and successful, including particular mentorship relationships, living and study communities, and student organizations |
| Health and physical safety | Significant threats to African American student learning, health, and safety from police and pandemic—including continual attention and discrimination, campus closure, social disconnection, and financial and work pressure—with an opportunity for conversations surrounding equity and justice |

High School Bridges

The first prominent theme that emerged from interviews involved the strong connections students perceived between “hometown” or high school experiences, on one hand, and college and career trajectories, on the other. Ten of the 14 interviewees were from Milwaukee, the state’s largest and most segregated city, a one-hour drive from Whitewater. Of these students, about half attended high schools in the Milwaukee Public School (MPS) district that some students said lacked various resources, including updated textbooks and career counseling services. The other half reported attending Milwaukee private schools or public schools in the Milwaukee suburbs, where they typically said they were in classes with predominantly White students and had access to college- and career-preparatory resources. While students across the sample told us that their high schools prepared them well academically for UWW, a few private and suburban school graduates told us that their high school experiences prepared them culturally as well. “I think that [preparedness for college] comes from me in high school,” one student from a suburban high school said. “I was really surrounded by White people so when I got to college, I was in the same boat and I was more comfortable.” Another student who attended a private, majority White high school in Milwaukee said his school prepared him well enough educationally, whereas socially, it taught him “how to deal with and operate in the [White] majority.”

Students said that high school-to-college bridge programs, in which nine students in our sample participated, also played a significant role in preparing them for college. Many were in more than one bridge program, including opportunities such as TEAM GEAR UP, College Possible, or the Boys and Girls Club’s Graduation Plus or Stein Scholars programs, which students said were more heavily advertised to those attending majority minority schools. Students reported that these programs took them on campus tours, assisted with college and financial aid applications and ACT/SAT test preparation, gave them tutorials on what they should expect on campus and in classes, and generally helped students better understand what they would encounter in college.

Bridge programs were important in preparing students for what college would be like as well as helping them believe that attending college was possible.

One interviewee participated in a bridge program geared towards college career preparation that engaged in resume building, mock interviews, and other career-oriented training. All students who took part in bridge programs said they were helpful, not only in preparing students for what college would be like, but in helping them believe that attending college was possible. As one student said, “having that backbone and support gave me a little bit more motivation and determination to succeed and persevere through any of the little challenges facing [me]...nothing [in college] was a surprise.” Like a few others, she further explained that the program eased some of her adjustment concerns that came with being the first person from her family to go to college. “If you’re a first gen and you have nowhere to go, got no plan, no one to guide you, that has an impact.”

Whitewater Paths and Spaces

Several of the students we talked to told us their preference in high school was to attend a historically Black college or university (HBCU). Many had toured HBCU campuses through their bridge programs and appreciated that the universities had large majorities of African American students. The financial burden of attending out-of-state colleges, or sometimes responsibilities for family members at home, compelled them to enroll in

Wisconsin. “The financial reality hit me,” one of these students reported. “I didn’t want to put my family in a situation where they were under financial pressure.” Most of the students in our study came to UWW because of its close “but not too close” proximity to Milwaukee, as an interviewee told us, as well as the low tuition and the wider reputation of UWW among members of the African American community in Milwaukee. Building on the latter point, a number of students said they knew others who were attending or had attended UWW, whether family members or friends. Three students also told us that UWW, UW–Oshkosh, and UW–Parkside, in the northeastern and eastern parts of the state respectively, were often considered to be the only three state universities with a significant African American student presence.

Despite this relative familiarity, however, many students described UWW as a difficult space to navigate because of the small number of African American students on campus, and also because of the predominance of White students, who made up over 80% of the student body. Interviewees reported, for example, that the scarcity of African American students at UWW was often exemplified by the inordinate amount of attention and stares one felt in public on campus—while walking to lunch, in dorm hallways, or sitting in class. It was as if people were “touching their eyes on you,” said one student interviewee. Several students spoke of the experience of being the lone African American student in a class full of White people, as well as the disconnection they felt with others on campus who seemed to have much different interests and viewpoints. “There’s a lot of stuff that African Americans don’t care about that the White people on the campus do,” one student reported. “I don’t really blame Black students for not going to a pumpkin-carving fest.”

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Aside from difficulties connected to underrepresentation, almost all African American interviewees described encountering more explicit forms of discrimination and stereotyping, including microaggressions (““This is a good paper for you, did you really write it?”” one student said an instructor told him); preconceived notions about Milwaukee and attendant stereotype threat (“As an African American student with my North Milwaukee zip code, I didn’t want to come off as the po’ Black child from the ghetto with a sob story of why I can’t pull my weight” another student said); and attention from police, described further below. The overall influence of these combined social and environmental factors, students told us, was exhaustion. “It was tiresome,” a graduate said. “You don’t get to switch up one day and decide to be White.”

