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Challenges African-American Graduate Students Face at Iowa State University

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Challenges African-American graduate students face at

Iowa State University

by

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ABSTRACT

African-American students continue to face high attrition rates in graduate education. The goal of this thesis project was to gauge perceptions of the challenges those students face in graduate school at Iowa State University, a major land-grant institution in the Midwest. Focus groups were conducted and revealed several important themes, as follows: communication, funding and resources, peer/faculty mentoring, connectivity vs isolation, contributions from fellow graduate students and drive and expectations of self. Two key concepts that emerged from the focus group discussions were self-efficacy and social capital. The participants recommended better communication with university executives, department faculty as well as student peers. Additional recommendations for the success of African American graduate students across the university are also offered.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

First-year graduate African-American students face many challenges as they enter college and Iowa State University is no exception. As graduate students start their transition to university life it seems critical to offer some strategies of retention to ease their transition back to school, especially for underrepresented groups.

There has been a large body of research on retention efforts in higher education graduate programs. Advantages of formal mentoring programs for the mentee and the mentor have been discussed in the academy (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz & Lima, 2004; Allen & O'Brien, 2006; Brown, Davis, & McClendon, 1999; Johnson, 2002; Kram, 1985; Lee, 1999; Scandura, 1992). Relationships in mentoring are focused on the socialization process of mentees into the program and then moving them into the teaching, service, and research of faculty. Contributions have been made in the pursuit of socializing graduate mentees in the program and also their retention (Allen et al., 2004; Lee, 1999).

The assessment and evaluation of graduate student progress and success of under-represented groups have been attributed to multiple factors. Major reasons for retention of graduate students can be attributed to mentoring programs (Allen et al., 2004; Kram, 1985; Lee, 1999). Student populations such as racial/ethnic groups, women and first-year students are frequently the focus of formal graduate mentoring programs (Lee, 1999). A mentoring program's success or failure in retention depends on the nature of the mentoring relationships

and their contributions to graduate students' experiences and persistence towards graduation (Lee, 1999).

Another set of factors that influence retention of underrepresented groups, including graduate students, are institutional factors. In addition to formal graduate mentoring programs, issues of climate and overall campus diversity play a role. There is clearly a need for more assessment and evaluation to determine what factors, either positive or negative, may affect African-American graduate students in their future degree completion.

In laying the foundation on the subject of diversity, some universities and colleges are attempting to support affirmative action, and many predominantly white institutions are looking for ways to create and maintain a diverse climate. Recent studies have suggested that institutions of higher education see positive outcomes for all students when they commit to diversity (American Council on Education and the American Association of University Professors, 2002; Bowen & Bok, 1998; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999). The evidence also points to the fact that more targeted efforts are needed in order to increase the likelihood of success of African-American students in colleges across the United States.

To understand the growth of graduate students from underrepresented groups, we must first look at how the number of students has evolved historically at Iowa State University. Data show that Iowa State University's graduate enrollment was 3,706 in the fall of 2002 and increased to 4,125 by fall 2011 (Brown & Ogilvie, 2011). During this time nearly one-third of Iowa State University's graduate population was comprised of international students while less than 5% of the students were US minorities. From fall 2002 to fall 2011, Iowa State University's population of minority graduate students has increased dramatically (Brown & Ogilvie, 2011).

With this increased number of underrepresented students come some new challenges for both the graduate students who join ISU and the university professors, peers and staff who are here to support them, but don't necessarily share the same cultural background. Therefore, the goal of the present thesis is to examine the perceptions of African-American graduate students at Iowa State University with two particular goals in mind. The first research question focuses on identifying the main challenges they face as underrepresented graduate students on a predominantly white campus. The second research question is to evaluate what communication methods and programs are working from the perspectives of underrepresented groups. The thesis will focus specifically on the perceptions of African-American graduate students and try to develop some practical recommendations on how the university can continue to develop programs and activities to aid in their success.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There has been an increasing body of research showing that student retention programs can be effective tools for colleges and universities. Such programs have brought to the fore a range of issues that have to be addressed as universities face more diverse population groups. Academic and social support within programs and departments has also increased over time. Some of those useful programs that have been considered in the socialization process are discussion groups, interest groups and support groups within different campus units. There are other ways to increase retention for underrepresented groups as well.

One such example is mentoring programs. Mentoring relationships in general have been shown to have a positive influence on graduate students' professional development (Allen et al., 2004). In general, graduate students involved in mentoring program indicate a feeling of increased confidence in transitioning into graduate school. Graduate programs and coursework become much easier. The socialization process also becomes much easier when moving through graduate programs based upon knowledge of the institution from year to year. Some institutions have developed activities where students of color engage with other students and faculty and can participate in diversity courses on campus (Rogers & Molina, 2006).

Another technique that is used by universities is faculty mentoring of underrepresented students. It was mentioned that mentoring relations were reinforced by the directors of the graduate program (Rogers & Molina, 2006). The universities created different programs to support peer engagement including (a) campus wide support groups (73%), (b) student

mentorship networks (55%), and (c) student-centered interest groups (9%) (Rogers & Molina, 2006). The literature states that departments and programs are supportive of their recruitment process and their retention efforts.

In formal graduate mentoring programs, students as well as faculty members were asked to evaluate the methods that were used to recruit and retain students of color. Another key point that was made was based upon the connectivity of historically black institutions of color and the networking done with those institutions of color. The connections allow for year-to-year flow of minority students overall and for the sake of this paper, African-American students. This in turn will open the door for future minority students because the knowledge is there knowing that someone already attends their predominately white university.

The features that were believed to have the greatest impact on retention were assessment and evaluation. Almost all students and faculty mentioned the importance of social support and mentoring (Rogers & Molina, 2006). Constant discussion of the relationship through feedback is helpful and also making the necessary adjustments along the way.

Mentoring programs on college campuses have long-term benefits. Ultimately, the mentoring relationship is centered on socializing mentees into the academy and transitioning them into understanding faculty values of teaching, service and research. Mentoring programs have not only contributed to addressing socializing graduate mentees in the academy, but also with retention of graduate students and their long-term success in academia (Allen et al., 2004; Lee, 1999).

