Toward a Humanizing Framework for Student Success

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Abstract

This article centers seven second-year Black and Latinx students with the hopes of reframing the conversation around "student success." These students have prevailed over the "problem" of freshman to sophomore retention with which Midwest University (pseudonym) has historically struggled. However, we argue that current frameworks that quantify student success dehumanize students of color. In addition, we contend that a limited focus on research methods and assessment in higher education diverts attention from larger questions of culture and power in the institution—in other words, what kind of institution is needed in order to take responsibility for such data. A closer look at students' experiences reveals complexities and contradictions involved in "success." For example, peer support, while essential for students' survival, allows the institution to absorb racialized incidents and maintain the status quo. Grounded in student interviews, we work toward a humanizing framework for student success

Introduction

In 2012, 34 Black and Latinx students started their academic journeys as first-year students at Midwest University (pseudonym). Of the 34, only 23 students returned for their sophomore year, an attrition rate of 32.4%. Within the context of retention and student success research, these 23 students are considered the "success stories."

Midwest is a regional, mid-sized private university. While it is a predominantly White institution, it has generally been able to recruit students of color to campus as first-year students. However, the university has struggled to retain students of color to their sophomore year. In addition, previous institutional reports show that students of color lag behind their White counterparts in GPA and graduation rates (Klimaszewski & Hatchet, 2013; Buckmiller & Hatchet, 2014). The persistence of these disparities led to an institutional effort to better understand the lived experiences of first-year Black and Latinx students through interviews and focus groups in 2013.

At the time of the study and since, Midwest has been going through a number of initiatives to support racial diversity on campus. Conversations around diversity have been on-going and have been put in motion by internal and external pressures. In other words, a noticeable lack of diversity is bad for business. Diversity is linked to the ability to recruit students of color, many of whom might not even consider applying to smaller, private, and predominantly White institutions. Equity and inclusion are central to the missions of a number of higher education institutions, including smaller private ones that have always been predominantly White.

To be sure, nothing happens by accident and nothing occurs in a vacuum. In examining the politics of higher education institutions, we think dialectically

about the relationship between schools and society. For this reason, we are interested in thinking deeply about the goals and purposes of higher education. This work is meant to be critical yet hopeful. It is not meant to be an indictment of the institution but rather, an opportunity to forthrightly and thoughtfully engage issues of culture and power.

This article centers seven returning Black and Latinx students with the hopes of reframing the conversation around "student success." These students have prevailed over the "problem" of freshman to sophomore retention with which Midwest has historically struggled. They are the success stories—what the institution wants. However, we argue that the quantification of success dehumanizes students of color. A closer look at students' first-year experiences reveals complexities and contradictions involved in "success." For example, peer support, while essential for students' survival, allows the institution to absorb racialized incidents and maintain the status quo.

To begin, we provide a brief overview of student success. We then discuss the theoretical framework for our critique of the quantification of student success, and relatedly, the focus on graduation and retention rates. Next, we describe the research project and its findings. The interviews drive and ground the analysis, but we also see the need to theorize the experiences of the students. We conclude with an analysis that works toward a humanizing framework for student success, in particular, the role of the culturally democratic institution. Writing from a critical pedagogical perspective allows analysis and an opportunity to make sense of *why* things are the way they are.

Literature Review

The issues of student recruitment, retention and persistence in higher education have been the focus of much research over the past 30 years (Tinto, 2010). More specifically, research has focused on defining, theorizing, supporting, and building models of institutional action for student success (Braxton, 2006; Ewell & Wellman, 2007; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Hearn, 2006; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, Hayek, 2006; Museus, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1993, 2005; Perna & Thomas, 2006; Smart, Feldman & Ethington, 2006; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Peter Ewell and Jane Wellman[1] (2007) state that while student success involves many different factors, the most prominent definitions are "degree attainment, … cognitive learning outcomes, personal satisfaction and goal attainment, job placement and career advancement, civic and life skills, social and economic well-being, and commitment to lifelong learning" (p. 6).

Students of Color and Student Success

Students of color continue to struggle with college persistence, retention, and graduation (Pyne & Means, 2013). Nationally, 63.3% of White students in the 2009 cohort graduated within 6 years, while the graduation rates were 39.5% for Black students, 53.6% for Hispanic students, 73.0% for Asian students, 48.5% for Pacific Islander students, and 41.2% for American Indian/Alaskan Native students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). Research in higher education has identified various factors that may address lower retention rates for students of color. For instance, Watson Scott Swail, Kenneth E. Redd and Laura W. Perna (2003) outlined five components of a retention framework for minority students: financial aid; recruitment and admissions; academic services; curriculum and instruction; and student services, which include campus climate.

