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The Influence of Black Identity Development on Academic Achievement of Black College Students at PWIs

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The signature of the individual below indicates that the individual has read and approved the project of Abbey Jerome in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of M.Ed. in Higher Education, College Student Affairs Leadership.

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Abstract

Past and present literature suggests that racial identity development has a presumably positive influence on Black students' academic achievement in college settings. The literature also shows that Black students continue to under-perform in academic settings when compared to their White counterparts. Throughout this literature and development of an intervention, these issues begin to merge as racial identity development is linked to academic achievement at PWIs. This project explores what exactly it means to develop Black Identity in college, and why this is impacting academic achievement among Black students. Through identification of these issues, a course will be designed in order to address them. The course will aim to provide first-year Black Students with Black History as well as information on how to develop their identity on campus will be implemented at Grand Valley State University, a regional comprehensive university.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

The underachievement of Black students in college has large, negative implications on financial, social, and personal levels of these students. Cokley and Chapman (2007) stated that Black students are underperforming academically, specifically at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Ritchey (2014) concluded that being faced with an identity conflict and the inability to understand what Black identity is can be an indicator of early departure from college. Cokley and Chapman (2007) and Ritchey (2014) concluded that there is a connection between academic achievement and Black identity development that is impacting Black students' ability to be successful in college. There are various ways that identity development impacts academic achievement in Black students. The stereotypes alone that are associated with Black students' minority identity are enough to impede their academic goals and ability to be high achieving in school (Cokley & Chapman, 2007). Because racial identity development can be attributed to how Black students cope with a hostile environment, the lack of academic achievement by Black students at PWIs can be tied to the fact that all Black students are at a different stage in development of their identity (Ritchey, 2014; Allen, 1992).

The literature presents factors that play a role in Black students' academic achievement and identity development. The first factor is pre-college influences. Herndon and Hirt (2004) as well as Witherspoon et al. (1997) emphasized how impactful parents are in the development of student's identities and academic self-concepts, or how students perceive themselves in school. Parents are not only important on the topic of academic self-concept, but also on academic achievement. Following parental influences as a pre-college factor, Harper et al. (2016) concluded that Black students are more likely to have lower GPAs entering college, which can

be linked to early departure from college. The second factor is campus influences, which can be attributed to a sense of belonging and faculty connections. When Black students feel connected to their institution, they are more likely to have a positive academic self-concept, and in turn, higher levels of academic achievement (Beasley & McClain, 2020). Connections with faculty are an important piece of academic achievement among Black students, and this becomes a positive influence for Black student's GPAs in college (Cokley, 2000). Academic self-concept is also a factor which is presented throughout the literature, as it connects student's racial self-image and how that impacts their academic achievement in college (Cokley & Chapman, 2007).

Identifying the barriers that Black students face before and during college in terms of stereotypes, parental influence, sense of belonging, etc. is important to work toward creating an intervention. Through the work of Cokley and Chapman (2007) and Richey (2014) the importance of fostering positive Black identity development is identified. Consequently, Harper et al. (2016) and Allen (1992) have identified that Black students are not achieving the same academic success at their White counterparts. This intervention will engage Black college students in a course to facilitate racial identity development and thus academic achievement.

Importance and Rationale of the Project

Low rates of academic success are closely associated with low lifetime earnings and less career options, as well higher levels of emotional and physical stress/illness (Taylor et al., 2021). Because Black students tend to have lower GPAs at PWIs than their White counterparts (Allen, 1992), it is important to know what needs to be done in order to foster academic achievement in college for Black students. These negative results are important when looking at the overall picture of race inequalities in academic achievement or outcomes after college. According to Taylor et al. (2021) who discussed closing the racial academic achievement gap, while it costs a

little over $90,000 for an intervention that will send a Black student *successfully* through college, the public would benefit from over $265,000 per Black student who graduates. This is measured in terms of increased tax revenues and lower spending on health and crime. This determination alone shows that more effort needs to be placed on Black students' academic achievement throughout college. Though the positive results outweigh the negative for Black students to successfully complete college, Palmer and Young (2008-2009) state that Black students are discouraged because of negative stereotypes, to invest time and resources into education because they are found to be less likely to see a return on their investment as compared to their White counterparts.

The intervention that I am proposing in this project is a course to be offered to first-year Black students at Grand Valley State University (GVSU). This course will be designed to teach Black students' Black history as well as Identity Development – and how that can be supported on campus at GVSU. According to Palmer and Young (2008-2009) faculty relationships play a large role in the academic success of students in college, so the course will utilize a faculty member in order to teach the students about Cross' (1971) Theory of Racial Identity Development and how to utilize all resources on campus to benefit their identity development process. The focus of this course is to provide Black students with the resources and background necessary to develop their Black identity, as well as exactly what this means, to help these students excel academically.

Background of the Project

It is crucial in discussion of Black students' achievement in college to understand the impact that systematic educational discrimination, socioeconomic oppression, and underrepresentation in college have on Black college students (Lee & Barnes, 2015). Lee and

Barnes (2015) also discuss in 1954, when PWIs were required to accept racially diverse students, minimal effort was put in place in order to accommodate and retain those students. This statement goes hand in hand with research by Tramonte and Willms (2009) who state that social status has been more important to school systems in the United Stated than retaining their diverse populations of students. PWIs create an environment that will not feel welcoming to Black students because of their past commitment and connection to White elitists. Being uncomfortable in an environment will not foster academic success or identity development for these students.

Allen (1992) noted that Black students on White campuses had lower persistence rates from freshman to senior year, lower academic achievement, were less likely to enroll in an advanced degree program, lower graduation rates, and lower earnings post-graduation. Allen completed this study at two large research institutions that can be considered PWIs. Through identifying the fact that Black students were underperforming academically on the campuses of PWIs, the intervention can be deemed necessary to foster academic achievement for these students.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this project is to develop a first-year general education course option for Black students at PWIs. The course will be designed in two different sections; first to give the students emersion into Black history as taught by Black scholars and second to provide the students with an environment which fosters identity development. During this session the students will learn what Black identity is, why identity development is important, and how to foster this on campus. Black history is shown to be a significant piece in the development of Black Identity as stated by Sullivan and Platenburg (2017). Using Cross' (1971) theory of

Nigrescence to frame the project, the two different aspects will create awareness for students into what Black Identity is and show them they are equipped to develop it on their campus.