Without mentoring, students of color at predominantly white institutions (PWI's) of higher education can possibly feel unwanted and alienated as a minority population among

the majority. Students of color at PWI's experience "higher attrition rates, lower cumulative grade point averages, and less persistence to graduation than do majority students" (Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies & Smith, 2004, p. 1). This all ties into my first research question in that first year graduate African-American students continue to encounter the basic challenges at predominantly white universities when attempting to succeed and maintain enrollment. In tracking graduate African-American students, it is stated that it is an overwhelming number that leave before degree completion. What would help facilitate completion is a feeling of belonging to the Iowa State University community with student motivation and morale.

Under-Represented Groups at Iowa State University

History

In 1916 the Graduate College at Iowa State University was founded to support graduate study in agriculture, engineering, home economics and veterinary science (Beatty, 2013). Due to steep growth in the number of graduate students over time, a division came about with the Vice Provost for Research and the Graduate College with the Dean of the Graduate College taking on the position of associate provost for academic programs. There are more than 110 distinct programs within the Graduate College across the entire university's schools and colleges that are assessed and evaluated (Beatty, 2013). The Graduate College was responsible for nearly 700 students during a ten-year period.

ISU Data on Graduate Student Enrollment and Graduation: Fall 2002-Fall 2011

Graduate College reports have tried to track down and capture the proportion of under-represented groups in the ISU graduate student body since the early 2000s. Looking at data

from fall 2002 to fall 2011, Iowa State University's proportion of minority graduate population increased from 138 graduate minority students in the fall of 2002 to 235 of which 3.1% were African-Americans in the fall of 2011, which represents a 60% increase during that period (Brown & Ogilvie, 2011). When looking at the gender breakdown, minority males represented 2.6% or 133 of the population while minority females represented 2.0% or 103 of the population for a total of 4.6% or 236 of the total graduate student population at ISU (Brown & Ogilvie, 2013).

Although the number of African-American students at Iowa State has increased some (Beatty, 2013), the Graduate College is still concerned about the retention of the African-American, Latino and Native American students (Ogilvie, 2016). For the two years following the Graduate College Reports of 2011, the Black/African-American and Latino graduate student populations enrollment has not varied much over the years with African-Americans at 3.1% and Latinos at 1.9% (Beatty, 2013).

In addition to looking at the raw number of under-represented groups on campus, one can examine first-year retention rates to better understand student trajectory over time. First-year retention can be defined as those students who return for a second year. ISU reports show that between the years of 2003-2010, the average retention rate for majority students was 82% for Master's students while the average retention rate for minority students was 85% for Master's seeking students. Master's fall 2007 cohorts' retention rates were high with retention rates of 92% and 84% respectively (Brown & Ogilvie, 2011). The percentage retention rate for minority students, at least on the surface, seems to have gone down over time.

Retention rates of various student groups at the graduate level are critical when determining African American graduate student's satisfaction at ISU. Research shows that higher levels of satisfaction among students lead to greater retention and degree completion (Kram, 1985). As stated by Dr. Craig Ogilvie, Assistant Dean of the Graduate College, "Deans and other university administrators continue searching for ways to increase African American enrollment as well as graduate student degree completion on campus. One approach has been to develop and implement new policies that help with retention of under-represented groups."

A new program developed by Dr. Craig Ogilvie, Assistant Dean of Graduate College, created a task force that addressed degree completion for African American students at Iowa State University, and focused on a faculty and peer mentoring program. Such mentoring programs have been shown to be effective on other college campuses; nevertheless, it was important to keep track of participants and evaluate the mentoring program's impact on first-year graduate African American students. Graduate students were given opportunities to provide feedback in order to assess the program's effectiveness as well as develop peer mentoring training and also improve the mentoring program structure at ISU. For the purpose of this assessment, peer mentors and their first-year graduate student mentees were interviewed (Beatty, 2013). The results showed that it is important to have a formal mentoring program structure on campus and that there is a need to continue to develop a comprehensive peer mentoring program training (Beatty, 2013).

With its newness, the mentoring program needed to be evaluated and its impact on first-year graduate African American students assessed. Constructive feedback was needed in order to assess the program's effectiveness as well as for the development of the peer

mentoring programs' training but also the mentoring programs structure too at ISU. For the purpose of this assessment, peer mentors and their first-year graduate student mentees were interviewed. Peer mentors were interviewed by a fellow graduate student to receive constructive feedback not only on the formal mentoring program structure but also to continue to develop a comprehensive peer mentoring program training (Beatty, 2013). Beatty identified a few areas where the programs can be improved, as discussed below.

Institutional Factors and Graduate Student Retention

It is important to understand the factors that may predict academic success and failure, especially as those factors apply to underrepresented groups on college campuses. Attitudes and characteristics of graduate students as a whole can be analyzed to develop a general picture of the graduate student body (Beatty, 2013). It is important for any graduate student to become acclimated with university organizational and institutional culture. A key to being successful as a graduate student is learning how to navigate institutional resources but also how to engage university faculty and staff. Formal programs that introduce grad students to university resources and key people within their departments and college-wide seem to be an important first step towards later success.

Beyond formal institutional programs another area that seems vital to the success of graduate students is the socialization process as they relocate to their new community. Beatty's (2013) findings show that graduate student morale, motivation, and sense of community are critical for the new graduate student's transition. Socialization within the campus community but also outside of the university is likely to help new graduate students feel like they belong. Increasing the sense of community can be achieved by providing first-

year graduate students with personal development opportunities on and off campus and professional guidance in the area of academic interest.

A report by the Alliance for Graduate Education and the Professoriate (AGEP), which is a network of universities committed to increasing the number of underrepresented groups seeking graduate degrees in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics areas produced a survey in July 2013 that is quite informative (Ogilvie, 2013). Alumni from the three Regent's universities in Iowa -- ISU, UNI and University of Iowa -- participated in the survey. Results that are most relevant to the current research are discussed below.