According to Swail et al. (2003), campus climate is determined by the beliefs and practices of students, faculty, staff and administrators. An institution with a positive campus climate supports its students and is characterized by positive peer relations. Many institutions have engaged in campus climate assessments in order, in part, to address student retention issues. The hope is that positive assessments prove that the institution is on the right track. Unfortunately, Annemarie Vaccaro (2010) found that while quantitative findings in a climate study at one predominantly White university described the campus as "positive" and "accepting," open-ended comments by male respondents showed signs of "symbolic racism, hostility toward diversity efforts, and resentment toward the university's liberal bias" (pp. 205-206).

Racism exists on college campuses—in personal interactions and in institutional policies and practices. Students of color have had to negotiate, make sense of, and attempt to find their places in contexts that can be socially and culturally isolating, academically and pedagogical alienating, and racially and ethnically hostile (Vandegrift, 2011; Delpit, 2012; Lam, 2015a). For example, Jioni A. Lewis, Ruby Mendenhall, Stacy A. Harwood and Margaret Browne Hunt (2012) discussed gendered racial microaggressions against Black women students and the strategies they used to cope with the intersection and racism and sexism.

Ethnic studies programs provide academic spaces for engaging issues of race and racism. Anne-Marie Nuñez (2011) found that Chicana/o studies courses supported first-generation Latina/o students in their transitions to college. In particular, the courses were a space to connect with other Latina/o students and faculty; increase awareness of their cultural heritage; and learn about different perspectives and backgrounds. Benefits included helping students counter negative Latina/o stereotypes (Rendón, 1994, as cited in Nuñez, 2011) and

increasing their academic motivation and performance (Nuñez, 2009b; Saunders & Serna, 2004, as cited in Nuñez, 2011).

Culturally Relevant Models for Student Success

In his development of the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model, Samuel Museus (2014) reviewed the college student success literature, beginning with Vincent Tinto's integration theory (1975, 1987, 1993). Museus summarized critiques of Tinto's theory as well as alternative "culturally relevant" frameworks (e.g., Cabrera, Nora, & Castañeda, 1992; Dowd, Sawatzky, & Korn, 2011; Guiffrida, 2006; Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012; Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus, 2011; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1999). Museus (2014) states that a new framework must satisfy three points in order for it to be viable; it must:

> (1) [address] all of the shortcomings of traditional perspectives of college student success, (2) [offer] a comprehensive model derived from a substantial body of literature on diverse college student populations, and (3) [provide] a model comprised of a set of easily quantifiable and testable hypotheses. (p. 193).

He then describes the CECE model, the focal point being nine indicators of culturally engaging campus environments. The model posits that a more culturally engaging campus environment is positively associated with greater student success. It is important to note that the CECE model focuses on "environmental factors that *promote* success among diverse student populations… rather than the negative environmental pressures that might *hinder* success of those students" (p. 216) such as institutional racism and racial bias (Dowd et al., 2011). While Museus acknowledges the significance of negative environmental pressures, he states that the CECE indicators "indirectly account" for such pressures (p. 217).

Greg Tanaka (2002) and Alicia C. Dowd, Misty Sawatzky, and Randi Korn (2011) also call for critical perspectives in higher education assessment. They discuss the need for instruments that measure "intercultural effort." Using an economics framework, Dowd et al. argue that "minoritized students" face "higher prices" in their investments in education that "include the cost of countering discrimination" (p. 30). In contrast to Museus (2014), Dowd et al. insist that factors that hinder the success of students of color must be measured: "Intercultural constraints on the college success of minoritized students are real, identifiable, and measurable. It is essential to measure these constraints in order to attend to and alleviate them" (p. 37).

We agree with Tanaka and Dowd et al.'s critiques. However, we contend that a limited focus on research methods and assessment in higher education diverts attention from larger questions of culture and power in the institution—in other words, what kind of institution is needed in order to take responsibility for such data. In fact, Tanaka notes that it "would be valuable to examine how institutions change how power operates in increasingly intercultural contexts" (p. 263). We address such questions here.