Adams (2005) discussed the importance of Black students being exposed to Black authors in order to give them insight into cultural and social issues that have shaped and motivated them. Adams (2005) also discussed that being engaged in this type of immersion learning is beneficial to identity development of the Black students and makes certain that this type of Black identity and culture development will be passed along to future generations of Black youth. Taylor et al. (2021) claimed that many Black children are accustomed to limited resources and limited opportunities to experience positive images connected to their culture and race which would otherwise lead them to academic achievement. Working from Adams' (2005) research, this course aims to provide those opportunities for Black students at PWIs and to see themselves in their studies, which will better equip them to achieve positive outcomes in college.

<div align="center">**Objectives of the Project**</div>

This course will be split into two sessions with two separate outcomes. Creating a course intended for first-year Black students at the institution (a PWI) will bring awareness to the barriers these students face when developing their Black identity. The first section of the course will be intended to give Black students an opportunity to learn Black history from Black writers, artists, and scholars. The second part of the course will be designed to show students the importance of developing their identity, and ways that they can do this on their campus.

During the course, the students will be evaluated in four learning outcomes. First, students will be given in class evaluations, after class evaluations, as well as one that bridges from the beginning of the course to the end to measure these outcomes. The first learning outcome assessed is that the students will be able to understand concepts regarding the Civil

War, Enslavement Era, Reconstruction Era, Segregation, and the Civil Rights Movement from the text *The African American Odyssey* (Hine et al., 2014). Second, the students will be able to apply Cross' (1971) Theory of Racial Identity Development in their own lives. Next, the students will be able to explain what Black identity means to them, and lastly, know how to use resources at GVSU that are related to positive identity development. By achievement of these learning outcomes, Black students at GVSU will be better equipped to develop their Black identity on campus, understand what that means for their academic achievement, and use resources to benefit this process on campus.

Scope of the Project

This project is designed to address the importance of identity development for Black students at PWIs and how it impacts academic achievement. This intervention will examine the social integration and sense of belonging for Black students on campus at PWI's as it relates to their Black identity development. Additionally, this project does not focus on the implementation of the course at an HBCU, which is said to foster a more positive environment for Black students' identity development (Palmer & Young, 2008-2009). The goal is to move toward this positive environment at PWIs. Though this project does not focus on Black identity development of Black students at an HBCU, Van Camp et al. (2009) discussed this opportunity for students as a main reason for choosing to attend an HBCU. The authors discuss reasons that Black students choose to attend an HBCU out of high school, and mostly this is due to racial reasons. These reasons are along the lines of wanting to be around other Black students, and the opportunities they will have to develop their racial self-identity (Van Camp et al. 2009). The authors also call for research to be completed at more PWI's to better understand the college choice process of Black students and the reasonings for choosing a PWI versus an HBCU.

The impact of socialization on Black identity development is an important concept to consider when discussing Black students at PWI's. According to Demo and Hughes (1990), the quality and quantity of social interactions with family and friends, as well as interracial interactions, are important determinants of understanding and developing Black identity. Additionally, a limiting perspective to this project and research is my positionality as a White woman. This limits my ability to fully conceptualize the experience that Black students have in college, particularly at a PWI.

Definition of Terms

The key terms used in this project are defined to provide uniformity and understanding throughout the entirety of the writing. The terms to follow have been defined by scholarly authors and are defined as follows:

- *Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)* are institutions of higher learning in which White students account for 50% or greater of student enrollment. (SAGE Knowledge, 2009).

- *Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)* are any historically Black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was (and still is) to educate Black Americans. (Van Camp et al., 2009).

- *Racial Identity Attitude Scale (RIAS)* was created by Parham and Helms (1981) to operationalize the nigrescence model and measures the self-conceptions of Black students in contrast with their White counterparts (Awad, 2007).

- *Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI)* was created by Sellers (1993) in order to provide an integrated view of African American racial identity (Harper &

Tuckman, 2006). This scale measures the salience, centrality, and ideology of racial identity.

- *Racial Salience* is defined as the extent to which a person's race is a relevant part of their self-concept at a certain point in time (Worrell et al., 2020).

- *Racial Neutrality or Race Neutral* means not based on race or not assuming race as a factor in something (Cambridge University Press, n.d.).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Being faced with a racial identity conflict when entering college is enough to cause negative outcomes such as inability to persist through college (Ritchey, 2014). Creating an environment where Black students can develop a positive racial identity is essential to foster academic achievement in those students. When Black students feel a positive sense of identity and connectedness to campus, they are more likely to have a positive academic self-concept and academic achievement in turn (Beasley & McClain, 2020). The literature in this chapter will unpack Racial Identity Development, Black identity, as well as influences on identity and identity development before, during, and after Black students are attending PWIs.

This chapter will use Cross' (1971) Theory of Racial Identity Development as a theoretical framework to examine the factors impacting academic achievement of Black students at PWIs. The chapter will outline this theory as well as discuss what Black Identity means in the context of this framework as well as the rest of the literature. The chapter will also review literature framed around four key themes: pre-college influences, campus influences, importance of academic achievement, and academic self-concept. Diving deeper into these concepts, topics of parental influences, sense of belonging on campus, faculty interactions, and GPA will be discussed in the various sections listed above. These themes will outline how and why Black Identity development impacts the academic achievement of Black students at PWIs. The chapter will conclude with a summary and conclusion, leading into what is to come in the third chapter regarding an intervention for the issue presented. The theoretical perspective will offer a lens through which the literature is organized, examined, and presented to best create the intervention.

