Building the Bridge: Practical Considerations for Student Affairs Practitioners and Faculty to Support Black Students in First-Year Seminars

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Black students are enrolling in college at higher rates than they have ever done in the past. This scholarship provides a new way of thinking and conceptualizing first year seminars for Black student support. The article provides inclusive strategies and practices in the development of faculty and student affairs advisors as they support student learning and development.
Keywords – first-year seminars, Black students, transition

Higher education constantly seeks new and innovative methods to engage and serve student populations. While engagement is not a new topic, higher education's interest in student engagement has seen increased research over the past fifty years (Coates, 2005; McDougal et al., 2018). Student engagement is predicated on the constructivist premise that an individual's participation in educationally purposeful activities influences his or her learning. However, learning is viewed as a 'joint proposition' (Davis & Murrell, 1993, p. 5 as cited by Coates, 2005), which requires institutions, student affairs administrators, and faculty to create the conditions, opportunities, and aspirations for students to participate (Coates, 2005). This participation, which often takes on different forms for student affairs administrators and faculty on college campuses, often calls for work and collaboration across both faculty and student affairs administrators.

As such, faculty and student affairs administrators share equal responsibility in the holistic development of student learning and engagement. Calhoun (1996) shared, "if learning is the primary measure of institutional productivity by which the quality of undergraduate education is determined, what and how much students learn also must be the criteria by which the value of student affairs is judged" (p. 26). Teamwork is readily apparent in first-year seminars, where first-year students acclimate to a new environment and experience life on a new campus. Hutson (2010) shared, "To promote students' academic success, first-year experience programming should guide students toward becoming more self-regulated learners" (p. 5). As such, first-year seminars are seen by higher education institutions as a strategy for developing students into transformational leaders and leaders of their own education (Cassidy, 2020).

First-year seminars are widely believed to have a positive impact on student success, and as a result of this perception, they are becoming more widespread across institutions of higher education. While formats and delivery methods differ, educators have created a number of first-year seminar courses to meet the needs of a wide range of students (Swing, 2002). For example, students with a first-generation identity experience differently than other populations. Thayer shared (as cited by Conley and Hamlin, 2009, p. 48),

> Entering the university means leaving home for an unfamiliar academic setting and entering an alien physical and social environment that they, their family, and their peers have never experienced. They are faced with leaving a certain world in which they fit for an uncertain world where they already know they do not fit. In fact, first-generation students may find themselves "on the margin" of two cultures and must often renegotiate relationships at college and at home to manage the tension between the two. (p. 4-5).

Conley and Hamlin (2009) add that first-generation students are frequently "caught between two worlds" while in college and balancing two identities (home life versus college life). Balancing multiple identities is even more challenging for students with additional marginalized identities such as race and gender. For example, for first-generation Black students, race is an additional hurdle besides their first-generation college student status.

This manuscript serves as an introduction, bridging the gap and initiating a discussion on Black first-generation college students and first-year seminars as oppressive spaces. We start this work with a snapshot of who we are and the experiences we bring to rethinking and reframing first-year seminar educational spaces. We provide pertinent information on Black first-generation college students and first-year

seminars. After that, an examination of first-year seminars as racialized oppressive institutions in higher education. Following that, we give ideas to assist faculty members and student affairs professionals create inclusive places for Black first-generation college students. Finally, we pose a question to readers and their colleagues to stimulate discussion on new techniques for creating and supporting more inclusive first-year seminar learning environments.

Positionality as Student Affairs Practitioners and Scholars

As critical scholars, we must acknowledge our social positions as they influence how we interpret the theories, systems, and literature we see, experience, and consume daily. Author One identifies as a Black, cisgender, non-disabled man who was educated as a Black student and learner in predominantly white educational institutions. As such, my professional career as an educator began as a diversity, equity, and inclusion administrator, supporting and educating students about differences in higher education and, subsequently, in the global society. As a professor, my goal is to create environments in which students may negotiate academic hurdles and prosper. As a result, my identities are always a part of who I am and how I see my work, as I believe my racial identity influences how I think about the world I inhabit, and this intellectual work is anchored in our identities since they shape who we are and how we approach it.

