

Fittin' In: Do Diverse Interactions with Peers Affect Sense of Belonging for Black Men at Predominantly White Institutions?

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Prior research on interacting with diverse peers focuses on pooled samples including all racial/ethnic groups or specific subpopulations such as women and White men. Research on sense of belonging has tended to include part-time learners, Asians, and Latinos, but no studies were readily uncovered that focus on Black men. Addressing this gap in the literature, College Student Experiences Questionnaire data were analyzed for 231 Black and 300 White men (N = 531). Results suggest that cross-racial interactions were significant predictors for both groups; however, interactions with peers who have different interests was significant for Black men only. Implications for future practice and research are discussed.

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College enrollment rates have increased for all groups over the last 30 years. Today, more women than men enroll in college according to data published by the U. S. Department of Education (2006). However, significant gaps across racial/ethnic groups persist. For instance, while 75% of White students enroll in college after high school graduation, only 35–50% of African American¹ students do so. And, when they do enroll, African Americans tend to be concentrated at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), 2-year community colleges, and less selective 4-year institutions (Baum & Payea, 2004; Ellwood & Kane, 2000; Thomas & Perma, 2004).

Gains in college enrollment are unmatched by increases in degree attainment among racial/ethnic minorities, specifically African Americans (Mortenson, 2001). For instance, approximately 1.5 million bachelor's degrees were conferred in 2004; however, less than 9% were earned by African Americans. And, Black men represented only 4% of all bachelor degree recipients (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Taken together, these trends suggest that while more students enroll in college today than in the past, many leave before earning their degree. In fact, only 1 out of every 4 African American males completes his degree (Wilson, 2007).

One reason why Black men may depart from college is due to lack of sense of belonging. A confluence of factors may make it difficult for Black men to “fit in,” particularly those attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs). For instance, African Americans attending PWIs report feeling alienated, marginalized, socially isolated, unsupported, and unwelcomed by their peers and faculty members (Allen, 1992; Bennett & Okinaka, 1990; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993).

African American males may find it difficult to establish a sense of belonging on campus for other reasons. Scholars have found that Black men are often described using disparaging terms such as dangerous, endangered, uneducable, and lazy, which generally reinforce negative stereotypes to which some non-Black peers, teachers, and faculty subscribe (Gibbs, 1988; Majors & Billson, 1992; Parham &

1. The terms “African American” and “Black” are used interchangeably throughout this manuscript.

McDavis, 1987). This problem is exacerbated by the fact that some Black men internalize such beliefs which, in turn, become self-fulfilling, self-defeating, and self-threatening (Steele, 2000).

Finally, some scholars believe that Black men may disidentify with academic achievement (e.g., Ogbu, 2003). Academic disidentification draws linkages between self-esteem and academic performance, suggesting that Black males will perform better when their self-esteem is contingent upon doing well in school (Rawls, 2006). However, when one's self-esteem is contingent upon nonacademic factors—for example, being cool (Majors & Billson, 1992) or not “acting White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), as it seems to be for some Black men—students may deliberately *underachieve* to avoid the risk of being labeled an “oreo” or “sellout” for excelling academically (Belluck, 1999; Noldon & Sedlacek, 1994). This, in turn, can have a precipitous effect on academic achievement and, subsequently, attrition.

Under these circumstances, it comes as little surprise that some Black men find it difficult to develop a sense of belonging on campus. Yet, this is troublesome as sense of belonging has been shown to be related to important educational outcomes such as academic achievement, retention, and persistence to degree attainment (Rhee, 2008). Thus, more information is needed on the factors that explain African American males' sense of belonging in college. One potentially important predictor is the frequency and nature of interactions between Black men and individuals whose background differs from their own (Chang, 1999), hereafter called diverse interactions. Yet, no studies were readily uncovered that address this issue directly. It is out of this context that the need for the present study grew.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to estimate the relationship between African American males' diverse interactions² and sense of belonging

2. “Diverse interactions” and “diverse experiences” are used interchangeably throughout the manuscript to refer to students' interactions with individuals whose background differs from one's own; this language is used in prior research that informs the present study (e.g., Chang et al., 2003; Hurtado and Carter, 1997).

on campus, as defined by the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ). Specifically, multivariate analyses were conducted to investigate how diverse experiences affect Black males' sense of belonging. Secondly, follow-up tests were conducted on a random sample of White men to understand whether the relationship was unique to Black men or common across both student samples. The following research questions guided this analysis:

1. What is the relationship between diverse interactions in college and sense of belonging for Black men attending 4-year PWIs, controlling for background and academic differences?
2. Do diverse interactions in college affect sense of belonging similarly or differently for White and Black men attending 4-year PWIs?