First, the AGEP survey showed that almost half of the student respondents considered leaving at some point during their study, while 15% did leave during this time. For this survey, there were 14 students and of the two groups that "considered leaving" and "did not consider leaving" met the graduation requirements and graduated.

The educational background of the students was a control factor taken into account when conducting the analysis of the AGEP survey results. Calculations were made for students of each type of undergraduate institution of those that "considered leaving" graduate program or "left" and sorted by undergraduate institution. In this category, there were no significant differences in terms of the student's decision to leave based on their undergraduate background.

Another section of the survey asked about the distance from undergraduate to graduate school for each respondent. Of the students who "left", the average distance was 952 miles and of those that "considered leaving" were 896, which show no significant difference in the average distance between undergraduate and graduate school in the student's decision.

The 2013 AGEP survey showed that out of the students that "left" and "considered

leaving" those who visited before enrolling were about 65% and 25% respectively and those that did not visit before enrolling who either "left" or "considered leaving" was 75% and about 32% respectively. This observation shows that at least 75% of the students who left had not visited before applying to the university. The survey recommends that campus visits before enrollment should be paid for those who have been accepted in order to help with future retention.

A question asked if students felt "less prepared," "well prepared" and "better prepared" than their peers. For the underrepresented bachelor's students, 15% felt "less prepared," 50% felt "well prepared" and about 32% felt "better prepared." For the under-represented master's students, 62% felt "less prepared," 25% felt "well prepared" with only about 12% felt "better prepared." There seems to be at least a perception that undergraduate education had not sufficiently prepared them for graduate school. One possible implication of this finding is to offer some training before semester starts or perhaps develop programs that increase self-confidence and self-efficacy among under-represented groups.

The AGEP survey data was sorted by whether students had considered leaving the program in the past or not. Out of those students who left campus all reported they felt "less prepared" relative to their peers. Out of those that "considered leaving," 50% of those felt "less prepared" while a little over 15% felt "well prepared" and about 32% felt "better prepared." It is important to emphasize that students who left the institution all felt "less prepared" than their peers. It was recommended that students should be asked early in their degree if they felt prepared for college and if not, they should work to find extra support, including taking preparatory coursework.

Reasons for Decision to Leave Graduate School

According to the 2013 AGEP data, there were a number of reasons why students considered leaving the university (Ogilvie, 2013). These reasons include factors such as lack of diversity, feeling out of place, unsupportive atmosphere, end of funding and advisor conflict, among other reasons. These four reason ranked very high on a scale of 0-9. Conflict with advisors appears as the most dominant reason students considered leaving followed by funding and climate issues. It was recommended that the advisor and student should be provided with training on conflict resolution along with workshops on inclusive climate to help facilitate student success.

Reasons for Staying in Graduate School

The AGEP survey also investigated reasons for staying in graduate school (Ogilvie, 2013). Out of the 16 students who were affirmative in their decision to stay, the five top reasons provided are: academic support, financial support, support of peers and near peers, support of family and interest in the program. Out of those reason the top reason for staying reported was interest in the program. It was recommended that in order to increase student retention, it is important to build peer support and consider engaging student families, perhaps with a newsletter or some form of email communication to the families each semester. In both reasons for staying and reasons for leaving graduate school, peer support and inclusive climate emerge as important factors.

Student Participation in Organized Activities

The AGEP survey also tried to capture whether participation in student activities was related to the decision to stay or leave the university. For this section categories for "students who left," "considered leaving" and "did not consider leaving" were offered. The survey results show that the participation in practices by students who considered leaving is larger than that for students who left:

- Fellowship: 75% left, 100% considered leaving, 85% did not consider leaving

- Community membership: 50% left, 85% considered leaving, 55% did not consider leaving

- Attend/present research at local even: 25% left, 75% considered leaving, 50% did not consider leaving

- Faculty advocate and mentor: 25% left, over 55% considered leaving, 45% did not consider leaving

Based on these findings, the AGEP survey recommended that some university resources be made available to increase attendance at research events and also continue faculty and peer mentoring programs.

To summarize the AGEP survey findings, over half of the graduate students surveyed considered leaving with major reasons being conflict with the faculty advisor and a poor institutional climate. Improvements in these areas can be made by the graduate college but also by department-level programs and faculty.

It also became clear that graduate students that left the institution felt unprepared for the level of academic work and were more likely to have never visited the campus before enrolling. Providing adequate resources for visits might improve enrollment and retention, and also help make students better decisions. Something that cannot be neglected is support from peer support, faculty advocates/mentors and family. Therefore, the graduate college should consider developing and continuing institutional efforts that make under-represented students more integrated in the university fabric.

Graduate College Climate Survey

In the spring of 2016, the ISU Graduate College conducted a survey of graduate and professional degree seeking individuals about their experiences and the overall climate at ISU. For this survey, a total of 999 students responded out of 4863 graduate/professional students who were contacted, which resulted in a survey response rate of 20.5% (Ogilvie & Harris, 2016).

This most recent climate survey asked graduate students if they have had any negative experiences in their graduate program based on personal characteristics; 35% of the graduate student's surveys reported they have had such an experience. Notably, the most frequent types of negative experiences were based on gender (12%), race/ethnicity (10%), age (7%), and country of origin (6%). In terms of experiencing bias/harassment/discrimination in the form of verbally abusive comments, 38% of graduate students reported the experiences while 49% of students of color (74% of Black/African American students) had those claims.

Fostering a university climate that values diversity in its various forms is important for any university community. One aspect undermining diversity that has received attention

recently is micro aggressions. The climate survey asked graduate students if they have experienced micro aggressions during their time as ISU. Data was disaggregated by demographic groups and showed that 58% of students of color had experienced micro aggressions while 88% of Black/ African American students reported the same. Additionally, 28% of students mentioned their ideas or contributions made in an academic research discussion were disregarded because of what they felt were their personal characteristics. Furthermore, 61% Black/African students felt their research ideas were disregarded. In addition, 42% of Black African/American students reported receiving written offensive comments and 29% of Black/African American students reported feeling physically threatened on the ISU campus.

