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Mitigating race: Understanding the role of social connectedness and sense of belonging in African–American student retention in hospitality programs



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ABSTRACT

Given the shifting demographic composition of the U.S., and the need to have qualified ethnic minority professionals serving diverse communities in the hospitality industry, retention and matriculation of ethnic minority students are of paramount importance. Since many predominately White institutions (PWIs) experience challenges retaining these students, this exploratory study sought to better understand how social connectedness related to retaining African–American students in a hospitality management program. The findings suggest that (1) being connected to the program and university; (2) the depth and quality of relationships with faculty; and (3) the presence of minority faculty is important in retaining African–American students.

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1. Introduction

The Brown v. Board of Education (1954) Supreme Court decision declared that school segregation deprived “the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities” (Cozzens, 1995). After this decision, and during the Civil Rights Movement, many believed that education was the key to creating equality in the U.S. Today, colleges and universities provide ethnic minorities greater access to higher education; however there is still a significant difference in the graduation rates of ethnic minority and White students. Fifty-nine percent of White students graduate within six years. Conversely, only 38% of African–American students and 46% of Latino students graduate within that timeframe (Smith, 2004, p. 48). One explanation for this rate disparity is the campus experiences of ethnic minority students.

Despite the existence of affirmative action policies, racial discrimination has increased on college and university campuses (McCormack, 1995). This is evidenced by the “differential treatment and stereotyping by fellow students, faculty members, campus police, teaching assistants, administrators, and staff” (Suarez-Balcazar, Orellana-Damacela, Portillo, Rowan, & Andrews-Guillen, 2003, p. 428). These experiences influence an ethnic minority student’s decision to remain at a university or college, and graduate.

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The social aspect of collegiate life significantly impacts ethnic minority student academic success (Black issues in higher education, 2002). For example, the formal social integration process was more important than the informal process for African–American students' academic performance³ (Furr & Elling, 2002). Ethnic minority student organizations have an immense impact on retention. These organizations often offer academic support programs that acknowledge students' cultural backgrounds and provide them the necessary academic tools they need to succeed (Rhoades, Buenavista, & Maldonado, 2004). Moreover, it is important for ethnic minority students to develop peer networks and garner support from faculty. These processes work together to create a safe and positive social climate for ethnic minority students, which subsequently increases the likelihood they will graduate (Frater, Howe, & Murray, 1997; Shinew & Hibbler, 2002).

Understanding the influences on ethnic minority college/university graduation rates is not only important for these institutions, but for industry as well. Racial and ethnic minorities are underrepresented in the management ranks of the hospitality and tourism industry, even though they are well-represented in the industry's labor force. According to the U.S. Census Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010), 40.2% of accommodation and foodservice employees are racial and ethnic minorities (p. 782). More specifically, in the lodging segment of the industry, a combined 48.6% of the workforce is Latino, African–American, or Asian–American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, p. 782). A study of ethnic minority representation in lodging management; however, revealed that in 2002, 75% of the managers were White (Costen, Cliath & Woods, 2002).

One of the key roles hospitality and tourism management programs serve is to provide knowledgeable and trained management candidates to the industry. If faculty and administrators in these programs understand what influences ethnic minority student retention, these programs can establish practices that increase ethnic minority student retention, which will subsequently increase the number of qualified ethnic minority management candidates available for hire in the hospitality and tourism industry.

To date there is little information on the number of ethnic minority students enrolled in hospitality and tourism programs in the U.S. However, according to the International Council on Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Education (ICHRIE), there are 204, 4-year degreed hospitality programs in the U.S. Of these, 16 are located at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Thus, a large number of ethnic minority students majoring in hospitality and tourism are enrolled at predominantly White institutions (PWI). These data suggest that if hospitality educators desire to understand what impacts ethnic minority student retention, it is best to study this phenomenon at a PWI.

Therefore, this study explores the experiences of ethnic minority students in a hospitality and tourism management program on a predominantly White university campus in the southeastern United States, and how those experiences impact the ethnic minority students' decisions to remain at the university and graduate. More specifically, this exploratory study investigated whether ethnic minority students felt attached or connected to their academic program and the university at large. Finally, this paper discusses the implications of this attachment for ethnic minority student retention.

2. Literature review

Two relevant theoretical constructs important for understanding the degree of social integration college students experience on campus are social connectedness and sense of belonging. Since social integration plays an important role in ethnic minority student retention, it is helpful to understand how these constructs operate and how they are related to retention.

3. Social connectedness

Social connectedness is an internal sense of belonging and “the subjective awareness of being in close relationship with the social world” (Lee & Robbins, 1998). According to Timponi (1998), it is also the degree to which a person is woven into her social environment, and the depth of one's social networks. One's social connectedness evolves through relationships with family members, friends, peers, acquaintances, communities, and society at large. Satisfying long-term relationships with others, who accept the person as she is, strengthen a person's sense of connectedness (Lee & Robbins, 1998).

Social connectedness guides a person's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in social situations (Lee & Robbins, 1998). A person with a high level of social connectedness identifies with others in her network, and seeks to participate in activities with those in her network. Lee, Keough and Sexton (2002) proposed that social connectedness is measured by “the degree of interpersonal closeness that is experienced between an individual and his/her social world as well as the degree of difficulty in maintaining” his/her world (p. 356). Additionally, social connectedness helps people manage their own needs and emotions through self-evaluation and social comparisons (Tesser, 1991). In general, social connectedness measures how close a person feels to others.

Social connectedness can affect a college student's ability to adjust to a new environment and new norms during a critical developmental time period in a young adult's life. One study revealed that students who felt a strong sense of community on their college campuses believed they had a high degree of support, were more involved in campus activities, and had higher achievement than students who did not feel a strong sense of community (Pretty, 1990). More recently, a study designed to measure the impact of the Student Readiness Inventory on college student retention at 2 and

³ Informal social integration is defined as participation in campus social life (Furr & Elling, 2002, 189).

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