The present study is deemed significant for at least one of two reasons. The present study is part of a larger research program focusing on the role that sense of belonging plays in college student success. This line of inquiry is important as it aims to shift current knowledge about determinants of college student outcomes by providing empirical evidence that racially diversified environments lead to quantitative as well as qualitative gains for students (Chang, Witt, Jones, & Hakuta, 2003). As we learn more, educators can leverage such knowledge to design intentional campus environments that engender minority student success.

Finally, previous studies on sense of belonging have focused on part-time learners (Kember & Leung, 2004); women (Ostrove, 2003); Latino Americans (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Strayhorn, 2008a; Velasquez, 1999); and Asian Americans (Lee & Davis, 2000). Only recently have scholars placed research attention on the sense of belonging of Black students and, even then, studies are only tangentially related to sense of belonging (e.g., Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002) or based on first-year students at a single institution (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2006). Building upon this literature, the present study examines African American males' sense of belonging using a multi-item measure of sense of belonging and a larger sample of individuals enrolled in 4-year PWIs across the country.

A Blended Framework

To understand the relationship between interactions with diverse peers and African American males' sense of belonging in college, I drew upon theories that provided constructs for talking about the relationship between student interactions and sense of belonging. As Kerlinger (1986) explained, theory was defined as "a set of interrelated constructs, definitions, and propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting phenomena" (p. 9). Based on this understanding, a blended framework was employed drawing on the sense of belonging literature and Tinto's (1993) interactionist theory of student retention. Similar to Anfara and Mertz (2006), this seemed to be a useful procedure for understanding a latent, complex abstraction (i.e., sense of belonging) and explaining how diverse interactions might influence the extent to which students belong.

According to the literature, sense of belonging consists of both cognitive and affective elements (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). An individual assesses his/her position or role in relation to the group (cognitive) which, in turn, results in a response, behavior, or outcome (affective). Sense of belonging, then, reflects the extent to which students feel connected, a part of, or stuck to a campus (Jacoby & Garland, 2004–05; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). It is a subjective evaluation of the quality of relationships with others on campus. For example, some scholars measure sense of belonging as how much others would miss you if you went away (Rosenberg & McCullough).

Retention theory, on the other hand, suggests that student attributes (e.g., age, family background) shape individual goals, dispositions, and both institutional and degree commitments. These factors interact over time with experiences (formal and informal) in the academic and social systems of college life to influence retention-related outcomes such as satisfaction with college (Bean & Hull, 1984) or the decision to stay in or leave college (Tinto, 1993). Taken together, these frames provide clues to ways in which African American males' interactions with individuals whose background differs from their own may influence sense of belonging in college.

Literature Review

The extant literature about this topic can be divided into two categories: (a) studies on diverse interactions in college and (b) studies on sense of belonging. Research on diverse interactions consists of two streams: (a) information about the importance of such interactions and (b) empirical research that tests the outcomes of such experiences. The sense of belonging literature can be generally classified into two categories as well: (a) explanations of the concept and (b) studies that measure the relationship between sense of belonging and other important educational outcomes.

Diverse Interactions in College

Countless essays, scholarly works, and research articles emphasize the educational benefits of having a racially diverse student body and interacting with diverse peers (Chang, 1999; Gurin, 1999; Macedo, 2000; Orfield, 2001). Scholars have argued that exposure to diversity in college prepares students for lifelong learning, participation in a democratic society, and global citizenship. Specifically, Chang, Witt, Jones, and Hakuta (2003) argued that racially diversified environments lead to quantitative and qualitative educational gains as they encourage creativity and unfettered speculation. Given the consistency of such findings, Sternberg (2005) concluded, "Much of what we learn in college is a result of the people with whom we mix" (p. 6).