Finally, the 2016 climate survey investigated whether graduate students know where to go for help. The results showed that half of those surveyed agreed with this statement: "If I had concerns about inequity in my graduate program I know where on campus I could go to address my concerns." Additionally, 58% of graduate students agreed with this statement: "If I had concerns about inequity in my graduate program I would feel comfortable expressing them to relevant administrators/staff on campus."

The 2016 climate survey also revealed some positive aspects of graduate education at ISU. Specifically, 84% for students of color reported feeling supported by their program or department to succeed academically. Additionally, 81% students of color reported that they would recommend their graduate program to others of the same identity as them. Finally, 71% of students of color said they feel a sense of community among graduate students in their program or department.

The 2016 climate report concluded with several recommendations (Ogilvie & Harris,

2016) that ISU senior leadership, as well as department and program-level leadership, should try to implement in the near future. Two important recommendations were to (1) develop positions and hire college-level Graduate Inclusion Officers, modeled after undergraduate Multicultural Liaison Office Officers and (2) Conduct inclusion workshops in graduate programs with separate workshops for graduate students and faculty, using case studies to explore the built around the concepts of inclusive excellence and implicit bias

The series of reports summarized above has identified several areas related to under-represented groups in graduate school that deserve closer attention. The reports are based on large-scale surveys and do not allow for a more personal, in-depth look at the perceptions of current grad students. This thesis will take a qualitative approach and allow graduate students from diverse backgrounds to express in their own words what types of issues they face or have faced during their graduate careers. Thus, the following research questions are posed:

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the main challenges that African-American graduate students face at Iowa State University?

RQ2: What communication methods and programs are perceived as most desirable by that population?

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The primary research method used in this research includes focus groups, following an objectives-oriented evaluation approach (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, Worthen, 2004). The main goal of the research is to determine how ISU graduate students from underrepresented groups perceive the challenges of transitioning to grad school at Iowa State University and also understand what communication methods and programs they perceive as the most appropriate to meet their needs. Focus groups as a research method provide an opportunity for in-depth understanding of audience perceptions and also allow free sharing and exchange of ideas.

The specific target population of this research would be African-American graduate students enrolled at ISU. Participants were initially recruited through the Black Government Student Association (BGSA) on campus. In addition, the primary researcher attended the GMAP symposium on campus in fall 2016 to personally invite potential participants to join the research. Finally, Graduate College help was solicited in sending an email inviting all current graduate students from underrepresented backgrounds to consider participating in the research. Despite some initial challenges with recruiting, this three-pronged approach made it possible to conduct two focus group sessions. The researcher served as moderator as he was in the best position to follow up on focus group questions and allow participants to build off of each other's comments and observations (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013).

Data Collection

For the collection of data, two focus groups were utilized to elicit in-depth information about existing programs targeting underrepresented groups at ISU and the socialization process in Ames and Iowa in general. The goal is to collect in-depth and more nuanced responses from the participants. The type of data collected is based on their experiences and their feelings of transitioning to graduate student status and overall thoughts about socializing in a campus setting. We need to keep in mind that the academic side and the socialization process during their graduate studies cannot be separated and must be fully considered. For this purpose, participants were probed for any recommendations they might have for future programs.

Participants were contacted by email and asked to participate in a focus group, with the hope of forwarding the message for a "snowball" effect. Individual confirmations of participation were made through land base and or cellular phone or email. Participants were recruited via email and invited to meet at a desired location on campus -- specifically the Greenlee School Focus Group Room. Participants were given an explanation of the purpose and the importance of my study and asked to sign an Informed Consent Form before the focus group commenced. As the focus group discussions progressed, the researcher determined when a saturation point was achieved (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013).

The focus group technique allows for intense focus and direction in questioning, particularly when it comes to sensitive topics. Therefore, it was determined not to have the major professor present in the room in order to keep the discussions as genuine as possible. The number of participants that was involved in the two focus groups totaled ten.

Participants were asked the same questions overall. There were ten questions used as a guide

and is provided in APPENDIX A. Every session was documented by handwritten note

taking with prior permission of the participant. These extensive notes were used to develop

the overarching themes presented in the results chapter.

   The two focus groups took place on Oct. 14, 2016 and Nov. 4, 2016. The first focus group

session lasted one and a half hours and the second session lasted two hours. Both sessions

were conducted by the researcher with his major professor observing intermittently through a

one-way mirror and serve as another method of increasing validity and reliability of the

study. The participants were unable to see the observer to avoid making them feel

uncomfortable. The Informed Consent Form was approved by the Institutional Review Board

Office and determined the participant's participation. Their identity as well as the results

obtained is confidential. Participants were provided with pizza for lunch as a thank you for

their participation in this research.

   Questions were developed to allow participants to describe their experiences as ISU

students, starting with background on their first year of graduate studies at the university.

They were asked to describe their relationship with fellow graduate students as well as give

examples of specific incidents or situations they were involved in. Questions also focused on

encouraging factors that motivated participants to be successful in graduate school as well as

describing limitations that they experienced as graduate students. In particular, individuals

were asked to reflect on their relationships with peers and faculty, whether they felt

comfortable talking to their advisor about issues or situations. Participants commented on

their progress in their graduate studies and possible recommendations for others to attend

graduate school at Iowa State University. They were also asked about what kind of

communication they would like to see from the university to make them more successful.

Special care was taken to make sure participants' identities were protected. Each focus group participant was labeled "Participant 1," "Participant 2," etc. to avoid the possibility with linking their answers to specific departments or cases. The primary researcher was the only one with direct access to the detailed notes from the focus group discussions. Individuals were reassured at the end that their anonymity will be protected and answers will be discussed in an aggregate (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013).

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The focus groups included 10 graduate students of color who identified themselves as Black or African-American during the fall semester of 2016. All of the participants completed an informed consent document prior to the focus group session. Given the qualitative nature of the study, the focus group themes discussed below were obtained using deductive reasoning and based on a reiterative process of reading the focus group interview transcripts several times and inferring the main topics/ themes reported by the participants.