Theoretical Framework

While "student success" is a broad concept, degree attainment is generally, if not always, one of its most significant indicators. Existing research on low graduation rates for students of color typically begins with the following narrative: *Students of color (but* not *Asian or Asian American students) graduate at lower rates than their White counterparts*. To be sure, these statistics are true and troublesome.

However, we argue that there are two problems with this approach. First, within the context of this narrative, Black, Latinx and Native students become marked as "high-risk students." As a result, research focuses on how to "fix" students

(Darder, 2002), which may lead to what Lori Rendón calls "victim blaming" (2006), rather than how the institution can and must be transformed to make space for students of color. Thus, students are not the problem, but schooling is: "Rather than 'high-risk' students, it seems we should be more concerned with 'high-risk' institutions, whose policies and practices, deliberately or not, can rob bicultural [students] of their innate intelligence" (Darder, 2012, p. 77).

Second, we see the dehumanization of students by our preoccupation with numbers and percentages. In her research on recruiting teachers of color, Cynthia Dillard (1994) argues that "inclusion of people of color within education must have at its core the recognition of the multiple ways in which we participate, see and are in the world" (p. 9). Dillard's analysis may be applied to students of color as well. Implicit in the rationale of uneven graduation percentages is the notion that the "solution" is to make the rates for Black, Latinx and Native students equal to those of White and Asian/American students. This dehumanizes students of color; Dillard recounts one student who wanted to be "more than a number" (p. 9).

In addition, more often than not, Native students are not considered because they do not constitute a large enough "sample size." This approach also dehumanizes White[2] and Asian and Asian American students. Within the context of the "problem" of low graduation rates for students of color, White and Asian and Asian American students (the latter sometimes not considered students of color), are treated as not having (or being) problems, and thus, not worthy of research (Lam, 2012, 2015b, 2017). In fact, Asian and Asian American students were not sought out to be a part of this study because of their relatively high retention and graduation rates. In effect, the institution is not interested in learning about their experiences on campus, including their experiences with racism.

Critical educational theorist Paulo Freire (1970/2010) states the necessity of humanization as a "radical requirement":

> The oppressed have been destroyed precisely because their situation has reduced them to things. In order to regain their humanity they must cease to be things… This is a radical requirement. They cannot enter the struggle as objects in order to *later* become human beings. (p. 68)

According Freire, to reduce people to numbers, things or objects is to dehumanize. An alternative framework—a humanizing framework for student success—rejects the notion that increasing the numbers, rates or percentages for students of color will lead to "student success" or a more positive campus climate. Rather, we must recognize the "entire personhood" that students of color bring to teaching and learning and their inherent value in schools (Dillard, 1994, p. 16).

Methodology

Midwest University is a regional, mid-sized private university. It has more than 5,000 students, including over 3,000 undergraduates. The university categorizes 81% as White, 3% Black, 4% Asian, 3% Hispanic, and 0.2% American Indian/Alaska Native (Lam, 2015a). Graduation rates for the 2009 cohort with a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree are 76% for White students, 48% Black, 60% Hispanic, and 89% Asian. The relatively high graduation percentage for Asian or Asian American students may be due to this categorization including both domestic and international students, many of whom come from the middle-class. There are seven Black faculty members, nine Hispanic, and 14 Asian.

Students of color at Midwest (including our interviewees) range from first-generation working-class students to those from middle-class and affluent families. For the most part, the undergraduate student population is from the

suburbs of Chicago, Kansas City, and Minneapolis. A number of students are from metropolitan areas, while others are from smaller towns in the state and the surrounding Great Plains states. There is a significant international contingent, in particular, students from Malaysia, through the actuarial science program. This is consistent with the national trend of international student enrollment as a source of tuition revenue as well as efforts to position institutions as global or cosmopolitan (Fischer, 2019, 2020), even in the context of racism on campuses.

This study began as an effort to better understand the lived experiences of first-year students at Midwest. The Provost's Office commissioned two researchers to conduct interviews and focus groups in Spring 2013 (Buckmiller & Hatchet, 2014). All returning Black and Latinx second-year students were invited to participate. There were roughly 23 students that fit this criterion, and seven total students participated in the individual interviews. These students consented via the university approved Institutional Review Board process. Students were initially recruited by the Associate Provost for Academic Excellence and Student Success via a letter to each student's mailbox and via email.

The researchers engaged in intentional and purposeful personal conversations and dialogue through semi-structured interviews. Recognizing that some students may feel more comfortable in one-on-one settings while others may prefer a small group setting, our design allowed each participant to choose the format they preferred.