A separate, but related, line of inquiry tests the impact of diverse interactions on student outcomes (Astin, 1993; Bennett, 2006; Chang, 1999, 2001; Jayakumar, 2007; Springer, Palmer, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). For instance, Chang (1999) studied 11,680 undergraduates at 370 colleges and found that students who socialize with their peers and discuss racial/ethnic issues outside of class report higher levels of college satisfaction and academic self-concept than those who do not interact with their peers. In a separate study, Chang (2001) analyzed Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) data from 18,188 students attending 392 4-year colleges and found that socializing with someone of another racial group is positively associated with self-concept, retention, and satisfaction with college.

Bennett (2006) conducted a dissertation study on opinion change using a sample of 2,000 undergraduates who responded to the CSEQ. She found that students who had discussions with others who are different from themselves in terms of political views and country of origin were more likely to change their opinion than those without diverse interactions. In sum, the weight of empirical evidence suggests that interacting with diverse peers advances racial understanding (Milem, 1994); cultural awareness (Astin, 1993); openness to diversity (Springer et al., 1996); political attitudes (Dey, 1997); and even critical thinking (Gurin, 1999; Pascarella, Palmer, Moye, & Pierson, 2001).

Sense of Belonging

The idea of sense of belonging has been well established in the literature (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Belch, 2004–05; Hagerty, Williams, & Oe, 2002; Hale, Hannum, & Espelage, 2005; Hausmann et al., 2006; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Jacoby & Garland, 2004–05). For example, Hurtado and Carter suggest that “sense of belonging contains both cognitive and affective elements in that the individual’s cognitive evaluation of his or her role in relation to the group results in an affective response” (p. 328). Thus, studying sense of belonging affords researchers an opportunity to understand factors that facilitate students’ affiliation with college.

A growing body of research has documented the circumstances that engender students’ sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gilliard, 1996; Hagerty et al., 2002; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002–03). For instance, Hoffman and his colleagues identified the important role that campus climate and faculty support play in sustaining sense of belonging on campus. As another example, Hagerty et al. found that participating in a sport fostered a sense of belonging among college students.

Finally, a number of studies have shown that sense of belonging is related to other variables such as social class and student engagement (Astin, 1993; Johnson et al., 2007; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Ostrove & Long, 2007). For example, Ostrove and Long conducted a study with 322 students attending a small, liberal arts college and found that measures of social class (e.g., access to

basic needs) were significant predictors of belonging. On the other hand, Kuh and his colleagues conducted several national studies and found that belonging is related to engagement or significant involvement in educationally purposeful activities.

While we know a good deal about the educational benefits of diversity (Chang, 1999; Gurin, 1999; Orfield, 2001), the benefits that accrue from interactions with diverse peers (e.g., Chang, 1999, 2001; Springer et al., 1996), and the importance of sense of belonging to college student success in general (e.g., Hurtado & Carter, 1997), we know relatively little about the relationship between diverse interactions and sense of belonging for historically underrepresented racial/ethnic minorities. As one exception, Velasquez (1999) found that interactions with White students play a significant role in Chicano students' sense of belonging. As another, I recently found that interactions with diverse peers affect sense of belonging for Latino male collegians (Strayhorn, 2008a). Yet, no studies to date examine this relationship for African American males who face additional stressors that may undermine their success in college. The present study was designed to fill this gap in the literature.

Method

This study is part of a larger research program on the postsecondary educational outcomes of historically underrepresented minorities in the United States. The present study represents a secondary analysis of survey data employing multivariate analytic techniques.

Data Source

Data were drawn from the 2004–05 national administration of the CSEQ. The CSEQ consists of 191 items designed to measure the quality and quantity of students' involvement in college activities and their use of college facilities. For example, several items elicited information about students' engagement in a series of college activities that have been shown to contribute positively to learning and psychosocial development (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Vesper, Connolly, & Pace, 1997; Pace, 1990). At present, the national questionnaire has been used by more than 500 colleges and universities. The CSEQ has been shown to be consistently reliable and valid (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Sample

The sample for the current study consisted of 531 randomly selected college men who responded to the 2004-2005 administration of the CSEQ. The sample was restricted to include students enrolled at 4-year PWIs only. This sampling strategy controlled for differences by institution type (i.e., 2- vs. 4-year, HBCU vs. PVI) as such differences can be pronounced (Arbona & Nora, 2007). The analytic sample consisted of 231 African American male and a comparison group of 300 White male collegians. It is important to note that the researcher randomly selected only 300 men for the comparison group as this allowed me to balance sample sizes across the two groups, which is recommended as seriously unequal sample sizes may alter parameter estimates (Howell, 1992). Table 1 presents a summary to describe the two samples.