Author Two is a White, cis-gender, queer, middle-class, agnostic, able-bodied, first-generation Ph.D. student. My Whiteness and queerness are the most obvious identities I possess. While my sexuality, gender identity, and race do not define me, they do impact how others perceive and treat me in this world. I came to understand the implications of the systems of oppression in our society during graduate school, though I had a preview as I navigated my queer identity in the south. As a student affairs practitioner and scholar working in an orientation office, I straddle the world of academic and student affairs. Orientation intersects the first-year experience and introduces new students to the academic expectations of the institution. My experience uniquely situates me at my institution to help build the bridge between academic and student affairs – working with colleagues on both sides to create inclusive and equitable experiences for all students.

First-generation College Students

First-generation college students are becoming a more well-researched student category in higher education as the number of first-generation college students rises (Smith et al., 2021; Santa-Ramirez et al., 2020). Despite significant declines over time, the proportion of U.S. undergraduates with parents who did not have a bachelor's degree and those with no postsecondary education remained significant in 2016, at

56 percent and 24 percent, respectively (Center for First-Generation Student Success, n.d.). Some institutions have made significant progress in their attempts to support students, including by offering programs like summer bridge programming, living-learning communities, and financial assistance programs for students who may also be from low-income households (Cassidy, 2020; McCoy, 2014). On the other hand, first-generation students continue to be less likely to take advantage of academic support programs on campus, which are critical to their success.

Pascarella and team (2004) highlight research on first-generation college students that sorts them into three categories: first-generation students who are compared to other populations' characteristics of college preparation and experiences; first-generation college students' transition from high school to college; and first-generation college students' persistence in college, degree attainment, and early career experiences. Since then, first-generation college student research has expanded to include the experiences of first-generation doctoral students (Holley & Gardner, 2012; Gardner, 2011; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Wallace & Ford, 2021). While these areas contribute significantly to our understanding of what it means to be a first-generation college student, there is still much to learn about how first-generation college students navigate collegiate contexts.

According to Woosley and Shepler (2011), the early experiences of first-generation college students are critical to their long-term performance in college. Furthermore, first-generation college students' perceptions of their status in the campus community were essential to their integration into the campus community. These findings are congruent with those of Pike and Kuh (2005), highlighting the importance of supporting and advocating for first-generation college students' academic achievement. In addition to the difficulties that first-generation college students face, first-generation college students who identify with other marginalized identities face extra difficulties. For example, Black students in educational settings confront a variety of difficulties due to their race.

Black Student Experiences in Higher Education

Black students' experiences in higher education are a direct reflection of Black people's daily realities in the United States. While our society has worked for decades to address the lived experiences of Black people in the United States, this demographic still faces several obstacles. On a macro level, Black people in the United States have endured a slew of racial injustices, as well as a bevy of microaggressions. Racial injustices directly impact Black Americans' collective trajectory, impeding their upward mobility and communal leadership for generations. Majors and Gordon (1994) state, "Blacks have been miseducated by the educational system, mishandled by the

criminal justice system, mislabeled by the mental health system, and mistreated by the social welfare system" (p. 31). As a result of racial societal disputes within these systems, Black students face a host of challenges in higher education.

In recent years, higher education has seen a process in the collective treatment of Black students in higher education. Research has increased on the experiences of Black people in education (Briscoe, 2022; Ford, 2022; Morales, 2021) and, subsequently, Black undergraduate students in collegiate environments (Coleman et al., 2020; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Smith et al., 2007), yet Black students still face many issues in their academic journeys around engagement within campus communities. Croom and colleagues (2017) discovered that there is still a significant amount about Black women and engagement that we do not understand, consistent with Palmer and Maramba's (2012) call for institutions to explore ways to increase engagement and persistence for Black men. One way institutions grapple with students' needs around engagement and persistence is by working to foster college adjustment for new students. Haktanir and team (2021) position, "college adjustment refers to a multidimensional construct comprised of an individual's ability to cope with the demands of academic work and the social environment of university life, as well as his or her sense of well-being and overall attachment to the academic institution" (p. 162).