As a method for triangulation, the researchers were invited to a special "fishbowl" discussion sponsored by the Black Student Union (BSU) at the African American Cultural House. Over 20 students and alumni from various academic years attended and shared their experiences at Midwest with five university representatives. Although these students represented all levels (freshman through

senior, graduate, and alumni), many themes arose that were similar to what we learned in the interviews with second-year students. We also utilized document analysis in our review of previous university reports on this matter.

We coded the seven transcripts by "theming the data" (Sandana, 2009, p. 139). We identified themes that emerged from the data (Ezzy, 2002), compared each set of themes, and then "[winnowed] down" the number of themes by grouping similar ideas into one theme (Saldana, p. 139).

Findings

We identified four findings. The first provides a picture of campus climate as well as students' attitudes about Midwest's academic and social life. The final three findings contribute to the task of this article to work toward a humanizing framework for student success. Students' experiences speak to what it takes to survive and succeed at Midwest—in particular, complexities and contradictions that are not captured in the quantification of success.

<u>Campus Climate</u>

As second-year students, the participants recalled their pre-college perceptions of Midwest. Several students mentioned that the school's academic reputation was a significant factor in their decision to attend Midwest. Most of the students talked about expecting a rigorous and challenging education at Midwest. For example, Erika said, "I expected a really driven and motivated student body, with a really high level of professors and a really high level of expectations for the students."

Most students described the lack of students of color on campus or observing/experiencing racism on campus. Teresa described being in a context without a lot of racial/ethnic diversity for the first time in her life: "When I got here, for the first time in my life, I didn't see a lot of Black kids, a lot of [South

Asian] Indian kids, or Hispanic kids." Andrea also expected to see more students of color: "I thought there were going to be more Black people here (laughter). But now I know the state is the fifth whitest in the U.S. and that goes for Midwest also." In addition, Rona noted the absence of faculty of color: "Do we even have a Black professor here?" Her question reflects the reality of having been on a college campus for a year and a half and not encountering or even hearing of a Black faculty member.

Though students did not necessarily want to dwell on the topic, racism and racialized incidents were common discussion points. Two students described Midwest as "welcoming" with a caveat. Rona stated, "It is welcoming but there are times..." and proceeded to describe troubling conversations with other students. Teresa observed: "Midwest students are welcoming to the majority of people but not always to the minority of people."

Felicia shared that some students accept students of color but others do not: "It depends on how the person was raised or grew up, whether they are accepting or friendly towards minorities, or whether they are completely against it and avoid minorities." Felicia also recounted students "hiding" their non-acceptance and others being condescending:

> I feel as though lots of people are friendly towards minorities but there are clearly people who are not. They hide it well, if that makes anyone feel better. I think that most people are okay with [racial diversity]; in fact, most people enjoy diversity. But some people seem condescending towards minorities, or at least me sometimes, which pisses me off.

While Felicia provided the most detailed description of her experiences as a student of color on campus (students being against you, avoiding you, and being

condescending toward you), other participants' accounts also speak to challenges with campus climate at Midwest.

Most participants discussed Greek letter organizations (i.e., social organizations at many U.S. colleges and universities, commonly referred to as "Greek life") during their interviews. Perhaps unsurprisingly, students' opinions differed based on whether or not they were involved in a fraternity or sorority. Teresa was initially against joining a sorority; however, when her roommate did and invited her, she became active and now holds an office. Similarly, Michael recounted:

> I never thought I would be in fraternity…. I went through Rush [organized events that allow prospective and current Greek organization members to meet and socialize] and I found a house I really liked, and I have stuck with it. It has really helped me, opened up a lot of doors and helped me get to know a lot of people.

Those who were not involved framed their discussion within the context of cliques at Midwest. Felicia explained, "I feel like Midwest is very heavily Greek-oriented and sports-oriented, so the fact that I am not in either one of those things is kind of weird. All the sororities people usually associate with each other." Rona connected the cliques on campus to racialized identities: "I'm not a part of Greek life here or many other organizations because maybe there is nobody that looks like me in these groups."

Rona had been in a sorority her first semester but decided to drop out: "When I came here, I actually hated it. I was in Greek life my first semester." Andrea had also been in a sorority and decided to drop out after her first year. Andrea thought that "joining that sorority, a conventional White sorority, kind of put me at odds with the other Black girls at this school and that didn't exactly help with my experience." She further explained, "I was known as the Black girl who turned to

the Whites and a lot of the girls in BSU said I should have come and talked to them first, instead of talking to the White girls first." Whether students had positive or negative opinions, it's clear that Greek life had a strong impact on students' experiences as well as campus climate issues.