It is important to note that the focus group participants included five male and five female African-American graduate students which range from first year graduate students to second year enrolled or just completed their graduate studies at ISU. They came from a variety of academic disciplines ranging from humanities to hard sciences and included both Ph.D. and master's level students. To protect their identity participants are simply referred here as "Participant 1," "Participant 2," … "Participant 10".

Focus Groups Theme

The primary researcher is an African-American master's student in journalism and mass communications. He was able to establish rapport with the participants and he took very detailed notes during the focus group discussion. The analysis followed and inductive approach. After revisiting the notes and looking for commonalities, the focus group discussion results revealed several major themes as they relate to the participants' perception,

attitudes and behavior. These themes are as follows: (1) Communication, (2) Funding and resources, (3) Peer and faculty mentoring, (3) Connectivity versus isolation, and (4) Contributions of fellow graduate students, (5) Drive and expectations of self.

Communication

Participants were asked to recall specific things that need to be addressed by the university in terms of effective communication. Most of what was said in the focus groups is the need for more "open ears" by university officials, department heads, faculty members and the graduate college. A few quotes below serve to illustrate these points:

Participant 1 stated that more communication on the part of university officials would be helpful in this way: "I would like to see the identification of different services and faculty of color." Can you elaborate here? "Yes, I would also like to know that support is there and readily available."

Participant 2 felt that communication with under-represented groups was vital and described it this way: "I would like to see more communications from support systems such as counseling services via Facebook." "Also emails once a month." The participant recommended that the Graduate College could utilize social media as well as email to communicate student services and programs offered on campus. The participant added that communication should be "more frequent" and student services made available to African-American graduate students to ensure growth."

In general, participants agreed that communication was vital to feeling connected to the university but also saw it as important for connecting with groups outside (such as families, for instance). Participants as a whole mentioned that the university needs to find more ways to reach out to African-American graduate to help them succeed at the university.

Funding and Resources

A critical point that emerged in the focus groups discussion was funding. Perhaps not surprisingly, participants felt that funding was key for their success in graduate school. It highlighted the need for more available funding to graduate students through their own departments and maybe even to research more options for multicultural assistance programs.

Participant 4, for instance, shared thoughts about funding in this manner: "Other means to support my financial expenses would be helpful". Participant 4 added: "One of the most important things that come to mind is that of financial support. There are some African-American students that don't have a full academic scholarship or graduate assistance funding so people need to know if there are other means to support my financial expenses."

Participant 5 revealed that when money was low, participant's response was concerned about how the money for the GMAP fellowship was allocated. It seemed like participants were thankful for the availability of GMAP funding but may have experienced some issues in the way it was distributed within individual programs. Funding sustainability was also mentioned. Participant 5 stated that the university should have an obligation to continue supporting underrepresented graduate students throughout their entire graduate studies.

While funding was critically important so were other campus resources. Several students stated that it was often difficult for them to fill their information needs; they also seemed to believe that this was not a problem for white students on campus. Participants also stated that white students can be unwilling to share their resources of any kind with African-American students. To deal with this perceived lack of information sharing, participants discussed their information dilemmas with other African-American graduate students across campus, rather

than seeking the help of information sources such as librarians, professors, and administrative staff. Communication in looking for resources, information on research topic databases, the job market, or university procedures was discussed among the African-American graduate students.

Participant 5 commented that the university is a good place overall and described it in this way: "Yes, I feel that the elements that were discussed in the overall assessment creates an issue on the many different levels as outlined. I think it is a difficult to be in the short term but as for the long term, I don't feel that it is made easy for the non-white students. I mean this in terms of the job market, information sharing of all types and perceived departmental favoritism for white students. As I look to the future after graduate school, the climate doesn't appear suitable for me because not all information is equally shared amongst all graduate students."

Participant 6 described reactions to the question is this manner: "Even though white students don't seem open to me I still feel comfortable about the overall climate. Regardless of the lack of information sharing, I seek out my own resources when trying to solve problems. I try not to get discourage when professors or administrative staff doesn't appear to be helpful. When university procedures appear to be frustrating, I tend to look for the positives out of this situation".

Peer and Faculty Mentoring

In addition to funding and good communication, focus group participants commented on the benefits of mentoring programs. In general, participants believe that both peer and faculty

mentoring can be really helpful for graduate student's success. Participants 2 and 6 stated they already participated in similar programs on campus. They commented that conducting focus groups can reveal some important findings with respect to the mentor/mentee relationships and possible areas of improvement of the existing programs. In general, participants seemed to agree that peer/faculty mentoring can play an important role in helping students of color overcome potential barriers to their academic transition and success.

Connectivity versus Isolation

Participants clearly discussed the feeling of being "isolated and feeling" outside their comfort zone. There was a general sense of feeling alienated when coming to the university. That feeling of being isolated transferred to the classroom environment as well. In general, participants felt that many of the different races with the classroom or on campus tended to stay within their own race and were perhaps reluctant to engaging with people of color.

A "sense of belonging" was noted as key. Participant 10 shared thoughts that seem to be common among many: "As far as limitations that becomes an issue with me is the traveling distance in going back and forth to my home town. So much gas and time is consumed and more than anything is the distance to which I have to get there. At the university, I have no family members or close friends from my home town here and I sometimes feel alone." The lack of family close by or a larger community outside campus was mentioned several times.

As far as connections on campus, Participant 6 offered the following observations regarding relationships with other graduate students at ISU: "A good relationship with

students is really important and that it helps foster a bond so whenever issues come up I can go to that person and ask questions and maybe we can share ideas on how to work out any problem".

Contributions of Fellow Graduate Students

Participants reiterated that mentorship is a very big part of the student's success. Several participants stated that students of all races need to reach out to one another, which would encourage more interaction and networking. By doing this, the opportunity to succeed is greatly enhanced. One suggestion was made about professors perhaps pairing individuals with the opposite race to facilitate growth.