Due to class, racial, and gender dynamics, college adjustment looks different for Black students. While our research indicates that Black students experience college differently than non-Black students, Eimers and Pike (1997) assert that "there are few substantive differences in college adjustment between minority and non-minority students" (p. 94). While this remains a factor, contemporary scholarship demonstrates that racial microaggressions (Morales, 2021), navigating racism (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017), and racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2007) all play a role in Black student experiences. First-year seminars are one area in which student affairs administrators and faculty members might work to assist Black students in adjusting to college life, especially for first-generation college students.

The First-Year Experience & Seminar

The term first-year experience is most often used "to name a purposefully connected set of initiatives designed and implemented to strengthen the quality of student learning during and satisfaction with the first year of college" (Koch & Gardner, 2014, p. 13). Institutions employ an array of initiatives, often positioning the first-year seminar "as the cornerstone of an integrated, comprehensive, and intentional first-year experience" (Greenfield et al., 2013, p. 92), resulting in higher retention, success, and engagement rates (Upcraft et al., 2005; Young, 2019). While there is variance in

the goals, content, and overall structure of a first-year seminar, Barefoot (1992) has provided a comprehensive and widely accepted definition, "The freshman seminar is a course intended to enhance the academic and/or social integration of first-year students" (p. 49).

This seminar is "one of the most durable success initiatives for first-year students" (Young & Skidmore, 2019, p. 63) and is unequivocally the "most researched course in the undergraduate curriculum" (Young & Skidmore, 2019, p. 63). Often taught by student affairs administrators and part-time and full-time faculty (Cassidy, 2020), first-year seminars foster student retention, learning, and success as students transition to college life (Skipper, 2018). Most researchers have focused on the extent to which these courses achieve their stated learning objectives and ability to fulfill institutional goals related to retention and engagement. However, little is known about the effects the first-year seminar has on reproducing and/or challenging the racialization process inherent in the racial structure of the academy and, ultimately, the impact on Black students.

Racialization, as described by Ray (2019), occurs when racial meaning is extended "to resources, cultural objects, emotions, bodies – and for our purposes, organizations – previously seen as non-racial" (p. 29). Until Ray (2019), most organizational theory scholars, including those studying higher education, largely neglected the fact that "organizational formation was partially premised on the expropriation and exclusion of racial others" (p. 29). They ignored the ways "Whites created racial categories, imbued meaning and structural properties to each category, and racialized modern social relations, institutions, and knowledge" (Christian et al., 2019, p. 5). To ignore this would neglect the ways organizations, including higher education as a whole and the first-year seminar in particular, perpetuate a White supremacist ideology.

As Hamer and Langer (2015) state, "the university has become a site where nominally anti-racist discourses recognizing diversity, celebrating difference, and even acknowledging the presence of social inequality can thrive - even as unequal distributions of power, resources, and opportunity remain relatively undistributed" (p. 898) preserving the White racial order. As a socialization tool, how might the average first-year seminar at a college or university reproduce or challenge hegemonic White supremacist racialization processes? To explore this question, we will provide an overview of Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations and Okun's (1998) characteristics of White supremacy culture, followed by an analysis of first-year seminar learning objectives broadly and specifically how they are operationalized at one institution.

RACIALIZED ORGANIZATIONS

Every institution of higher education in America is a racialized organization that "limit[s] the personal agency and collective efficacy of subordinate racial groups while magnifying the agency of the dominant racial group" (Ray, 2019, p. 36). Colleges and universities "do not have to be explicitly racist to create a hostile environment. Instead, unexamined historically situated White cultural ideology embedded in language, cultural practice, traditions, and perceptions of knowledge allow these institutions to remain racialized" (Gusa, 2010, p. 465). Race and racism are two important concepts central to the theory of racialized organizations. Ray (2019) defines race as a "multidimensional, hierarchical, sociopolitical construction…that is constructed relationally via the distribution of social, psychological, and material resources" (p. 29). Bonilla-Silva (2010) defines racism as "the racial ideology of a racialized social system" (as cited in Ray, 2019, pp. 29-30) that people operating in a society use to justify or challenge racial inequality. He notes, "when race emerged in human history, it formed a social structure (a racialized social system) that awarded systemic privileges to Europeans (the peoples who became 'White') over non-Europeans (the peoples who became 'non-White')" (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 8). This racialized social system, otherwise known as White supremacy, permeates every organization and "is the unnamed political system that has made the world what it is today" (Mills, 1997, as cited in Christian et al., 2019, p. 5).