Educator, Expert and the Entertainment

Participants described conversations with White and/or non-Latinx peers that alienated them. In these cases, conversations about their racialized and ethnic identities were initiated by their peers. Students of color were assigned roles as educator, expert or the entertainment—not on their terms but on terms dictated by others.

Rona was often asked questions by White students on issues that she did not feel comfortable talking about, without a level of trust or friendship established:

> I'm an open-minded person, but once I got here, I was like, "Whoa, this is way awkward." It took me a while to branch out because I didn't have any similarities with anyone in the hall. They [White students] would ask me questions about blackness and being Black that I really did not want to answer.

As the one Black student in her hall, she was expected to have taken on the role of "educator and expert" in blackness.

Similarly, Teresa felt dehumanized by peers' prodding: "You speak fluent Spanish? Say something in Spanish for us." Teresa explained, "It feels like I'm a pet who is called to do a trick. Do you want me to show you how I can roll my tongue? In a way, I don't usually find things offensive, but you know, it's like, 'Hey, look my pet can do this, she can speak Spanish fluently.' But I think it is rude." Questions that some White students may feel are light, trivial or

entertaining are experienced as rude and isolating to students of color who are objectified as the entertainment. Rona shared a specific conversation from early on during her first year: "I remember one of the first weeks here, I was talking to the girls across the hall from me, and they asked, 'Can you teach us to shake our ass like a Black girl?' That kind of made me not want to seek out and talk to people anymore."

Andrea attributed inappropriate attempts at humor by peers as "nerves":

> This one girl was telling me … about this White guy who was talking to her [and] said he wished he had the dance skills of a Black guy but the money-making skills of a White person. Yeah, I guess you could say that is racist, but I think he is just nervous to talk to you…. They are just not used to being around Black people.

While we cannot speak to this particular student's motives, we see in these three instances that it is the responsibility of students of color to address ignorance and be "educator and expert."

In Rona and Andrea's experiences with racialized humor, students of color were expected to go along with the joke and not have any kind of personal reaction or response to it—serving as a "laugh track" of sorts to their peers' attempts to project a certain degree of comfort with race and nonchalant approach to racial stereotypes.

Survival Strategies

Michael described an incident that occurred during his first-year seminar. The class was held in a chapel on campus that was mostly dark: "It is all natural light in there…. And when the sunlight came through, someone said, 'Oh, I can't see Michael smile.' They made a joke like that." Michael refused to go along with

the joke at his expense: "I could have chosen to play it off and laugh [but] if you give an inch, some will take a mile." He made the nearly instant decision—in "half a second"—to respond in a very deliberate way: "The whole class looked at me because they were looking for the reaction. I'm not going to sit here and take this, but I am also not going to go after this dude's character." Michael decided instead of going "on a big rant" that he would just remove himself from the situation. He walked out of class. Later, the professor emailed him and asked if they could meet and talk. Michael said the professor was worried about "lawsuits and stuff like that." Michael responded: "No, from my point of view I was just raised in a better family. I'm not going to go after this kid. But at the same time, I'm not going to have this happen. He asked me what I would like him to do [to] deal with it. I told him I would talk to the kid personally."

We see through one incident that Michael was the entertainment, expert—in deciding on how to respond to a racialized incident at that moment and afterward—and finally, educator. Michael's account suggests an awareness of his classmates sensing the possibility of threat—and making the conscious decision to resist their expectations. He decides to act in a way that reflects that he "was just raised in a better family."

When asked about how to cope with racism, another student, Teresa, mentioned similar themes:

> I think it is just a matter of … not being an example of those stereotypes. I mean, most people think different things about Hispanic women. It's just about proving them wrong. I think that is another motivator, too. Not letting stupid things people say get to you. Get a tough skin. Just be better than them.

Both Michael and Teresa are driven to go against stereotypes—"prove them wrong"—and use the survival strategy of wanting to be "better than them."

The second survival strategy discussed by participants was the Black Student Union. Lilian shared an incident in her dorm in which White students stated their discomfort and possibly even fear of her and another Black student. Ironically, the conversation occurred in response to the White students' behavior when they were drunk, and the White students were the ones who requested (or demanded) the meeting:

> The White students called the meeting. At this point, we [Lillian and her friend] [said], "We don't need to meet with ya'll. What happened last night happened. You all were drunk. Just leave it at that." Then my friend said, "No, we need to have this discussion. We live with these people. We have to go to a community bathroom and see these people so we should work some things out."