The literature to be reviewed was found through a search with various parameters. First, to find the literature, I used key words and phrases such as "Black student academic achievement in college," Black identity development in college students," and "influences on academic achievement." While using these phrases, the date range was of importance, but since Cross' (1971) Theory of Racial Identity Development was used as reference, some articles are a few years past the 30-year range. These two parameters were important in the search for relevant literature, as well as the database. I found success using *Education Source*, *ERIC*, and *ProQuest.*

Theoretical Perspective

Racial Identity Development Theory (Nigrescence)

In 1971, William Cross Jr. developed the term Nigrescence, which can be defined as the process of racial integration, and this consists of five stages (Cross, 1971). The process of Nigrescence takes a person through developing a racial identity, which refers to a person's sense of group identity resulting from being socialized to believe that they have a common racial heritage, history, and are part of a racial group (Cokley & Chapman, 2007). In order to better understand the stages and how they more closely impact Black identity, I will use the work of Ritchey (2014). Ritchey (2014) presented the stages' descriptions to better understand Black identity development among Black students attending PWIs. It is important to understand the stages and how they each may impact Black students at different stages of their college career. Because students are all going to be at different stages of developing their identity, the college setting must be inclusive to all stages so students can achieve success to the degree they desire.

Pre-Encounter Stage. The first stage is the Pre-Encounter stage, when Black students do not realize that they have been raised with White westernized ideologies, in part because it can be so deeply embedded in American culture (Ritchey, 2014). People who are in this stage often

hold attitudes which range from low racial salience (conforming or accepting Eurocentric standards), race neutrality (not basing judgement or decisions on race), and all the way to anti-Black attitudes (holding a closer proximity to Whiteness) (Ritchey, 2014). Because this stage takes place prior to Black students giving attention to their identity, they are often more focused on their jobs, lifestyle, hobbies, school, and religion as their indicators for identity (Ritchey, 2014).

According to Awad (2007) there are two additional dimensions added to this stage which are miseducation and assimilation (p. 190). The miseducation stage is focused on students experience of being educated in the American school system, more specifically Western cultural history and the missing piece of Black history being taught. In the assimilation stage, Black students are likely to view themselves as American rather than Black, as race is not a critical part of their identity yet because of past miseducation of Black history (Awad, 2007).

Encounter Stage. There are two steps that embody the Encounter stage: encounter and personalization. During the first step, encounter, an event has happened such as a negative experience with someone regarding their race, that shapes or changes how an individual views their race (Ritchey, 2014). During the personalization step, the individual is acting because of the event which has given them a new perspective. It is vital that during this stage, individuals are moving past the relevance of their own ideologies of race and keeping an open mind to what is next (Ritchey, 2014). Often this can mean a shocking event that can be personal or social in nature, but it in some form shatters the relevance of their current identity, and prompts them to experience guilt, shame, and ask themselves deep personal questions as a reflective reflex (Gooden, 2014). Throughout the encounter stage, Black students will be not only faced with an

event or experience that shapes their view of their own race, but also be faced with determining how this impacts their own identity.

Immersion-Emersion Stage. The Immersion-Emersion stage describes a time for Black students to shed their prior worldview of a less salient racial forefront or race neutral way of living and construct a new frame of reference which can now include the information that they now know about race as a result of the encounter which was discussed in prior steps (Ritchey, 2014). This new view of the world can empower Black students to find a new appreciation for Black history, art and music which represent a whole different culture. Ritchey (2014) states that during this stage is when Black students are able to decompress the negative stereotypes and perceptions of being Black to generate personal growth (p. 103).

Internalization Stage. During this stage of identity development, Black students are working through the challenges associated with the creation of their new racial identity. Ritchey (2014) discusses during this stage people can move away from focusing on how others view them to how they view themselves (p. 103). Through the Internalization stage, Black students are learning to embrace exactly what it means to be Black.

Internalization-Commitment Stage. This stage is focused on the long-term interest in Black research over extended amounts of time. This stage requires the results of future research in order to fully understand and/or comprehend the experience and process of Black identity development (Ritchey, 2014).

This idea of racial identity differs not only with the stages discussed previously, but also the stage that Black students are in life/age. According to Harper and Tuckman (2006), racial identity beliefs are constructed differently during challenges specific to a particular point in one's life. The authors note that Black students enter adolescence having a poorly developed

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racial identity. This in turn leaves them to enter a period of identity crisis where their association

with their race is challenged, and hopefully leads them to create a more positive racial identity.

After adolescence comes time for the decision to attend college. Beasley and McClain (2020)

found that Black students who see race as a central aspect of their multiple identities are more

motivated to exceed academic excellence to keep/create a positive image of Black learners.

According to the authors, Black students who have a higher racial centrality often see being

Black as a positive feature of their identities, while Black students with less race centrality may

interact with academic spaces much differently.

Within the timeframe of college, racial identity can be developed, impacted, and changed

based in the institutions that Black students are attending. According to Cokley (2002), African

American students who are attending an HBCU are likely to have a higher cultural awareness

and a higher self-consciousness than African American students who are attending PWIs. Cokley

also notes that there are significant differences in the types and depth of racial ideology that

students will develop in each of the different institutional environments. Black Identity

development is essential for Black college students because it impacts how they interact with

their environments which then sets them up for academic success.

Measuring Black Identity

Burrell-Craft and Eugene (2021) define Nigrescence as the developmental process by

which a person "becomes Black" – where Blackness can be defined as a connection with one's

race instead of the color of their skin (p. 38). The Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity

(MMRI) is a useful tool to measure the stage or depth in which a person is at in developing their

Black identity. Harper and Tuckman's (2006) analysis of the assumptions and stages of the

MMRI are helpful in explaining how the different stages of developing Black Identity can impact

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students in and out of college. Importantly, according to Cokley (2005), how Black students develop their identity stems from how they manage their minority status in different environments, and this becomes a challenge.

The MMRI scale is based upon four assumptions (Harper & Tuckman, 2006). The first assumption is that Black racial identity consists of situational and stable properties. This means that Black students are faced with situations and environments where Black identity is encouraged, and they also may be in others where other parts of their identity are more salient. The second is that all people have a different hierarchically ordered identities, and it is important to understand that there are many identities within one person. Black students are constantly having to decide how central their Black identity is in their multiple identities. Third, the scale assumes that one's perception of their Black identity is the most valid measurement. This means that contextual factors allow Black students to construct their own racial self-image. Finally, the model assumes that there are individual perceptions and meanings of what it means to be Black, and that identity is a result of the demand of different environments (Sellers, 1993).