Participant 1 identified thoughts on the contributions of fellow graduate students: "Overall I haven't received much contribution. He added: "More interaction with graduate students would be more helpful. There's just not enough cohesion amongst all graduate students in my department. I feel that people of all ethnicities tend to stay within their own and don't reach outside their groups to support one another. Maybe it's because of language barriers. Either way since we are all at this university and must be able to speak English, we have to step outside of our norms and support all graduate students."

Participant 2 stated the contributions of fellow graduate students need to be increased and stated it in this way: "I feel there are two levels that can be discussed here. In the social aspect people sought me out. I felt that they could have embraced the newness of my presence and welcomed me to the department. Secondly, we could have had informal meetings with fellow students. Informal meetings such as going out for pizza or coffee could

have helped increase my experience at the university. They also could have supported me academically too. We could have bonded and exchanged email addresses and if there were questions, it would have easily facilitated my growth."

Participant 2: "There was sometimes negative contributions too. There were some people for whatever reason didn't seek us out to see if we needed help. I really couldn't expect everyone to be there with open arms or make themselves available. Some of that has a lot to do with race. Ethnic groups tend to stay within their own groups and not venture out to help those that are not like them. It seems really common at the university."

Not everyone commented on feeling isolated in their social group. Participant 7, for example, felt that for relationships were pretty good and further explained it this way: "In my department where I am studying students are very friendly and not standoffish. They are very open and helpful. I don't feel any form of segregation nor do I feel alienated". Several participants also mentioned the BGSA as a big part of their academic success and that the organization as a whole supports students of color on campus.

The divergence of experiences in this area shows that the feeling of isolation may be more pronounced in certain departments or programs. Nevertheless, the importance of feeling connected, that you "belong," and have a group of peers that are approachable and relatable seems to be a key overarching theme for most participants.

Drive and Expectations of Self

Most focus groups participants mentioned that proving oneself is a big reason for moving forward in their quest for success in graduate school as well as their determination to finish.

Most of participants spoke of the need to show their families their ability to succeed at the graduate level. Even without being prompted, individuals commented that the need to show close friends they "can do it" also compelled them to succeed in grad school. They also offered the fact that faculty encouragement would also facilitate growth and finding the right faculty mentor can also motivate one to succeed.

Participant 8 was very open and candid about answering the question in this way: "Realizing my position within the university is very important. I also need to be an example to others and knowing that peers are here to help me. I felt this is encouraging in so many ways and can contribute to my growth at the university." In other words, that individual felt they need to serve as a positive example to others who might have similar background and face similar challenges on campus.

Participant 10 also shared some thoughts on expectations of the university that proved to be positive in this way: "My initial thoughts concerning the expectations I had about the university lived up to the moment. I haven't felt any push back. My professors are very supportive and very engaging. I feel it is exhausting being a black person but yet it's very important for me to strive for success and surpass the stereotypes of blacks. Just as important is the fact that people in my department have accepted me and this makes the road a bit easier for me. People are not confrontational and nor do they seem afraid to talk to me."

Participant 9 expressed how encouraging factors can contribute to success at the university and offered these statements: "While in school, I became pregnant and knew I had to support my unborn child as well as my other family members. Even though my husband is working, I felt the need to do my part. These motivating factors influenced me to remain focused on my goals and achievements overall. Also since my sister received her Ph.D., that

was a highly motivating factor for me as well. I had strong desires to do the same and not be deterred."

Additional Observations

Another topic that was mentioned in the focus groups was the need for "safe spaces" on campus. This is a place where anyone can relax and be able to fully express, without fear of being made to feel uncomfortable, or unsafe, on account of race/ethnicity or even cultural background. Participant 4 noted that safe spaces for achieving success at the graduate level and back up support is at the top of the list too. "Safe spaces make a world of a difference when I look for a peace of mind when trying to relax or do my studying" the participant noted. "This is where I do my best work."

Participant 3 stated that support can come from the university in many different ways: "Having a mentor would be greatly appreciated and also knowing where they can be found. I wasn't sure if they were in the student services building or if I had to go through the graduate college or my own department. Graduate counselors would be extremely helpful too. Particularly if there were African-American mentors or counselors that understand the things that other African-Americans go through at predominantly white universities." Thus, the topic of having designated counsels or opportunities for personal advice through the Student Services office or the Ombudsman office, for example, is also worth mentioning.

Research Questions

The first research question investigated in this thesis was: What are the main challenges that first-year graduate African-American students face at Iowa State University? The themes emerging from the focus group interviews revealed several main challenges along with explicit or implicit recommendations on how to better integrate under-represented groups in the fabric of the university. Overall, participants in this study agreed that there is a need for more peer/faculty mentoring. Someone that graduated from one's program would make one feel comfortable. Students stressed that having peer mentors would help facilitate in returning to Iowa State University in the following year in their program. It can be said that offering positive aspects in their mentoring relationship would show a strong adherence to commitment in that relationship. For the fact that there aren't many students of color, bonding with peers would show a collective dedication to students of color in the road to success. When the mentor participate in the program, mentors would be given the opportunity to meet new students and help them in their journey at ISU. With a great peer/faculty relationship, it offers the opportunity for future success. Overall, participants would be encouraged to learn from strong peer/faculty relationships when they had time for interaction. Also, some participants felt that meeting peer/faculty outside their departments would facilitate a new perspective on graduate school. Some participants said learning the culture of ISU from individuals outside his or her department would support them as well.

The focus groups revealed that establishing clear personal goals and expectations also play an important role, especially for first-year students, to overcome barriers in their transition to graduate school and ensure future success at ISU. Meaningful relationships

would help articulate personal goals and expectations and allow for feedback along the way; interpersonal relationships can help mitigate any potential struggles. Some participants mentioned that after their first year, racial isolation or even the perception of inadequacy in their department had caused issues. Regardless of the individual situation, strategies need to be developed in coping and addressing the negative impact of racial isolation on under-represented graduate students on campus.