Measures

The dependent variable in this study is based on the concept of students' sense of belonging in college, as described by the conceptual framework. Specifically, sense of belonging was operationalized using three items from the CSEQ that are believed to have psychometric properties consistent with general definitions of sense of belonging (Gonyea, Kish, Kuh, Muthiah, & Thomas, 2003; Hoffman, Llagas, & Snyder, 2003). Sense of belonging was derived from three survey items ($\alpha = 0.76$); using principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation, all three items loaded on a single factor that accounted for 78% of the inter-item variance. Thus, a composite variable was calculated by summing a respondent's scores on the component items. This procedure is consistent with suggestions offered by others (Armor, 1974). Participants were asked, "thinking of your own experience, rate the quality of your relationships with other students/faculty/administrators." Originally, responses to each item were placed on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 ("competitive, uninvolved, sense of alienation") to 7 ("friendly, supportive, sense of belonging"). Therefore, scores on the composite variable ranged from 3 to 21 with higher scores indicating higher levels of sense of belonging.

The independent variables were conceptualized in consonance with the theoretical framework upon which the present study is based. In other words, 10 CSEQ items were used to operationalize "interactions

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations for all Variables, Both Samples

| Variables | Blacks | | Whites | |
|--------------------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
| Sense of belonging | 15.39 | 3.63 | 15.85 | 3.35 |
| Year in college | 2.00 | 1.17 | 2.38 | 1.20 |
| Transfer status | 1.19 | 0.39 | 1.17 | 0.37 |
| Grades | 2.76 | 1.13 | 3.46 | 1.14 |
| Living on campus | 0.70 | 0.46 | 0.56 | 0.50 |
| Age | 1.74 | 1.00 | 1.73 | 0.80 |
| First-generation | 0.46 | 0.50 | 0.32 | 0.47 |
| Acquaint-INTEREST | 2.84 | 0.90 | 2.70 | 0.81 |
| Acquaint-BKGRD | 3.03 | 0.84 | 2.77 | 0.83 |
| Acquaint-AGE | 3.07 | 0.87 | 2.83 | 0.86 |
| Acquaint-RACE | 3.09 | 0.88 | 2.69 | 0.85 |
| Acquaint-COUNTRY | 2.72 | 0.96 | 2.34 | 0.87 |
| Discuss-VALUES | 2.83 | 0.95 | 2.45 | 0.97 |
| Discuss-POLITICAL | 2.68 | 1.04 | 2.38 | 0.99 |
| Discuss-RELIGION | 2.69 | 1.05 | 2.44 | 1.01 |
| Discuss-RACE | 2.92 | 1.01 | 2.29 | 1.01 |
| Discuss-COUNTRY | 2.60 | 1.04 | 2.05 | 0.95 |

Note. BKGRD = background.

with diverse peers” that potentially affect sense of belonging. Sample items asked respondents to indicate the frequency with which they “became acquainted with . . .” or “had serious discussions with . . .” students whose race/ethnic background, religious beliefs, political opinions, and country of origin were different from one’s own. Each item was placed on 4-point scale ranging from 1 (“never”) to 4 (“very often”). To test the significance of various interactions with diverse peers, each item was included in the model individually rather than creating an overall scale score. This procedure is consistent with prior research (Chang, 2001; Hurtado, 2001).

Finally, to intensify the rigor of this analysis, a set of statistical controls was employed to account for potentially confounding influences such

as background (e.g., first-generation status, age) and academic factors (e.g., year in school, transfer status, grades, living on campus). Statistical controls allow researchers to “subtract statistically the effects of a variable to see what a relationship would be without it” (Vogt, 1999, p. 56). Several of these factors have been shown to be important in measuring how college affects students (Astin, 1993; Lee, Mackie-Lewis, & Marks, 1993; Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, & Pascarella, 1996; Wassmer, Moore, & Shulock, 2004) so the study was designed to account for such differences. Table 2 presents the operational definitions of each variable.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive statistics were calculated to identify any existing patterns among variables. Second, exploratory correlation analyses [not presented here] were conducted to establish initial estimates of the magnitude and direction of interrelationships among the independent and dependent variables. In addition, independent samples *t* tests were conducted to test for differences between Black and White males in terms of sense of belonging. Third, hierarchical regression tests with a nested design were conducted to estimate the net effect of various sets of predictors on sense of belonging for African American (and White) men in college. Hierarchical regression is “a method of regression analysis in which independent variables are entered into the equation in a sequence specified by the researcher in advance” (Vogt, 1999, p. 129).