Lilian described the meeting that began "really casual," led by the White students, which then turned accusatory:

> We had a floor meeting, middle of hallway, really casual. We allowed them [the White students] to lead the meeting. It was their meeting. We allowed them to speak first. One of the first things out of their mouths was, "We feel that you all are too Black. You are too proud to be Black. We feel like you are enforcing your blackness on us."

As a result, Lilian and her friend were alienated from the rest of the floor:

> My roommate and I were on our own. No one came by anymore. No one wanted to hang out, nobody wanted to go to dinner. The family-friendly environment that had been created was no more. At first, it hurt my feelings, but then I thought, whatever.

Lilian further reflected on students' accusations that she was "too proud to be Black":

> I felt as if I'm not doing anything out of the ordinary. But would I correct you if you said something that was wrong? Yes. Would I take offense to a racial slur that you use? Yes. Would I take time and educate you? Yes. But does that make me proud? This is the only way I know how to survive. There was no manual: "Here is how to survive as an African American student at Midwest." If it seemed that I was proud of who I was or it seemed that I took pride in the fact that my hair is natural—that is my crown, my style. I wasn't going to apologize for it.

The actions Lilian lists—correcting misconceptions, speaking out against racial slurs, educating—seem to fit the role of "educator and expert" that students of color are expected to fill; however, Lilian's case is different because she refuses to have these conversations on others' terms. We see that when racial conversations happen on their own terms, students of color are not valued as educators and experts but are deemed offensive and threatening—"enforcing [their] blackness," in Lilian's case. In short, students should be Black enough to validate racial jokes but not "too Black"; ethnic enough to perform language but not "too proud"; knowledgeable enough about race to educate but only when called upon—and only in ways that do not disturb the "protective pillows" of White racial comfort (Fine, 1997, as cited in DiAngelo, 2011, p. 55).

Lilian was conscious of the fact that Midwest is a predominantly White campus and did not want to compromise herself in exchange for making "other people feel comfortable":

> When you are an African American female student on a predominantly White campus, it may just be an unnatural or unconscious aura about you. But that may be the only way you know how to survive. Because if you don't have that aura, you will find yourself changing into something that you are not in order to make other people feel comfortable.

Having pride in herself—including her racialized identity and her natural hair—were a means of survival, ensuring that her racialized identity does not disappear through assimilation.

After this incident, Lilian stated that she and her friend "turned towards BSU for companion[ship]." She explained the importance of being in a context with other Black students: "Being an African American student or being any new student at Midwest, you need to escape. You get to a point where you see so many people that do not look like you, that it is disheartening. It can be depressing." Being on a predominantly White campus means contending with the pressures of assimilation, pressures to "apologize" for being Black, and pressures to respond to racialized incidents in "appropriate" ways.

BSU seemed to be a positive support for many Black students. For example, Rona commented, "There is a lot of blatant racism, but you are not thinking about it in that way. That is one thing that is hard to deal with. That's why BSU is there to vent, and let it out, and let somebody know so if we need to take action or anything like that." As a survival strategy, BSU was a means of resisting the tendency to internalize and/or make excuses for racism. BSU was also a platform for action and resistance.

Thoughts of Transferring

Three students recalled their desires to transfer, either after their first semester or first year. Rona almost left Midwest to attend Great Plains State (GPS) because GPS offered more social/cultural experiences for her as a student of color: "This year I was on the verge of transferring. I put my application in at Great Plains State. They just started an NAACP chapter, a BSA, and Black Greeks." Andrea also contemplated leaving after her first semester: "I hated it here." Her social life

was negatively impacted by her decision to join a "conventional White sorority," an action with which "a lot of girls in the BSU" did not agree.

Participants explained challenges with retention in different ways. However, the idea that rigorous academics, or the notion that students could not "hack it" academically never came up as a reason why they considered leaving or why their friends left. This corresponds with the initial finding of this study which describes students' high level of academic preparation and high expectations for a strong academic program at Midwest.