Racialized social systems rule and maintain control "through processes of consent or hegemony rather than through older processes of coercion" (Lewis, Hagerman, & Forman, 2019, p. 5). Gross (2011) defines hegemony as "the social, cultural, or economic influence exerted by a dominant group over other groups" (p. 52). It is "an active process whereby legitimacy is sought and maintained by the dominant group through the balancing of consent (that is, tacit support for the dominant group) and coercion (that is, the threat or use of forms of force)" (p. 53). As Gusa (2010) notes, "When Whites neglect to identify the ways in which White ideological homogenizing practices sustain the structure of domination and oppression, they allow institutional policies and practices to be seen as unproblematic or inevitable and thereby perpetuate hostile racial climates" (p. 465). The theory of racialized organizations put forth by Ray (2019) highlights four tenets that form the culture and ideology of racialized organizations that contribute to the active or passive support of the hegemonic White supremacist racial order (Gross, 2011). The tenets are: (a) racialized organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups, (b) racialized organizations legitimate the unequal distribution of resources, (c) Whiteness is a credential, and (d) racialized decoupling (Ray, 2019). These tenets connect racial schemas (templates for organizational action) to material and social resources.

The proliferation of racial schemas has led to the continued subordination of racial groups within organizations. A schema "can be thought of as a kind of unwritten rulebook explaining how to write rules" (Ray, 2019, p. 31). More specifically, schemas are the "'taken-for-granted' mental representations generating and legitimating inequality" (Ray, 2019, pp. 30-31). They are the mental maps that guide everyday behavior and reactions, becoming the habits of mind that are "hierarchically organizational, widely shared, and contextually activated" (Ray, 2019, p. 30). In relation to Ray's (2019) theory, racial schemas provide a roadmap "for the accumulation and distribution of organizational resources" (p. 31).

To further illustrate racial schemas, Ray (2019) calls upon "The baroque racial etiquette under Jim Crow, which reinforced hierarchical relations among individuals and racial groups" (p. 31) through "rules of social interaction" (Ray, 2019, p. 31). These schemes connect to the distribution of resources that produce racial structures that bring forth a racist ideology used "to justify the unequal distribution of resources along racial lines" (Ray, 2019, p. 32), ultimately reinforcing the schema that created the racial structure in the first place. Gusa (2010) notes, "One such consequence of an unexamined racialized environment is that [historically White institutions] become alienating spaces of hegemonic power" (p. 465) that perpetuate a White supremacist racial order as the dominant culture. As higher education seeks to diversify its practice to support and graduate Black students, we offer the following tips for consideration based on existing literature on Black students and Ray's (2019) theory, as highlighted above.

Ray (2019) highlights (a) racialized organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups, (b) racialized organizations legitimate the unequal distribution of resources, (c) Whiteness is a credential, and (d) racialized decoupling as tenets used to connect racial schemas (templates for organizational action) to material and social resources. As such, we offer considerations for collaboration and best practices for faculty and student affairs administrators to develop inclusive spaces for Black student engagement in first-year seminars.