Additionally, funding opportunities and lack of finding resources were clearly identified as challenges. Not having to worry about money would allow the student to focus on the academic process. Participants reported that other means to support one's financial expenses would be helpful. When there is a lack of resources and funding available, students must look at other alternatives such as moving closer to home or even taking out student loans. When funding is allocated in areas of low priority, students can feel cheated and appear as unimportant in the process for academic support.   The university must establish a position in helping minorities find resources either through GMAP, BGSA, and also through the Multicultural center.

Participants also emphasized the need for support systems such as the BGSA and LGBT groups and communities. They encouraged more frequent and more comprehensive communication from university executives and departments alike (more on communication below). Relationships with other ethnic groups in the graduate student body also appeared as a challenge and finding one's place within the university loomed large among the participants in this study. Participants mentioned that there are instances of no relationship at all with other ethnic groups. Dividing ethnically in the classroom and laboratories doesn't help facilitate interaction, understanding or strong sense of belonging. This makes it hard to

develop relationships. Emboldening, networking and following what is needed to succeed is very important to growth. These three contributions help ensure strong relationships. Loose interaction contributes to a gap in communication. This may lead to students being omitted in the overall communication each day. There needs to be good communication with other students of all color and not a feeling of being isolated. Gaining friends that are very supportive could help reach one's goals. Students in general must reach out to each other and help when there are difficult assignments when asked for help. Not knowing who to ask for help will stall in the growth of the academic student.

Finally, safe spaces were mentioned as troublesome spots by participants too. Participants mentioned that there is a need to feel protected and feeling comfortable without feeling unsafe due to their cultural background.

The second research question asked: What communication methods and programs are perceived as most desirable by African-American graduate students? The focus group discussions confirmed that more explicit communication from the university administration is needed. University executives, the Graduate College, as well as individual department members need to better communicate to African-American graduate students about measures that are being taken to ensure their voices are being heard. Specific communication in the form of panels and climate surveys can be put into action that will help resolve current and future problems within the African-American graduate population. Monthly meetings on behalf of the university executives such as graduate college staff can help in the realization process that there is a need for more communication across the board at the university. This type of open-forum communication should trickle down to the different colleges. Focus group participants spoke of the need to know that support is there throughout the university

from top to bottom. While information and communication channels are already in place, some of the information does not seem to flow consistently from unit to unity within the university. Relying on more redundant communication and employing communication channels such as email, newsletters, websites as well as open forums seems like an appropriate recommendation here.

More cultural sensitivity programs organized by ISU can be a promising entity especially for new graduate students when proposed and conducted by top university administrators. If African-American graduate students know that there are more information and communication options coming from the university, this would also further facilitate the growth of the African-American student population in terms of feeling comfortable. Conducting more retention studies would be an excellent means to understanding how other ethnic minorities perceive challenges and find opportunities for success. Officials can call upon present and past African-American students to help in the process. The Black Graduate Student Association is an entity that connects on a monthly basis with the African-American population. Once it receives specific notifications from higher up within the university this will allow for the continuation of procedures showing students that communication is ongoing and opening more avenues for input from students.

Another area of concern that emerged in the focus groups was availability and focus of ISU counseling programs. The dean of students can authorize more communication to the student services department of the university to find ways to reach out to those that require attention. Participants mentioned that the university should take more direct action into

helping minorities in locating resources as well as designated staff members to reduce the degree of alienation, hence, facilitating a more rich growth. More communication, rather than less, in each of these areas is clearly warranted.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate African-American student's perceptions on the transition or continuation of graduate education at Iowa State University and the challenges that they face in grad school as members of an underrepresented group. The study employed focus group methodology in order to capture more depth student thoughts, opinions and recommendations. The focus group discussions were analyzed and findings emerged around six major themes of importance: communication throughout the university, funding and resources, peer/faculty mentoring, connectivity vs isolation, contributions from fellow graduate students and the drive and expectations of self.

Financial disparity and the lack of financial resources can dim the hopes of graduate students. Therefore measures must be taken to make sure graduate students regardless of background are well supported during their studies so that the graduate student can focus on school rather than juggle several jobs and outside work responsibilities. Offering financial assistance such as the GMAP program is a good way to ensure success can be attained.

Perhaps not surprisingly, another theme that emerged from the focus group discussions was the importance of peer/faculty mentoring. This theme confirms what previous studies have found and underscore additional measures taken to improve the mentoring programs offered at the university. Gathering feedback from students and faculty experiences during their participation would offer an understanding of the retention and degree completion issues plaguing the university.

The next two themes--connectivity vs isolation and contributions from fellow graduate

students point to the importance of social capital. It appears that connections with others and the feeling of belong to a community are critically important for success in graduate school. This finding suggests that it is important for various ethnic groups to connect and to minimize isolation within and across academic departments and programs. Increasing one's social capital includes getting support from the university community as well as the Ames community. If one becomes better engrained within the community at large, there will be a sense of belonging, which was mentioned as a key factor by several study participants.

The last theme was drive and expectations of self. This finding highlights the importance of self-efficacy or believing in one's skills and abilities to be successful at what they are usually engaged. It seems like the individual can be its own best motivator for success; in cases where some students may lack the self-confidence needed they could perhaps rely on other fellow students or faculty mentors to increase their self-efficacy.

Understanding student opinions on mentoring and inclusiveness will enable the graduate college to design better retention and mentoring programs and create a more inclusive environment for diverse populations. The benefits include an opportunity to reflect on one's experiences related to the transition to graduate school as well as share some of the common challenges and obstacles along the way.

Based on these research findings, several implications and recommendations are discussed. Overall the focus group sessions provided findings to suggest that there were both positive and negative experiences with participants.

Implications

In terms of theoretical implications, overall the focus group results offered results that suggested participants had positive experiences with Iowa State University in continuing the education. They stated that in order to coexist with fellow graduate students at the University, relationships have to be developed over time and reciprocated. The findings suggest that some participants would like more structure and a thorough outline for developing meaningful relationships across the board. The focus group data offered, however even more complexities when understanding the mentoring relationships and their experiences of their first year of graduate school. But there are bright spots for hope in that they are willing to be patient and work through the process for attainment.