Teresa referenced racial climate issues but was reluctant to attribute the differences in retention rates to one factor. Another participant, Erika, refused to cite racial climate issues: "I think you feel that no matter what ethnicity, college is an adjustment. Either suck it up or learn how to deal with it." Rona had a different perspective. She discussed the fact that many students of color she knows are first-generation college students and may not have the support to negotiate college (academic and social aspects) as well as other students: "I think almost everybody in BSU is first generation, which means none of our parents have a four-year college degree." In other words, although college is an adjustment for all students, some students may have more support in making the adjustment than others.

Analysis and Conclusion

This study centers the experiences of seven Black and Latinx second-year students at Midwest University. These seven students have prevailed over the "problem" of first to second year retention at Midwest. However, their experiences reveal complexities and contradictions involved in their success that point to limitations in "student success" methods and frameworks. We conclude

with three points in an analysis that works toward a humanizing framework for student success.

First, participants' experiences support Tanaka's (2002) and Dowd et. al.'s (2011) critiques of the use of "student effort" and similar concepts in higher education research, in particular research that seeks to explain differences in retention and graduate rates: "Terms like 'integration,' 'student effort,' 'persistence,' 'impact' on the student and 'retention rates' can too easily be misused to confuse academic success with conformance to a dominant culture at an institution" (Tanaka, 2002, p. 279). For instance, Arthur Amos (1990) found that while African Americans had the highest Quality of Effort [using the College Student Experience Questionnaire] of any ethnic group at UC Davis, their effort was "not paying off in high graduation rates" (as cited in Tanaka, p. 278). In short, Tanaka offers a critique of models that do not account for issues of culture and power in institutions.

Students in this study demonstrated "intercultural effort" and high levels of "effort" overall. They were highly "engaged." They were engaged in academic success, peer groups, Greek life and Black Student Union. They were engaged in educating others about "race" and maintaining their racialized identities. They were engaged in survival. However, these acts of survival do not count in the narrow conception of "engagement" in higher education research. In addition, Dowd et al. (2011) argue that "engagement" emphasizes "educational 'best practices' without consideration of the racialized 'bad practices' that minoritized students experience as harmful to their self-worth" (p. 19). According to Dowd et al. "these harmful practices can exist alongside best practices"; best practices do not "cancel out" harmful practices (p. 19).

We extend this idea and argue that an institution's best practices may, in fact, help to sustain harmful practices. For example, peer support, including ethnic student organizations like the Black Student Union, while essential for students' survival, may allow the institution to absorb racialized incidents and maintain the status quo. In Lilian's case, BSU was an essential support for her and her friend after the confrontation by White students in their dorm. Rona called BSU a space to "vent" about "blatant racism." These are important and necessary functions; however, what, if anything, does the institution do about those racist acts? In terms of the distribution of resources and power, supporting and promoting ethnic student organizations is easier (i.e., less threatening) than institutional transformation.

This is not to say that institutions should no longer support ethnic student organizations or see this as justification to challenge other best practices; however, the findings do point to complexities and contradictions in students' experiences that may not be easily categorized or quantifiable. In this study, BSU was a "best practice" and necessary for students' survival; however, focusing on "diversity best practices" may help stakeholders feel good about their efforts, while at the same time, resisting change and the sharing of power. Thus, while Museus (2014) asserts that focusing on positive factors on a campus "might be able to guide institutional action toward positive transformation" (p. 217), we do not think that adding "elements of culturally engaging campus environments" will lead to transformation without addressing the distribution of power in the institution.

Second, and similarly, participants' experiences bring to light the consequences of an over-emphasis on increasing retention rates. Three students had considered leaving Midwest during their first year. A focus solely on retention or graduation rates reduces these students to "three more" in the count. In his critique of the

concept of "social and academic integration," Tanaka (2002) warns against the "dangerous research assumption that a student no matter his or subjectivities must survive an institutional culture" (p. 285). The focus on retention and/or graduation rates diminishes students' actual experiences: "The fact that many students of color, or gays or lesbians, do 'survive' and go on to rewarding careers does not lessen the harm they may have experienced during that survival process" (p. 285).

The seven students in this study "survived." They are the "success stories" within the framework of persistence from first to second year students. In the context of hostile racial climates, is this what "success" looks like for students of color? Felicia described peers who were "against," "avoid" and are "condescending" toward students of color. Andrea and Rona "hated it" at Midwest. Lilian and her friend were accused of being "too proud to be Black" and of "enforcing their blackness" on White students in their dorm and were consequently isolated from their peers. To be sure, retention and graduation are important, and the disparities in rates are significant; however, the emphasis on simply increasing rates frames the problem as students who persist or fail. From this perspective, the costs of "failure" are clearly evident, while the costs of survival are minimized or discounted.