Results

The mean level of sense of belonging for African American males was 15.39 (*SD* = 3.63) and for White males was 15.85 (*SD* = 3.35); thus, White men in the sample seemed to report higher levels of sense of belonging, on average, than their African American counterparts. Upon closer inspection, *t* test results revealed no statistically significant differences, $t(529) = 1.25, p = 0.21$.

Hierarchical linear regression tests were conducted to estimate the general-model effects of diverse interactions on African American males' sense of belonging, controlling for an array of potentially confounding factors. The linear combination of factors has a statistically

Table 2
Operational Definitions of All Variables Included in Analysis

| Factor/CSEQ item | Coding |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Dependent variable</i> | |
| Sense of belonging | 3 (“sense of alienation”) to 21 (“sense of belonging”) |
| <i>Background/controls</i> | |
| Year in school | 1 = freshman, 2 = sophomore, 3 = junior, 4 = senior |
| Transfer student? | 0 = no, 1 = yes |
| Grades | 1 (“C, C- or lower”) to 5 (“A”) |
| Age | 1 (“19 or younger”) to 6 (“55 or older”) |
| First-generation? | 0 = no; 1 = yes |
| Live on campus? | 0 = no; 1 = yes |
| <i>Diverse interactions</i> | |
| Acquaint-INTEREST | 1 (“never”) to 4 (“very often”) |
| Acquaint-BKGRD | 1 (“never”) to 4 (“very often”) |
| Acquaint-AGE | 1 (“never”) to 4 (“very often”) |
| Acquaint-RACE | 1 (“never”) to 4 (“very often”) |
| Acquaint-COUNTRY | 1 (“never”) to 4 (“very often”) |
| Discuss-VALUES | 1 (“never”) to 4 (“very often”) |
| Discuss-POLITICAL | 1 (“never”) to 4 (“very often”) |
| Discuss-RELIGION | 1 (“never”) to 4 (“very often”) |
| Discuss-RACE | 1 (“never”) to 4 (“very often”) |
| Discuss-COUNTRY | 1 (“never”) to 4 (“very often”) |

Note. BKGRD = background.

significant association with sense of belonging, $F(16, 214) = 2.00$, $p < 0.01$, $R = 0.36$, $R^2 = 0.13$. The regression coefficient was 0.36, indicating that approximately 13% of the variance in Black males’ sense of belonging could be explained by variables in the final model. Significant predictors include interacting with peers whose interests differ from one’s own and becoming acquainted with students of a different race.

To compare these results to a sample of White males, hierarchical linear regression tests were conducted. The linear combination of factors

has a statistically significant impact on sense of belonging, $F(16, 283) = 1.66$, $p < 0.05$, $R = 0.29$, $R^2 = 0.09$. The regression coefficient was 0.29, indicating that approximately 9% of the variance in White males' sense of belonging could be accounted for by variables in the final model. Only one significant predictor was uncovered—becoming acquainted with peers of a different race. Table 3 presents a side-by-side summary of the regression results for both samples.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to estimate the relationship between African American males' diverse interactions and sense of belonging on campus, as defined by the CSEQ. Specifically, multivariate analyses were conducted to investigate how diverse experiences affect Black males' sense of belonging. Secondly, follow-up tests were conducted on a sample of White men to understand whether the relationship was unique to Black men or common across both student samples. Recall that the following research questions guided this analysis: (a) What is the relationship between diverse experiences in college and sense of belonging for Black men attending 4-year PWIs, controlling for background and academic differences? and (b) Do diverse interactions in college affect sense of belonging similarly or differently for White and Black students attending 4-year PWIs?