After understanding and accepting the assumptions that are within the MMRI scale, the dimensions that made these up can be discussed. The assumptions presented are factors to consider before factoring in the dimensions, the dimensions are different realms present within the measurement. Using the assumptions stated above, Harper and Tuckman (2006) identify and define four dimensions of the MMRI. The first dimension, racial salience, is the extent to which race is an essential aspect to someone's self-concept at any moment in time. Racial centrality is next, this refers to the extent that an individual defines themselves based upon their race. Third, racial regard includes the affective and evaluative judgements that are formed by individuals regarding their race. This dimension is discussed in two regards, the first is the private regard,

meaning one's own personal judgments of their race, and the public regard is the perceptions someone has of others view of African Americans. Lastly, racial ideology is the way one feels that members of a race should behave. These assumptions and dimensions are important to outline as throughout the research, these factors will come into play as Black students enter different environments and situations throughout college.

Measurement and ability to identify the stage at which a student is in terms of developing their racial identity is vital to understanding how this impacts academic achievement. Cokley (2005) found that the early and middle stages of racial identity development as defined in Cross' (1971) theory, are positively related to internalized racism. This means being more susceptible to positive and negative stereotypes that are often spoken about Black students. The author also found that Afrocentric attitudes were negatively related to internalized racism as well as anti-White attitudes. Afrocentric values include an emphasis on spiritualism, collectivism, and beliefs in self-knowledge (Cokley, 2005). This concludes that emphasizing these traits will lead Black students away from internalized racism. Diving deeper into the relationship between Black Identity and academic achievement, it is important to understand the idea that integration of racial identity is better for coping with different environments.

Research and Evaluation

Pre-College Influences

Though understanding that the environment Black students are in at PWIs can impact their identity development, the literature discusses the type(s) of environments they have been in before college, and how exactly they are entering college. Herndon and Hirt (2004) discuss the familial influences of academic achievement in Black students. Families are primary sources of academic potential, and parents are providing students with a social environment which

influences how they view education. The impact of influence on education by families differs. Mwangi et al. (2017) discuss that this connection is somewhat indirect, noting that parents influence a desire to be successful, rather than directly forming their students to perform at a certain level of academic achievement. The person in families who is most likely to be this positive influence of education is the mother according to Herndon and Hirt (2004). It is thus essential for parents, and specifically mothers to not exert pressure, but offer encouragement for students to reach their academic goals. According to Mwangi and colleagues (2017) when encouragement was used instead of pressure, students were enabled to develop a healthy sense of self and desire to do well and make their parents proud. It is clear that parental influence is important to the development and success of students in college. Parental influence is not only important to fostering academic achievement, but it is also important when it comes to helping Black students develop a positive academic self-concept. Witherspoon et al. (1997) note that the lack of encouraging parents or even worse, the effect of disparaging remarks from parents an be detrimental to a student's academic and personal development.

Herndon and Hirt (2004) speculate that earning a good education is essential to achieving economic stability and security for families among Black community members. Noting that academic achievement is important to gain economic stability for Black students in the future, the socioeconomic factors that impact academic success for Black students is relevant. Harper et al. (2016) examined Black student success, using data from a study composed of 23 Black undergraduate students and 20 members of a Black Student Success team. This study was completed in a large, racially segregated U.S. city where Black residents compromise over a third of the city population. The results of this study showed that 79% of first time, first year Black students entered an institution with a high school GPA below 3.0. From the same study,

69% of Black students were the first in their families to enroll in college, 99% of those students were Pell Grant eligible and all of those students came from public inner-city high schools. These characteristics label students as "at-risk" meaning that they are at a higher perceived risk of failure or departure from the institution (p. 12). So, these factors were a limitation to Black students' academic achievement. This study shows the relevance of characteristics such as low GPA, low income, and minority status on academic achievement/early departure from college.

Campus Influences

Moving from influences that come before college for Black students, it is important to look at what impacts them when they step foot onto campus. Davis (1994) illuminates the idea that Black students perform better at Black institutions and experience a higher degree of overall satisfaction in social and academic endeavors. In support, Beasley and McClain (2020) note that there is overall a positive relationship between perceptions of the university environment and Black students' engagement as well as academic self-concept at PWIs. There are vast differences on campuses of HBCUs versus PWIs, and according to Davis (1994) and Cokley (2000): Black students at PWIs have lower GPAs than their peers who are studying at HBCUs.

Sense of Belonging. It is essential for Black students at an institution to feel a sense of community and support on campus (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). It is vital for the academic success of students to prosper, that they are fully emersed on campus (campus involvements, social engagements with friends, attendance to classes, etc.). Beasley and McClain (2020) concur that as perceptions of the institutions improve, students experience more sense of belonging and fit, leading them to excel in their academic abilities. Promoting a sense of belonging is not only important for academic success, but overall campus climate perceived by students. There is an increased need for Black students at PWIs in formal programs, connections with faculty

members, and social activities – which can be helpful for Black students to cope with academic, racial, and social issues that they face on campuses of PWIs (Davis, 1994). There are differences in the sense of belonging that students feel at HBCUs and PWIs. According to Cokley (2000) PWIs have more hostile environments toward Black students, which can hinder academic and intellectual growth. This can show that students would be said to thrive at an HBCU rather than a PWI both academically and mentally. Establishing a sense of belonging is a strong predictor of academic achievement among Black students at HBCUs and PWIs (Adams, 2005).

Faculty Connections. Connections with faculty members are a strong predictor of academic achievement and sense of belonging at an institution (Nasim et al., 2005). As a predictor of academic achievement and sense of belonging at an institution, connections with faculty members are among the strongest connections. According to Nasim et al. (2005) positive faculty/student relationships is one of three predictors of high academic achievement for students. This is supported further by Cokley (2000) who states that good relations with faculty members was the strongest predictor of GPAs for Black students. Diving further into the relationships that Black students have with their faculty members, Beasley and McClain (2020) state that if Black students perceive their professors as caring and invested, this ensures that Black students receive critical feedback without diminishing perceptions of their academic potential. Drawing from research focused on sense of belonging and faculty connections on campus, creating an intervention that includes these factors is vital for Black students to be successful in college.