African American Community

Students also mentioned positive experiences on campus that could help alleviate this stress. Most often these were described as opportunities to spend time with other African American students or mentors in safer, more representative spaces on campus; we call this theme “African American community.” Many of interviewees, for instance, described the feeling of camaraderie evoked by seeing another African American student on campus. “You just feel like this little thump in your heart, like, ‘Oh my god, there’s another one of me!” one student explained. Other students described first-year experiences and cohorts, diverse living communities, institutional support services such as the African American Network, and a number of African American student organizations, including the This One’s for Us (TIFU) Cultural Ensemble; Ignite-Impact, an African

American religious organization; student networks called Brother to Brother and Sister to Sister Mentors; the Black and Mixed Race Student Unions; the National Association of Black Accountants; and various sororities and fraternities in which students were able to acclimate more easily to campus and UWW's African American student community. These outlets, interviewees reported, helped them grow friendship groups, meet others who had similar interests and experiences, and feel more at ease at UWW. "My [dorm] floor was mostly like Black, Hispanic, Asian," a student reported. "So that was a very comfortable feel compared to the campus, which feels like almost like there's been redlining." Almost every student we spoke to talked of an area on central campus where African American students hung out most often, called the University Center or "The UC," where the campus Diversity Center and affinity group offices were located. "That's our spot, you'll always catch us hanging out there...that's the place on campus where it's more diverse," one student said.

Faculty and staff mentors on campus were also important to African American students, as these figures provided critical encouragement, support, advice, and helped connect students more closely to university services and academics so they felt more a part of the university. Often, students told us the best campus mentors were those who not only understand dynamics that made campus life difficult for African Americans, but also were compassionate people who treated them "like normal"—i.e., not as tropes or caricatures, but as individuals. One student described a teacher with whom she felt she could just be herself, a somewhat new experience for her on campus. "I appreciate that he allowed me to express my thoughts," she told us. "It was a very liberating experience to not have to limit myself." Another student told us his mentor truly understood what he was going through in a cultural sense. This mentor, he said, "really understood African American students... he really helped us know that there is a place on campus for us." Mentors like these, students seemed to suggest, could both open up opportunities and strengthen African American community on campus. "I would say staff who listen and actively try to create more spaces," another student explained, when asked what kind of mentor encouragement was most helpful. "Some never really interacted with Black people, don't know Black people, and aren't aware of certain experiences so that it's really hard for them to give support." In some cases, students also said that mentors who showed a true understanding of African Americans' day-to-day difficulties—not only on campus but in wider society—could instill a sense of safety and belonging. "My professor understands the challenges that African Americans have to go through," one interviewee said. "He talks about the history of African Americans in ways that White people wouldn't really understand, trying to help them understand it." Indeed, while the wider campus community could feel somewhat cold to African American students, the acceptance and understanding offered by such mentors could be motivating.

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Health and Physical Safety

This study was conducted during a time of significant turmoil for students of color, who already face myriad barriers within PWIs. Findings indicate several distinct social and educational effects on UWW African American students, not only from the COVID-19 pandemic, but also continual discrimination from the police and others in the wider Whitewater community.

On the afternoon of March 12, 2020, UWW students received a sudden announcement that due to the pandemic, classes would move online, spring break would be held a week early, and students on campus who could stay elsewhere should leave as soon as possible. Most of the interviewees to whom we spoke went through the jarring experience of moving back home to stay with their families, where they began mostly asynchronous online classwork. The experience, many said, was “overwhelming.” While almost all of our interviewees reported having access to internet and computer technology during their subsequent online classes, several said they had trouble finding the space they needed to concentrate on their schoolwork as parents, siblings, and other housemates were mostly home as well. “I don’t really have a space here,” one student told us. One of her parents was working from home while her younger brother attended school virtually from home. “It was kind of difficult to find a location that worked.”

Students in our interviews expressed mixed reactions to their online classes. While they understood the predicament UWW and their instructors were in, most interviewees said they were not learning very much online. One student told us, for example, that she was doing well—at least in the short-term. “I’m doing great in my classes,” she joked. “I’m just not learning anything.” Others, however, were neither learning nor doing well. Another student said he had failed a math-based course because he did not have the kind of personal, instructor/student support he needed to learn in such courses. “I couldn’t get my mind to cope quick enough with just switching immediately everything online,” he said. “Taking away that one-on-one kind of assistance that I heavily depended on, just like sending videos, I was just completely lost.” Another student told us the switch from close, interpersonal contact with classmates to electronic messages made things much more difficult. “Like classmates who’ve got the same math class as you, it’s like, ‘Dang, I can’t just like tap them and ask them a question’...there was an app for it but there was just so many emails. It was just overwhelming.” Further, many of the students either continued jobs or took on essential working positions in addition to school. The health dangers from COVID-19 were real, students told us, especially in the African American community, but so was the need to pay bills. “If you don’t work...you don’t have money to pay bills,” a business student said. “You can pay bills or hide, you know?”