Diverse Interactions and Black Males' Sense of Belonging

African American males who interacted with diverse peers reported higher levels of sense of belonging than those who did not interact with diverse others. Specifically, Black men who became acquainted or socialized with peers of a different race or who hold different interests were more likely to report high levels of belonging to campus. These findings point to one of the benefits that diversity provides. Interacting with others who have diverse backgrounds and perspectives can lead to meaningful interactions, which, in turn, promote a greater sense of belonging or, in other words, attachment to college (Hurtado, 2001).

The factors that contributed significantly to African American males' sense of belonging included becoming acquainted with students of different interests and interacting with students of different races.

Table 3
Hierarchical Linear Regression Results, Both Samples

| Variables | Black Males | | | White Males | | |
|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------|-------------|-----------|-------|
| | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | |
| Constant | 10.63 | 1.50 | | 13.29 | 1.27 | |
| Age | 0.24 | 0.32 | 0.07 | -0.11 | 0.35 | -0.03 |
| FG | 0.70 | 0.47 | 0.10 | -0.07 | 0.42 | -0.01 |
| Transfer | 0.08 | 0.68 | 0.01 | 0.19 | 0.63 | 0.02 |
| CLASS | -0.11 | 0.25 | -0.04 | 0.06 | 0.24 | 0.02 |
| Grades | 0.10 | 0.20 | 0.03 | -0.11 | 0.17 | -0.04 |
| Live on | 0.18 | 0.57 | 0.03 | 0.42 | 0.50 | 0.06 |
| Interest | 0.81* | 0.40 | 0.21 | -0.35 | 0.37 | -0.08 |
| Bkground | 0.07 | 0.49 | 0.02 | 0.55 | 0.40 | 0.14 |
| Diff. Age | -0.36 | 0.40 | -0.09 | 0.42 | 0.30 | 0.11 |
| Race1 | 0.94* | 0.42 | 0.24 | 0.98** | 0.37 | 0.25 |
| Country1 | -0.12 | 0.37 | -0.03 | -0.20 | 0.33 | -0.05 |
| Values | -0.09 | 0.40 | -0.02 | 0.20 | 0.32 | 0.06 |
| Political | -0.13 | 0.36 | -0.04 | -0.03 | 0.30 | -0.01 |
| Religion | -0.43 | 0.36 | -0.13 | -0.46 | 0.31 | -0.14 |
| Race2 | 0.03 | 0.37 | 0.01 | -0.50 | 0.35 | -0.15 |
| Country2 | 0.54 | 0.34 | 0.16 | 0.22 | 0.34 | 0.06 |

Note. FG = first-generation. CLASS = year in school. Bkground = background. Diff. age = different age. Race1 = acquainted with students of different race. Country1 = acquainted with students of different country. Race2 = discussions with students of different race. Country2 = discussions with students of different country. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

However, socializing with peers whose race differs from one's own was the most powerful predictor of Black males' sense of belonging. Recall that the standardized beta for cross-racial interactions was 0.24, which is slightly greater than the standardized beta for the *interests* variable ($\beta = 0.21$). These results point to the powerful influence of cross-racial interactions which has been documented previously based on non-Black students attending a Hispanic-serving institution (Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007) or multiple institutions (Saenz, 2005). Building on Chang's (1999) findings that socializing with diverse peers increases satisfaction and self-concept, this study extends previous

lines of inquiry and demonstrates that cross-racial interactions also affect the extent to which Black men feel connected to campus.

Diverse Interactions and Men's Sense of Belonging: Black-White Comparison

Descriptive results indicate that White men, in the sample, reported higher levels of sense of belonging than their Black counterparts (although these differences did not satisfy the threshold for statistical significance). Given that the institutional sample for this analysis consisted of large, predominantly White 4-year institutions, this may reflect conclusions drawn from previous findings. That is, Black men tend to perceive such campuses as chilly, unwelcoming, and unfriendly; chilly climates engender a sense of alienation rather than belonging (Bennett & Okinaka, 1990; Feagin et al., 1996; Smedley et al., 1993). To be sure, other factors may account for this finding and future studies should be designed to identify a few of these untapped variables (e.g., psychological stress of racism, microaggressions).