Importance of Academic Achievement

One of America's most pressing and urgent education issue is academic achievement among African American students (Cokley & Chapman, 2007). According to Harper et al.

(2016), despite many efforts to increase college access for minoritized students, Black students in particular, these populations remain at the bottom of most metrics of success in higher education. The authors also state that explanations of this pressing issue most often attribute problems to under preparedness of students for the academic rigor of college classes, to the disengagement of academic efforts.

Through identifying the issue of academic achievement among Black students in higher education, it is important to identity some of the connections this issue has to identity development. Cokley and Chapman (2007) state that much of the research regarding African American student achievement and underachievement is focused on cultural identity. This is also in part to stereotypes associated with minority status and ethnic identity, which can hinder students' academic achievement and goals. These negative stereotypes justify and promote negative connotations of one's ability to achieve in school.

Racial Identity. According to Witherspoon et al. (1997) for African American students, racial identity can be linked to the struggle for peer acceptance. Students from minority groups often experience negative labeling for high academic achievement. Not only are there negative stereotypes associated with being Black, but there are stereotypes around being smart and Black. The authors also discuss feelings that African American students that good grades are associated with trying to "act White" (Witherspoon et al., 2007, p. 345). Similarly, Burrell-Craft and Eugene (2021) note that Black youth will draw on their early identity development beliefs (prior to reaching the last step in development) with hopes to remain academically challenged, especially in setting where they experience negative stereotypes surrounding their race.

In terms of understanding and improving academic achievement and its relationship with Black students, Harper and Tuckman (2006) discuss two categories which are contradicting to

each other. In relation to these two perspectives, Witherspoon et al. (1997) discuss that some African American students choose to give up their racial identification with the Black community in order to succeed in school, and others find pride in the Black community which strengthens them and aids their academic achievement. To support this, Sellers et al. (1998) found that racial centrality and racial ideology were positively related to African American students' cumulative GPA. Similarly, Stephens and Ford (1997) found that overall racial identity of students was low, but those with high racial saliency had higher GPAs than those with lower racial saliency. Given these findings, the literature suggests that racial consciousness and identification promotes feelings of pride and self-respect, and ethnic identity development which can be positively related to academic achievement in post-secondary education.

Academic Self-Concept

One of the most powerful predictors of academic achievement is the attitudes that an individual has about their abilities, or "academic self-concept" (Cokley & Chapman, 2007). Defined by Awad (2007), academic self-concept is a set of attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions which students hold about their skills and performance in the academic realm. This definition also includes a comparative aspect which discusses the notion that students compare their academic abilities and skills to their classmates and friends. Black students are faced with a challenge navigating not only creating a positive academic self-concept, but also holding minority status on a PWI campus.

Black Students and Self-Concept. For Black students to succeed academically, they must possess a greater and higher belief in themselves and their ability to adjust to the different environments they will be a part of in college (Nasim et al., 2005). Cokley and Chapman (2007) state that attitudes and feelings that are associated with minority status are an important aspect of

a student's ethnic identity, and that can create a self-defeating attitude toward academic achievement in college. Successful minority students in high school have high academic self-concepts (Epps, 1969) and this was also found true in college students. Gerardi (1990) notes that knowledge of self-concept among minority student populations could bridge the gap between cognitive skills and academic success. Black students also are said to have higher academic self-concepts when they are attending HBCUs versus attending PWIs according to Cokley (2000).

GPA and Academic Self-Concept. The literature supports the finding that academic self-concept was a strong predictor of grade point average among Black students attending various colleges (Awad, 2007; Beasley & McClain, 2020; Cokley, 2000; Cokley & Chapman, 2007; Stephens & Ford, 1997). Stephens and Ford (1997) state that academic self-concept influences how confident African American students are in academic settings and how these positive or negative perceptions impact their academic achievement, such as GPA. The blanket statement that GPA is impacted by academic self-concept goes on to support the idea that students who have more positive attitudes about their academic and scholastic abilities will perform better in their classes, and vice versa (Awad, 2007).

Summary

The research reviewed above has indicated that the development of racial identity impacts academic achievement in multiple ways for Black students in college. Using Cross' Theory of Nigrescence as a theoretical framework helps to explain how each stage of identity development is impacted by different factors of students' lives. Using Ritchey's (2014) research, Cross' (1971) theory can be used in relation to Black college students' academic achievement. Ritchey (2014) contends that it is essential as a student affairs professional to understand the different dynamics of Black identity development and where it comes into play on college

campuses. The reason that this information and lens is critical to this research is that students are all at different stages of identity development, and this greatly impacts their success in college.

Throughout the themes presented in the literature, it was clear that defining Black identity, pre-college influences, campus influences, importance of academic achievement, and academic self-concept were essential to frame the project around. These topics were important to cover to better understand how and why identity development is related to academic achievement in college for Black students. The literature also points to differences in identity development for students attending PWIs and HBCUs and their vast differences in many aspects.

Conclusion

Throughout the literature reviewed and the four main themes emerging, an intervention is necessary to support academic achievement of Black students at PWIs. The literature has framed not only an issue of lower academic achievement of Black students as compared to their White counterparts at PWIs, but also an issue of Black students not having all of the resources (physical, mental and emotional) to create and develop a positive Black identity.

Black students who attend PWI's are less likely to report positive academic achievement than their Black counterparts who attend HBCUs (Cokley, 2002). The literature has shown how various inputs can impact the academic achievement of Black students in college, and that it is important to examine Black Identity and how this process of development impacts this as well. It is important to not only give Black students the background on why this is important, but to give them the resources to be successful with developing their identity in college, specifically at a PWI. Using the literature as a framework to build an intervention for Black students, Tyrus (2011) discusses the positive outcomes that are associated with providing students the

opportunity to take part a Black studies curriculum. Consequently, the following chapter

introduces a course that give first year Black students this opportunity.