Building the Bridge: Practical Recommendations for Faculty, Student Affairs Practitioners, and Institutions

Racialized Organizations Enhance or Diminish the Agency of Racial Groups: Inclusive Teaching Techniques. Teaching is a critical component of a college student's first-year experience. While Black students see collegiate environments differently as a result of concerns about race and racism, they face extra obstacles in the classroom (Curtis-Boles, 2020). Masta (2020) encourages faculty members to establish counterspaces in the classroom that acknowledge the complexities of Black identity, resist white

supremacy, and promote Black students' emotional and genuine viewpoints. Masta (2020) employs borderland theory, which is based on the concept that our beliefs are shaped by our culture. While Masta's study focused on graduate student experiences, the scholarship advocates for faculty to reconsider their educational practices, which should begin in undergraduate settings, particularly first-year seminars, where students are building views about collegiate surroundings and forming their own identity. Moreover, utilizing Masta's (2020) borderland theory could create an experience for Black identified students that addresses Ray's first tenet of racialized organizations, creating an opportunity for Black students to feel a sense of increased agency. As such, we encourage faculty members and student affairs practitioners to remember that power and privilege are inherent in academic environments.

Whiteness is a Credential: Assessing Access. Although first-year seminar courses are elective for students in some situations (Enke, 2011), effective FYS courses require deliberate design (Rust & Korstange, 2018). While research indicates that first-generation and Students of Color who take similar first-year courses achieve academic success and retention (Swanson, Vaughan, & Wilkinson, 2017), if the course remains optional for subgroups rather than the entire campus community, it begs the question of who is enrolled in these courses. Frequently, first-year seminars are designed to target low-achieving students or make participation completely optional for all students, which can exclude White students. To address this, consider making it a required course and overhauling the curriculum to include meaningful time for equity, inclusion, and social justice issues.

Racialized Organizations Legitimate the Unequal Distribution Of Resources: Addressing Inequality. Black people have historically faced disparities in all social sectors, including education. Racial inequality has pervaded all systemic processes, institutions, and surroundings, particularly for Black people. As a result, racial injustices have a direct impact on the trajectory of Black Americans as a community in the United States, limiting their upward mobility and communal leadership for generations (Bordas, 2007; Majors & Gordon, 1994). First Year Seminars (FYS) reproduce and reinforce racial schemas of the academy that ultimately perpetuate a White supremacist racial order as the dominant culture. These schemes connect to the distribution of resources that produce racial structures that bring forth a racist ideology used "to justify the unequal distribution of resources along racial lines" (Ray, 2019, p. 32), ultimately reinforcing the schema that created the racial structure in the first place. If cultivated, FYS could create pathways for Black students to gain access to mentorship, research opportunities, internship connections, networking with alumni, organizational leadership, and a host of other opportunities to assist with their development.

Racialized Decoupling: Applying Appreciative Advising Approaches in First Year Seminar Spaces. Bloom and team (2018) identify appreciative advising as "the intentional collaborative practice of asking generative, open-ended questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials" (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2018, para. 2). Based on six phases, Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle (Bloom et al., 2008), appreciative advising is a theory to practice framework used as a "lens to develop and empower students to recognize their assets and achieve their goals" (p. 33). Smith and team (2021) highlight how impactful the appreciative advising approach can be for working with Students of Color, specifically with Black students who are processing and navigating racial injustices on college campuses (Matthews et al., 2021) and in our larger global society. Incorporating this advising technique would address Ray's (2019) tenet of racialized decoupling, implementing a systemic change that would grant additional agency, organizational resources, and credentials to Black students. In addition, Cassidy (2020) discovered the importance of an appreciative advising approach in the classroom, as first-year seminars will remain tools for fostering student success. Cassidy (2020) adds, "the appreciative advising approach demonstrates the impact of investing in the student-advisor relationship, as opposed to solely investing in recruitment. Ultimately, the appreciative advising framework helps to create and sustain meaningful relationships, increased retention, and a student-centered experience" (p. 41).

Conclusion

Student development is constantly evolving and changing how we view, see, engage, and interact with college students. Patton and team (2016) share that "theory and practice in higher education reflect the worldviews of people who enact them" (p.19). As such, we position this scholarship as a way to support, retain, and matriculate Black students in their first-year seminar experiences. Despite the fact that we make no claim to being experts, we do proclaim a commitment to students. With the goal of making the field of student affairs better for students, we share our experiences as practitioners and researchers in higher education. New and innovative ways are needed to combat the racialized nature of higher education organizations. We offer this scholarship to start the conversation in hopes of making our field a better place for Black students to succeed.

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