Only one significant predictor of sense of belonging emerged for White men. Those who socialized with students of a different race reported higher levels of sense of belonging, all other things equal. Interestingly, diverse interactions of this kind yielded a relatively greater influence on White men than Black men. Recall that the unstandardized beta coefficient for White men was 0.98 and only 0.94 for Black men. These findings reinforce those reported elsewhere—that cross-racial interactions benefit White collegians more than minority students (Chang, 1996; Milem, 2001; Villalpando, 1996). The contradiction in terms of educational practice is worth noting. Quite often when we talk about diversity, conversations are directed toward students of color and what they stand to gain from such experiences. Findings presented here point to a dimension of the diversity debate that is often overlooked and largely misunderstood—namely, the benefits that accrue to White students as well.

Results from these analyses generally coincide with those presented in previous studies. For example, Octavio (2002) found that, regardless of one's race/ethnicity, satisfaction with college was positively influenced by socializing with students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds. Results from the present study demonstrate that the same

holds true when considering Black males' sense of belonging—socializing with students of a different race matters. Indeed, this study points to the importance of structural diversity in higher education (Milem, 1994); the benefits that accrue from interactions with diverse peers depend on there being sufficient numbers of diverse individuals on campus with whom students can interact. The presence of diverse peers (and faculty), while insufficient on its own, increases the likelihood that one will engage diverse perspectives during college. Policymakers and educators should consult these results when discussing the educational benefits of diversity today and designing campus environments that promote such interactions.

Similar to Chang, Hakuta, Jones, and Witt (2003), who found that diverse campuses facilitate higher-order thinking skills among students, results presented herein suggest that diverse campuses are likely to facilitate sense of belonging among Black and White male students. However, merely increasing the number of diverse individuals on campus is insufficient without providing mechanisms for students to engage one another in educationally meaningful ways. Thus, administrators might take note of these findings when creating campus environments that are conducive for cross-racial interactions and enacting policies that promote such engagement. And while it is premature to recommend specific policies linking a particular type of exchange with a desired outcome, findings from this study call attention to policies that pertain to student life and conduct, admissions, campus activities, and study abroad, to name a few.

While my findings are *generally* consistent with previous studies on other student samples, this analysis extends previous research in a number of important ways. For instance, Villalpando (1996) found that cross-racial interactions influenced White males' postcollege sense of social responsibility and participating in community service. This study's findings suggest that cross-racial interactions influence White males' sense of belonging in college as well. Moreover, cross-racial interactions also exert a positive influence on African American males' sense of belonging in college. And, interacting with students of a different race affects Black males' sense of belonging more than *interacting with students who hold different interests*. It's reasonable to conclude, then, that diversity of *kind* may be more important than mere diversity of *mind* when it comes to sense of belonging (Strayhorn,

2006). This is an important contribution to our knowledge of diversity in higher education.

Examined through the lens of college student retention or college impact theory, the findings of these analyses are particularly illuminating. For example, scholars have argued that background characteristics such as age, transfer status, and first-generation status coalesce and have an effect on student outcomes in college (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993), but findings from the present study do not support prior conclusions. None of the demographic variables were found to be significant for either sample. In other words, Black and White men, in this sample, do not differ on the basis of age, first-generation status, or year in school in terms of sense of belonging in college.

These findings have a number of important implications. Chang et al. (2003) concluded that “students who are exposed to diverse experiences, perspectives, and ways of thinking that truly reflect the multiracial and multiethnic society of the United States will be better prepared to participate meaningfully in it” (p. 13). Results of this study suggest that those who are exposed to diverse individuals are also more likely to achieve a sense of belonging in college. According to Chang et al., these individuals are also better prepared to participate in democracy. Thus, findings can be leveraged to point to the compelling *social* interest that diversity serves such as civic participation.

Contrary to popular belief, recent court decisions affirm that increasing diversity serves a compelling educational interest. However, legal statutes have placed “narrowly tailored” limits on our efforts to achieve this goal. Increasingly, scholars and practitioners have to build a strong empirical case that diversity adds value to the college experience (Gurin, 1999; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). This study’s findings provide some of the information necessary to construct an empirical defense of diversity and its affect on students’ sense of belonging in college, which is linked theoretically to retention, a major policy issue in education.

This study may be significant for several campus constituencies; a few are highlighted here. One group that might benefit from the results of this study includes those who work in admissions. Findings provide admissions officers with data about the importance of diverse interac-

tions on sense of belonging. Officers might use the results of this study when admitting and enrolling larger numbers of students of color or students who have different interests (e.g., music, art, political perspectives), which, in turn, contributes to students' sense of belonging.