Chapter Three: Project Description

Introduction

Black students on PWIs are not achieving academic success at the same rate as their White counterparts on the same campus (Cokley & Chapman, 2008). This is in part in hand with the inability to experience healthy identity development in this space, as well as utilize campus resources to enhance this identity development. Tyrus (2011) found that engaging Black students in a Black history course in college promotes healthier racial and cultural identity consciousness. The research reviewed in chapter wo discussed in depth that Black identity development is important to Black students in college. Through the implementation of this new course, being able to develop Black identity while learning how and when to utilize campus resources, could in turn, impact these students' academic achievement in a positive light.

Throughout this chapter, I will discuss a plan of implementation of a course called *Becoming Black and Thriving on Campus*. This course will be implemented at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) and will fulfill a general education course requirement called *Issues*. The course will specifically be offered to students who self-identify as Black on campus during their first year at GVSU. The proposed intervention will consist of three sections. First being the course description and contents, which will give an overview to the course proposal and contents in the course, being part one, *Black History by Black Peers*, and part two, *Importance of Identity Development and How to Thrive on Campus.* Second, a brief syllabus which is meant to be manipulated and individualized by the presenters in the course. The project evaluation, which is a measurement at two different points in the semester which the students take the course is discussed. Lastly, conclusions and implementation will be discussed for this course, more specifically a timeline of *how and when* these practices will be implemented at GVSU.

Project Components

Overview

Banks (1995) stated that the inclusion of Black history in course offerings can be closely associated with positive outcomes and effects for Black students on college campuses. This is supported further by Asante (1991) who states that Black history gives Black students a consciousness to fully understand their place in their work and embrace their racial identity, as opposed to choosing to negate themselves. As such, the first half of this course will explore Black History as a way to promote positive Black identity development among these students.

Institutional Context. To fully understand the reach of this course, the context of GVSU is essential to outline. GVSU is a public, comprehensive, primarily residential university in rural Allendale, MI (Grand Valley State University, 2022a). At GVSU, out of the total undergraduate enrollment of approximately 20,000 students, only 4.2% of those students are Black (Grand Valley State University, 2021b). For context, the state of Michigan has a population of just over 10 million residents, and 14% of those are Black (*U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: Michigan*, 2021). A six-year graduation timeline is assessed at GVSU, and Black students' graduation rates compared to their White counterparts are disproportionate. The six-year graduation rate for Black students is 48% and 69.2% for White students (Grand Valley State University, 2021b). At GVSU, there are several ways that Black students are supported, whether that is through a community support group, an office and set of staff, or their peers. GVSU is home to the Multicultural Greek Council where students can get involved in Greek Life (Grand Valley State University, 2022b). GVSU also is home to Intersections, which is "an initiative of the social justice centers" (Grand Valley State University, 2019). Intersections offers social justice service-learning opportunities as well as overall networking opportunities for Black students on campus.

Course Offering. This course will be offered to Black students during their first semester at GVSU to best provide students with all the resources that are available to them on campus as early as possible. While GVSU does host Black Excellence Orientation (Grand Valley State University, 2021a) for first-year Black students, this course is designed to foster faculty interaction as well as learning Black history and Black identity development. Faculty relationships specifically are important as stated by Palmer and Young (2008-2009) who found that having a positive relationship with faculty is vital to success and welfare for college students. Through utilizing GVSU's Institutional Analysis data, this course can be offered to students who self-identified on their application as "Black or African-American" when applying to GVSU. This data would provide data with Black students on campus who this course would be presented to. Once identifying the students who are eligible to take the course, the course would be presented to them at their First Year Advising and Registration session and during Black Excellence Orientation. Students during this time are registering for courses, and academic advisors could provide them access to the course. For students who either do not register at their Orientation session, miss their session, or just have not added the course an email will be sent. This course is an optional course, but through the programming, the intention is that the course is fully registered with students. GVSU will send out an email reminding students of the opportunity for this course and how it could fulfill a general education requirement. The Office of Multicultural Affairs at GVSU will also send out an email to their students reminding them to sign up for this course on their registration date. This email would provide specifics for students to remind them where it counts in their general education curriculum, how to register, and the course description.

Moving into the topic of the general education and how this course will be counting for GVSU students, I have stated briefly that this course will fulfill a general education course (at GVSU, the specific general education course requirement is called Issues), and it will be listed in both Human Rights and Identity sections of these offerings. I felt that this course fit well into the Human Rights section because of the other course listed as options. Some of the other course offerings are *Black Women's Cultures and Communities, Anthropology of Social Movements, From Slavery to Freedom, Voices of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States,* and others. The Identity section also shows opportunity to fit this course because of some of the courses offered such as *Contemporary Black Literature, African American Culture and Social Thought, Class Conscious,* and more. Giving students the opportunity to take this course in their first semester at GVSU would be making an exception to the pre-existing GVSU general education (Issues specifically) curriculum for this group of students. GVSU currently requires students to be at Junior standing (55+ credit hours or more) to take Issues courses, but to fulfill the reach of this course, it will be essential that students are able to take it during their first semester. The importance of taking this course during the first year, is so that Black students can have all of the resources necessary to fully develop their Black Identity on campus at GVSU throughout their next 3-5 years following. This course would not be replacing any other general education course, the number of courses will stay consistent between students who are not targeted for the course, and students who are.

Course Design. This course would be designed in two sections, splitting the semester in half. Breaking the semester up into two sections will allow the faculty teaching the course, to create two different learning environments within the course and utilize two different sets of experiences to give these students as many resources as possible. The importance for having this

course in the first semester, is to aid in the transition from high school to college for Black students. Ritchey (2014) stated that this transition is often the first time the students are living away from home and learning independence. This is important to note as in chapter two, it was discussed that a lot of influences on identity development come from pre-college influences of Black students.