Finally, the findings point to the reality that simply adding more students of color will not lead to a less racist campus, and ultimately, a less racist society. George Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, Jennifer A. Buckley, Brian K. Bridges, and John C. Hayek (2006) state that peer interactions such as "talking with others of different races/ethnicities" can have "substantial and positive effects for virtually all students across a wide range of desirable college outcomes" (p. 43). In contrast, this study documents the realities of students of color on a predominantly White campus. Participants described negative experiences with White students. In our efforts to make campuses more "diverse," we must be conscious of what we are

asking (and expecting) of students of color. Participants described conversations with White students where they were expected to laugh along with racist jokes and also satisfy their peers' curiosity. While students like Rona and Teresa were taken aback by White and non-Latinx students' questions about race and language, it seems their peers used the excuse of being in a "learning environment" to say anything they wanted about race. In effect, students of color were there for their learning, for their use—and only on their terms.

Dowd et al. (2011) insist on "institutional responsibility in reducing intercultural barriers" (p. 38), in other words, responsibility for "reducing students' experiences of racial discrimination" (p. 28). Using Darder's (2011) analysis of institutional research, this is possible only in a "culturally democratic institution." Darder presents an organizational power continuum which describes four types of institutional responses to cultural difference: "Traditional—Liberal—Multicultural—Culturally Democratic" (p. 66). Two key variables along this continuum are the conception of culture and the distribution of power in the institution. For example, in a traditional institution, culture is viewed as a "depoliticized and neutral construct," and positions of power are "held almost exclusively by members of the dominant group" (pp. 67-68). In a culturally democratic institution, on the other hand, "culture and power are linked," and all members share in ownership of the institution (p. 72).

The question, then, is whether the institution is willing to go beyond culture as "exotica" or even "strong diversity rhetoric" (in a liberal or multicultural institution, respectively) and come to terms with culture "within the context of historical struggles for voice, participation, and self-determination" (Darder, 2011, p. 72). This critique is not specific to Midwest, but can be applied to higher education as a whole—and to our larger society. We may say that we "celebrate" cultures or "value" diversity, but does the institution (and society) really want to

increase retention rates for students of color? Do we want a society in which all are active owners and have an equal part in the democratic process? Are we committed to justice for communities that have historically "[struggled] for voice, participation, and self-determination," (p. 72) whose humanity has been taken to task? The issue of retention and graduation rates, thus, is not a question of helping "problem" students but is a matter of political will to work for cultural democracy on an institutional and societal level.

We attempt to make the connection between individual and institutional racism (Delpit, 2012). We seek to understand how racism is part and parcel of the very institution and structure we are trying to change. We do so by making it clear that institutions of higher learning (especially private ones) were developed to exclude certain segments of the U.S. population, especially individuals who do not "fit" or are not in alignment with a certain political, ideological, pedagogical, and philosophical discourse.

Ultimately, an approach to student success based on the quantification and objectification of students—an emphasis on "easily quantifiable and testable hypotheses" (Museus, 2014, p. 193); thinking of student success as numbers that go up or down; and other "management" tactics—undermines the goal toward which such instruments are deployed: "Propaganda, management, manipulation—all arms of domination—cannot be the instruments of … rehumanization" (Freire, 1970/2001, p. 68). Our efforts toward "student success" can be realized only when all students, in particular those historically marginalized in higher education, share in ownership and participation in the institution.

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Notes

[1] We have followed the practice of Nana Osei-Kofi, Riyad A. Shahjahan and Lori D. Patton (2010) in identifying authors by first and last name when initially used in the text: "We believe the continued reliance on last names only in accordance with APA guidelines, privileges deeply ingrained dominant assumptions of scholars as generally being male" (p. 338).

[2] In his call for an intercultural theory of student development, Tanaka (2002) acknowledged his "self-interest in not marginalizing European Americans… [and] promoting for them an enhanced ability to participate as equals (who find meaning) in 'intersubjective' exchanges" (p. 284). His "self-interest" stemmed from his own identity as a "third generation Japanese-American male traveling through higher education research, looking for but not finding toeholds and meaning" (p. 284). One could argue that "the European American male perspective" has been the center of all academic research until very recently, and that there is little danger of this perspective being marginalized; however, we do understand the larger point he is making in acknowledging the possibility of "new identity formation[s]" on "today's polycultural campuses" (p. 284).