Our research team conducted interviews with students at the height of the summer’s racial justice movement, in the wake of the May 25 killing of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis. The sudden concern over police violence that exploded in the national media and among the wider public, however, was not new for the students to whom we spoke. Most of the students either experienced negative interactions with the local Whitewater police, or had acquaintances who did. Indeed, many of the anecdotes that students shared involved Whitewater police following African American students, usually when students ventured off campus, as well as pulling over African American students for minor (or nonexistent) traffic infractions. As one student said, “once we get to the area where we want to be, it’s fine, but on our way getting there, that’s where the police speeder comes and stops you for literally anything.”

For students, these interactions were understandably fraught with tension and fear. One man, for instance, said whenever he was around police officers he was very cognizant of his body language and demeanor. “I do try to make sure that I stay at ease,” he said. “I don’t cause any problems or make them feel afraid.” For some students, the attention from local police was part and parcel of the negative attention they felt they received from local townspeople whenever they left campus. “I don’t feel it’s safe in the community,” a student told us. “If I’m waiting by myself on my friend to come back from getting gas or something, I’m terrified somebody is just going to come and stop me.”

This sense of fear off campus extended to protests. One of students who told us she participated in Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the town of Whitewater also saw signs of local backlash to the movement, including cries of “all lives matter” and defacement of BLM signs. “I’ve been to protests this year, and I cannot even explain to you the amount of fear I have for being a peaceful protestor,” she said. Those who talked about the wider protest movement, however, held out some hope that things could change for the better. Far from communicating aggrivement, as many counter protestors had been doing in recent weeks, students who spoke to this issue used language rooted in broader consideration, empathy, and equity. “I hope people do start to understand like what it’s like being African American...the fear factor when you do get pulled over by the police that you may never see your family again,” one student said. “We don’t want people to sympathize, we just want people to understand what we go through.”

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Conclusion and Action Components

This study confirms several factors shown by prior research to influence African American student educational and career trajectories through PWIs. These include family and neighborhood roots, high school bridge programs, student organizations and mentors in college, and the significance of creating space on PWI campuses (e.g., Hackett & Byars, 1996; Griffith et al., 2017; Parks-Yancy, 2012; Sedlacek, 1999). The study also touches on the unique dynamics—most directly the academic and career experiences of African American students through pandemic, campus closure, online education, and the contemporary racial justice movement—that are specific to the rural university campus and wider community setting of Whitewater, Wisconsin in 2020. The wider context in which this study takes place makes it even more valuable for understanding, and centering, African American student experiences on PWI campuses.

Though more work needs to be done, the research team believes these results point to a series of actions that can be taken to create space for the kind of self-authorship that has been found to be so important to the engagement and success of marginalized students on college campuses. First, the team will work to disseminate the findings from this report to general student and leadership audiences at UWW as well as leaders in the Office of Student Diversity, Engagement, and Success, the Black Student Union, and other African American student organizations at UWW, with a focus on more strongly connecting diverse audiences around important equity issues on campus. Second, the team recommends that UWW educators and other interested stakeholders further explore avenues for increasing the career-oriented social capital of African American and Black students at UWW, including developing models for measuring and

We recommend initiatives to increase the career-oriented social capital of UWW African American students, including fostering the kinds of interactions shown to improve student academic and career outcomes.

building student connections on and off campus, and discussing possible ways to foster the kinds of interactions that our interviewees and the literature show improve student academic and career outcomes and belonging.

Finally, using these research findings as a guide, the team encourages efforts to bring students, campus organizations, and other members of the Whitewater African American community together with representatives of the local police department to have conversations around discrimination, safety, and equity. A 2019 UWW Black Student Union event, which brought police officers to campus to talk with African American students, is a strong model for this kind of dialogue, as are a number of other programs around the country (e.g., Basha, 2016). Ultimately, we believe that this work can build a more solid foundation for future dialogue and understanding.

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Notes on Contributors

Devin R. Lewis is a senior at the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater, originally from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He is majoring in human resources management. Mr. Lewis is a student leader who has served as the membership liaison for the Black Student Union at UWW and is the current President for the Zeta Iota chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.

Isaiah Fitzgerald is a sophomore at the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater majoring in computer science with a comprehensive emphasis. Originally from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Mr. Fitzgerald is the vice president of the Student Undergraduate Research Organization (SURO) and a member of the Phi Eta Sigma honor society. After graduation, he plans to obtain his master’s degree in computer science and pursue a research-oriented career in artificial intelligence.

Ross J. Benbow is a researcher at the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s Wisconsin Center for Education Research. With a background in political science, international education and development, and comparative analysis, Dr. Benbow’s research focuses on the relationships among public policy, teaching and learning, and social and cultural transition in domestic and international educational contexts, with a particular interest in patterns of inequity in colleges and universities.

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