Section one, called *Black History by Black Experts* will be the first half of the semester. I felt that this section should come first to give the students a background of Black history. As stated by Asante (2011) Black students gain empowerment through Black studies courses, and this course is designed to provide that empowerment. Not only will this section be empowering to the students, but it will also be taught by Black Experts who come from multiple backgrounds such as motivational speakers, scholars and researchers, and others. These individuals will be recruited through existing organizations at GVSU such as Black Male Scholars, Black Excellence, and the Office of Multicultural Affairs or through outside networks such as Black activists. A few West Michigan organizations could be targeted for this such as *African Americans in GR* (Experience Grand Rapids, n.d.), *Lakeshore Ethnic Diversity Alliance* (Lakeshore Ethnic Diversity Alliance, 2021), and the *Alliance for Cultural and Ethnic Harmony* (Alliance of Cultural and Ethnic Harmony, n.d.) This course will utilize an expert from outside of campus for this section to give the students a perspective from outside of GVSU and learn about Black history from an expert in the field. Throughout this section teaching students of Black history, the students will have the chance to learn about topics from a Black perspective, ranging from the African Origins of Civilizations, Enslavement in America, the Civil War, Reconstruction Era, Segregation, and the Civil Rights Movement. The main course text in this section will be *The African American Odyssey (The Combined Volume)* by Hine et. al. (2014).

This text is vital for this course because of the storytelling aspect and descriptions of bravery, perseverance, and achievement by Black historical figures. This text is the first comprehensive textbook on this topic, as it draws from recent research to present Black history in as clear of manner as possible. I believe that the authors voices present in the text will provide first-year Black students at GVSU a comprehensive history of Black culture, Black lives, and how these have shaped their Black identity as well as American history, which can often be overlooked in mainstream textbooks on this topic.

Section two, called *Importance of Identity Development and how to Thrive on Campus* will be the second half of the semester. This section will be taught by a Black staff member at GVSU who is currently working on campus with access to campus resources. This staff member will also be well versed in identity development models to give the students a background on this topic. Using the research from authors such as Ritchey (2014) from chapter two, this section of the course will give the students the opportunity to understand exactly what it means to develop their identity, what Black identity is, and how to support this process on GVSU's campus. These topics are presented after the students learn about Black history because I believe that by the second section of the course, the students will have a better idea of their Black identity and what that means for them on campus at GVSU. Because of the Black identities explored as historical figures in the first section, Black students will have a better understanding of what Black identity means from a Black history perspective. Aside from giving students a background on Black identity and identity development, there is also room in this section to show students how to utilize campus resources to their advantage that will help promote a positive process of identity development. This can be through avenues such as counseling services, mentoring programs, Multi-Cultural Students Services, and many others (see Appendix B). Through giving these

students this information in their first year at college, students are not only set up for success in development of their identity, but academic achievement as well.

Course Plan. Because of the flexibility I want the syllabus of this course to have, a course plan is the best route for an overview of the course, topics, and texts for guest speakers in the course to follow. Providing a course plan rather than a full syllabus is important to give the instructor more individualization on the course trajectory. The most important piece of the course plan is the description of the Issues general education courses at GVSU. The goal of Issues courses is to integrate learning a co-curricular experiences to build connections between prior and new knowledge (Grand Valley State University, 2021-2022). These are "problem-solving courses that encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration within each class" (Grand Valley State University, 2021-2022). A course description is also provided in this plan, describing the layout, and split of topics, as well as the text required for students. The three high-level objectives of the course are also discussed here. The first learning outcome is that first-year Black students who have completed this course will be able to, understand concepts regarding the Civil War, Enslavement Era, Reconstruction Era, Segregation, and the Civil Rights Movement from the text *The African American Odyssey* (Hine et al., 2014). The second, third, and final learning outcomes are as follows: First-year Black students at GVSU who have completed this course will be able to apply Cross' (1971) Model of Identity Development in their own lives, explain what Black Identity means to them, and know how to use campus resources at GVSU that are related to positive identity development. Some of the main topics are also listed on this course plan. See Appendix A for full Course Plan details.

Course Approval Process. GVSU uses the online proposal system called *Sail* for course approval processes. The first step in the process of getting a course approved at GVSU for

general education is the proposal, consisting of what the course is, and why it is being requested. The course will also need to have knowledge and skill outcomes, how they will be taught and how they will be assessed. In general, the next steps are approvals. The approvals range from unit head to the Provost at GVSU. Throughout that process, there are seven more approvals needed. This process is overseen by the University Curriculum Committee which consists of faculty and staff from each college at GVSU.

Positionality. After creating the plan for *Becoming Black and Thriving on Campus* at GVSU, I felt it was necessary to discuss my own positionality as the proposer of this course. As a White woman, I have been socialized through my own developmental process to be naive in understanding how race impacts a person. This is in the broadest sense, but in terms of this research and course proposal, I feel this is important to share because of how it may impact my understanding and projection of these topics. This course proposal is an exercise to create practical programming from my own interpretations of literature.

Project Evaluation

The course *Becoming Black and Thriving on Campus* is meant to be taken by Black students in their first semester at GVSU. The course plan, topic and textbook plans, and outline of curriculum are meant for use as a guide to develop this course and maintain the ability to change by who is presenting the content over time. The first student survey given by GVSU is meant to be distributed before the course starts, before students sit through class for one day. This survey will aim to accomplish the baseline of where students are at in terms of knowledge of Black history, racial identity, and GVSU campus resources. The second GVSU survey is meant to be conducted as soon as students have completed the course in the Fall semester. This

survey will be used to compare the students' responses to the baseline, and determine how much improvement and understanding has been accomplished.

The evaluation of student success from this course will be measured through two different scales. First before the course, students will be assessed using the African Self-Consciousness Scale (ASCS), and the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI). After the course the students will take the same assessment, allowing us to see the positive (or negative) differences in scores which can be translated to racial identity consciousness. Aside from measurements of Racial identity development, the students will be given surveys through GVSU to evaluate the course content, learning outcomes, and academic improvement of students before and after the course (see Appendix C).

The ASCS as defined by Baldwin and Bell (1985) was designed to assess Black personality construct by using a 42-question personality "test." This scale will measure the students' competencies in two different dimensions out of the four it has been intended for: (1) awareness/recognition of their Black identity and heritage; (2) specific activity priorities placed on self-knowledge and self-affirmation (Baldwin & Bell, 1985). To process accurate responses for specifically the two dimensions, the students will need to answer all questions asked in the questionnaire. This measure is beneficial for the students in this course and future students in the course because of the developing value that can be placed in Black Identity. Baldwin and Bell (1985) state that this process is critical in all aspects of Black students' psychological functions and behaviors. MMRI is another tool that will be used to evaluate students' success in students after the course is completed. MMRI as discussed by Sellers et al. (1998) defines and measures racial identity as the significance and meaning that individuals attribute to their membership within the Black community and their own self-concepts as well as what it means to be Black.