Another group that might benefit from the results of this study consists of residence life staff members. Findings suggest that socializing with students who are different positively affects sense of belonging for Black and White men. Residence life staff members play an important role in providing students with opportunities to live, work, and socialize with each other. Thus, professionals may wish to consider the findings from this study to plan living configurations and conditions that promote peer interactions. For example, residence hall councils, themed housing, residential colleges, and living-learning communities may be important and effective interventions (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Pike, 1999; Zhao & Kuh, 2004) for promoting sense of belonging in college men.

Faculty may wish to consider the findings from this study to assess their curricular offerings and teaching methods. Results reveal that sense of belonging is powerfully influenced by cross-racial contact and engaging peers whose interests differ from one's own. Thus, faculty might adopt pedagogical techniques that encourage peer collaboration and cross-racial exchange in the classroom. For instance, some research suggests that opportunity for intensive dialogue in classrooms yields powerful learning gains for students (Nelson Laird, 2005). Working in small groups, mock debates, and service learning also may be potentially useful strategies for instructors of college men (Strayhorn, 2008b).

Future research could clarify and extend the results of the present study in a number of areas. First, more detailed analyses of African American males' sense of belonging might reveal more about the underlying patterns that exist. Qualitative approaches that employ in-depth interviews and/or journaling might prove useful in unpacking the lived experience of Black male collegians and how they negotiate cross-racial interactions.

Second, that cross-racial interactions were significant predictors of sense of belonging for both Black and White male collegians warrants

additional investigation. What is it about such interactions that make them powerful predictors of educational outcomes? To explore this question, additional analyses are recommended using large surveys like the CSEQ, CIRP, and even locally designed surveys from single- or multi-institutional studies.

Third, while background variables did not significantly predict sense of belonging in the present study, future researchers might include alternative proxies for individual characteristics. For instance, future studies might examine the impact of personological variables on sense of belonging using frameworks like the Big Five personality traits (Lounsbury, Gibson, & Hamrick, 2004; Lounsbury, Loveland, & Gibson, 2003) or Sedlacek's (2004) noncognitive variables.

Limitations

As with all empirical investigations, the present study was not without limitations. First, using extant survey data (i.e., CSEQ) limited the variables that could be considered in this analysis. Therefore, I acknowledge that the model may suffer from specification error. Secondary analyses of this kind can be constrained by measurement choices made by previous researchers such as the way in which scales and items have been operationalized (Koljatic, 2000).

Second, this study relied upon self-report data (e.g., grades, age, interactions). While some researchers have raised concerns about the internal validity of self-report data, others argue that self-reports and objectively measured variables are correlated and that the first can be used to estimate the latter (Kuh et al., 1997; Pike, 1996; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1999). Thus, CSEQ data were deemed appropriate for this investigation.

Finally, this analysis was based on data from a sample of students who responded to the 2004-2005 national administration of the CSEQ. While most data suggest that the study's sample reflects the general college-going population (Gonyea et al., 2003), parameter estimates may still be biased. Thus, readers should interpret these findings with a degree of caution as generalizations may be limited.

While important, these limitations do not diminish the study's usefulness in understanding the extent to which interactions with diverse others affect African American males' sense of belonging in college.

Conclusion

These findings may be useful to higher education professionals in that they help to fill a void in our current knowledge about sense of belonging and African American male collegians. This study moves beyond much of the current literature, which is primarily descriptive and based on pooled (i.e., mixed race) or single-institution samples, to measure the net effect of specific forms of diverse interactions on African American males' sense of belonging. As more and more Black men enter higher education, educators can learn from the results of this study to create campus environments opulent with opportunities for engagement across diversity and Black males' success.

The time is ripe for us to contend with the unasked (and therefore unanswered) question of diversity. That is, our future may turn on a single question—is the educational value of diversity sufficiently compelling to justify pursuing it in the face of legal challenge? If so, then the author recommends deliberate and intentional implementation of recommendations such as those outlined in this article. Indeed, the task that lies ahead is great and requires hard work; but hard work is no excuse for retreat. With work, we can make our campuses more welcoming, more inclusive—places where students “fit in” and feel they belong.

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