Some of the practical implications for administrators would be to conduct more climate studies on yearly bases to keep pace with the influx of African-American graduate community. This will eventually trickle down to the departments throughout the university as to the needs that were mentioned by various surveys during the semester. Based on this, departments can foster a cohesive environment to ascertain inclusiveness with all ethnic groups. As for the underrepresented graduate students, they must be actively engaged in the process of addressing what their needs are and be open for commitment and change. This includes all levels of connectivity- on campus, outside the university community and out of state. As many areas as of inclusion must be covered to ensure progress and growth for the establishment of retention at Iowa State University.

Limitations

There were limitations to this study during the collection of data. It is acceptable to state that during this study in the methods portion of my research, there could have been things done differently to gather more results for better saturation. For example a larger sample with more sessions could have facilitated a wider range of answers as well as various viewpoints. A limitation of the focus group is that individuals did not explain what they would do in order to facilitate the answers that they offered such as lobbying to the Graduate College. However, the focus groups were able to answer questions as to why students are or are not flourishing or even retained at Iowa State University.

The focus groups did not address any factors outside the university that could have contributed to student's experiences such as the Ames City Council for the improvement of relations or other agencies in the Ames community. The major limitation of this study is that due to the time constraint, limited participants, and focus groups sessions, faculty and staff members were not included in the gathering of data for focus groups. Experiences and perspectives from them would certainly have provided a full and overall understanding of all participant's experiences in order to address the full needs of all that are involved with the success of graduate program.

In the emailing process, the type of compensation for participation could have greatly influenced the desire for a larger sample size. Maybe offering money or gift cards could affect the outcome of the size of the sample as well. Monetary offering in the initial phase of the solicitation of focus groups may have influenced more participants which in turn could have offered more focus group sessions. Finally, it must be acknowledged that this study

does not capture the opinion of those students of color who have left Iowa State University. Future studies should try reach out to those individuals to determine if the challenges that they faced are similar or different than those who continued their studies at ISU.

Future Research

Recommendations have been conceived with connection to the objectives of this study. Several program evaluation are included as follows: the evaluation of first-year African-American graduate students overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction with peer/faculty mentoring program, determining whether or not they were planning on returning to Iowa State University the following year as a second year graduate student and also if they were able to articulate the reason why, and finally determining if they were ultimately "satisfied" with their formal mentoring relationships and the mentoring program sponsored by the Graduate College. Additionally, the student requested that the evaluator provide recommendations for the second year of the Graduate College Mentoring Program.

Based upon the analysis of both focus group conversations, I will make the following recommendations: the improvement of communication with the Graduate College, University executives and department leaders, make intentional changes to the peer/faculty mentoring training, and continue to establish a sense of community amongst all graduate students.

Additionally, I recommend that more climate studies are conducted and also more active engagement of African-American graduate students in addressing their needs. Getting input from first year graduate students is important but it is also necessary to receive feedback from second year graduate students as they progress further into their programs.

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APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction:

I would like to introduce myself. I am Darryl Austin, graduate student at Iowa State University and I am interested in the experiences of participants while in graduate school and the Ph.D. program.

I am conducting focus groups with underrepresented graduate and Ph.D. students and asking about their experiences at Iowa State University.

I will be taking notes during the focus group sessions and therefore I would need you to come up with a name other than your own for the sake of this research.

1. How would you describe your first year of graduate studies at Iowa State University?

2. How would you describe your relationship with your fellow graduate students? Please avoid mentioning specific names or describing details that could identify others.
   Possible Probe: Is there a particular incident or situation that would make you describe the relationship in that manner? (Explain please)

3. How did your fellow graduate students contribute to your experience during your first year?
   Possible Probe: How could they have contributed more to your experience?

4. What are some of the encouraging factors that motivated you while in graduate school?

5. What are some of the limitations that you experienced while in graduate school?

6. Have you searched for other options the university may provide for further support in your first-year as a graduate student?

7. Did you feel comfortable talking to your advisor about situations, either good or bad?

8. Do you think you are in a good place completing your first year of graduate studies?

9. Would you recommend others to attend graduate school at Iowa State University?

10. What kind of communication would you like to see coming from ISU to make you more successful?

APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL FORM

Date: 4/6/2016

To: Darryl Austin
3010 Regency Ct. #44

CC: Dr. Daniela Dimitrova
117 Hamilton
Kim Curell
103 Hamilton

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: First Year Graduate African-American Students Retention at Iowa State University

IRB ID: 16-092

Study Review Date: 4/6/2016

The project referenced above has been declared exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b) because it meets the following federal requirements for exemption:

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey or interview procedures with adults or observation of public behavior where
  - Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects cannot be identified directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or
  - Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could not reasonably place the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to their financial standing, employability, or reputation.

The determination of exemption means that:

- **You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.**

- **You must carry out the research as described in the IRB application.** Review by IRB staff is required prior to implementing modifications that may change the exempt status of the research. In general, review is required for any modifications to the research procedures (e.g., method of data collection, nature or scope of information to be collected, changes in confidentiality measures, etc.), modifications that result in the inclusion of participants from vulnerable populations, and/or any change that may increase the risk or discomfort to participants. Changes to key personnel must also be approved. The purpose of review is to determine if the project still meets the federal criteria for exemption.

  Non-exempt research is subject to many regulatory requirements that must be addressed prior to implementation of the study. Conducting non-exempt research without IRB review and approval may constitute non-compliance with federal regulations and/or academic misconduct according to ISU policy.

  Detailed information about requirements for submission of modifications can be found on the Exempt Study Modification Form. A Personnel Change Form may be submitted when the only modification involves changes in study staff. If it is determined that exemption is no longer warranted, then an Application for Approval of Research Involving Humans Form will need to be submitted and approved before proceeding with data collection.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review. **Only the IRB or designees may make the determination of exemption**, even if you conduct a study in the future that is exactly like this study.

Please be aware that **approval from other entities may also be needed.** For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. **An IRB determination of exemption in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.**

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.