The MMRI measures four dimensions of racial identity; racial salience, centrality of identity, regard the person holds the group associated with the identity, and ideology associated with their identity (Sellers et al., 1998). This measure is beneficial for this course and identity development as it measures racial centrality, the extent to which a personal defines themselves with regard to their race, and racial ideology, which is concerned with the meaning that someone places on being Black. This questionnaire will be beneficial to help students understand their own Black Identity as well as how it is impacting their academic achievement positively or negatively.

Throughout the surveys, and measurements concluded after the course, the learning outcomes can be measured (see Appendix C). The learning outcomes discussed in the course plan are as follows; First-year Black students at GVSU will be able to… understand concepts regarding the Civil War, Enslavement Era, Reconstruction Era, Segregation, and the Civil Rights Movement from the text *The African American Odyssey* (Hine et al., 2014), apply Cross' (1971) Model of Identity Development in their own lives, explain what Black Identity means to them, and know how to use campus resources at GVSU that are related to positive identity development. The students will have a variety of assignments throughout the course such as critical self-reflection papers, journal entries pertaining to reading assignments, in-class discussions, case study reports, and group projects/presentations. The course will be evaluated for grades based on active participation in class, submission of assignments listed, and overall understanding of concepts shown through the assignments.

Project Conclusions

Research reviewed in chapter two outlines the issue of identity development as an indicator of lower academic success in college for Black students (Ritchey, 2014). This project is focused at a PWI because Black students are more academically successful at HBCU's, and this

is where improvement needs to be made (Allen, 1992). These issues are of urgent importance to work through at a PWI because of the negative aspects associated with lower academic achievement such as lower lifetime earnings and career options, and higher levels of emotional or physical stress (Taylor et al., 2018). The creation of a course focused on Black history and Black identity development is adaptable for a PWI and something that is set to improve these negative outcomes associated with Black students at PWIs.

The creation of a course was chosen over a few other avenues of interventions because of its accessibility and adaptability to other organizations. Transition or bridge programs were suggested throughout the literature as a possible intervention for these pressing issues. This intervention would require a lot of focus on high schools as well as institutions, which presents a lot of time required to make successful by many different stakeholders (Lee & Barnes, 2015). Lee and Barnes (2015) call for transition programs as they can lead to success for first-year students. Leadership programs were also discussed as an ideal intervention due to the integration on campus, which fosters a culturally positive environment for students (Palmer & Young, 2008-2009). Overall, the idea of a course to be implemented comes from the call for faculty interaction as well as a well-developed identity to foster positive academic achievement among Black college students.

Plans for Implementation

I will plan to share the findings of success in this course with professors, academic advisors, and other support staff for Black students at GVSU. Sharing the results will assist these support staff in understanding how developing identity impacts these students every day on campus and how it also impacts (positively or negatively) their academic performance. Sharing these findings will also provide a learning opportunity for anyone with my own personal

positionality as it provides the opportunity to collaborate with Black colleagues and gather

feedback.

Appendices

Appendix A: Course Plan / Proposal

GVSU Issues Course Rationale:

"…integrate learning and co-curricular experiences to build connections between prior understanding and new learning. Issues are problem-solving courses that encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration within each class. They also develop your understanding of some of the most compelling issues of our time; globalization, health, human rights, identity, sustainability, and the connected topics of information, innovation, or technology" (Grand Valley State University, 2021-2022).

Course Title:

Becoming Black and Thriving on Campus

Course Description:

This course will be split into two sessions, first being Black history by Black experts, and the second session will be on Black Identity development and campus resources. Throughout the literature reviewed in this course, students will be better versed in their Black Identity as well as understand how to support their Identity Development on campus at GVSU.

Text:

The African American Odyssey (Combined Volume)

Hine, Hine, and Harrold (2005)

High Level Objectives:

1. First-year Black students at GVSU will be able to interpret at least five concepts or elements from *The African American Odyssey* on Black history after completion of the first half of the course.

2. First-year Black students at GVSU will be able to reiterate the steps of Cross' (1971) Identity Development model after the second half of the course.

3. First-year Black students at GVSU will be able to explain what Black Identity means to them after completion of the course in its entirety.

4. First-year Black students at GVSU will be able to list at least 3 resources on GVSU's campus that are beneficial for supporting their Identity Development after completion of the course.

Topics for Course:

1. African Origins of Civilizations

2. Enslavement in America

3. The Civil War

4. The Reconstruction Era

5. Segregation

6. The Civil Rights Movement

Other Evaluations Necessary:

Racial Identity Attitudes Scale (RIAS)

Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI)

Appendix B: Student Resources

Black Student Support at GVSU Counseling Center:

https://www.gvsu.edu/counsel/black-student-support-318.htm

- Mental health resources/databases

- Financial assistance

- Podcasts, videos, and articles

- Self-care for racial trauma

The Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA)

https://www.gvsu.edu/oma/

- Black Excellence

- Black Male Scholars

Conversations of Color Dialogue Series

https://www.gvsu.edu/oma/conversations-of-color-dialogue-series-34.htm

Black Excellence Orientation

https://www.gvsu.edu/blackexcellence/

Black Excellence 365

https://www.gvsu.edu/oma/laker-connections-6.htm

West MI Community Resources

https://www.gvsu.edu/oma/west-mi-community-resources-18.htm

Appendix C: GVSU Post-Course Survey

1. What concepts can you recall regarding topics from the text *The African American Odyssey*

(Hine et al., 2014)?

2. Explain how Cross' (2971) Model of Racial Identity Development is present in your life – i.e.,

do you feel that you are at a specific stage of developing your Black Identity?

3. Define what Black Identity means to you.

4. What resources have you become aware of at GVSU after this course that can assist in

developing your identity?

5. Rate how effective you felt this course was in understanding Black Identity, Black History and

GVSU Campus Resources: 1 – not effective.   5 – very effective.

(1) ____   (2) ____   (3) ____   (4) ____   (5) ____

6. Please share any suggestions for this course as it is implemented in the future:

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