Research Paper

Resisting Total Marginality: Understanding African-American College Students' Academic Success and Racial Identity Development at a Predominantly White University

*Marlon C. James[1], Vicki G. Mokuria[2]
Texas A&M University - 4232 TAMU, College Station, TX. 77843-4232, USA
*Corresponding author: *Marlon C. James*

ABSTRACT: *This article explores collegiate Black identity development when African American students attend predominantly White institutions (PWIs) in the United States, considering the overall impact of total marginality. The term "total marginality" is used to describe the myriad, chronic, and often inescapable ways that African American college students attending PWIs are marginalized in a college setting. The focus of this paper is the impact of total marginality on Black identity development for those African American collegians who successfully complete their university studies at a PWI.*

Keywords: *African American college students, Black identity development, peer group associations, predominantly White university, total marginality*

I.   INTRODUCTION

African-American students in the US who seek higher education in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) often face inordinate challenges that prevent them from graduating, and the reasons for this are multifaceted. This research advances the conceptual framework, known as "total marginality," which is "defined as the *cumulative dissonance* that a Black student encounters in the various academic and social situations common to campus life at a PWI" (James, Hall, Liles, Williams, & Marrero 2016, p. 9). Despite exposure to multiple forms of marginality in varying social situations there are African American students who are able to be successful at PWIs. The central question that this study explored is: how do African American students attending a PWI resist total marginality, and achieve academic success? A second question considered is: How does being immersed in a college environment characterized by total marginality impact the development of Black identity among successful college students?

At a Midwestern state university in the heart of the US, which was the site for this research, the most recent statistics from the university's 2015 FactBook indicate that in the past three years, only between 18.5% - 21% of African American students who entered as freshman actually graduated four years later. For example, in 2011, 1113 African-American students were enrolled as first year students. Four years later in 2015, only 207 African-American students graduated. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), only 21.4% of all African-American students enrolled in a U.S. 4-year university in 2008 graduated as a cohort in 2012 (compared to 39.8% total students and 43.7% White students). These national statistics mirror the trends at *State University* (pseudonym) where this research was conducted.

The findings from this research can contribute significantly to a broader understanding of Black identity development since current literature does not center these three factors—identity, peer groups, and the ecology of the college environment--as the key components of the African-American students' identity development within the context of the academic success of African American college students attending a PWI. For instance, Fordham and Ogbu (1978) (1986) (1988) in their studies on the racial identity of inner-city high school students suggest that due to perceived and real barriers in society, African Americans define education as "White," and as a result Blacks who want to succeed in education cannot relate strongly to their heritage and/or must become "raceless." This current research provides another perspective.

However, rather than focusing on the complex nexus of issues that prevent African-American students from graduating, this paper seeks to gain insight into those students who were able to persist in their studies and

succeed academically. They did so while embracing their identities as African American students, while simultaneously experiencing total marginality during their education this PWI. This qualitative study seeks to explore the following questions and provide a deeper understanding of the factors that propel African American college students to succeed—beyond inordinate obstacles:

1. How are African-American collegians who are studying at PWIs and experiencing total marginality able to experience academic success?
2. How does being immersed in a college environment characterized by total marginality impact the development of Black identity among successful college students?

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is unique in its attempt to explore that interplay between racial identity, college environment, peer group associations and academic success of African American college students attending a PWI. This study extends the work of researchers like Datnow and Cooper (1997), Fordham and Ogbu (1978) (1986) (1988), and Sanders (1997) by exploring the issues of racial identity, school environment, peer groups and academic performance within a sample of African American college students, rather than samples of high school students. Also, the ground-breaking study by Sellers and Cooke (1998) examined the same issues using multiple college samples, yet their quantitative study lacked the voices and *experiences* of students to support their valuable findings. This study provides voices to deepen and strengthen the data.

In addition, this study informs college administrators of the struggles and experiences of African American students. Currently, many universities are creating programs designed to address the needs of Students of Color, so research on their experiences will be key in creating workable and successful solutions. Also, critical social theory calls for the "oppositional knowledge" of oppressed groups to be brought to light and considered when attempting to solve problems relevant to these groups (Collins, 1998). James & Lewis (2014) further argues to research focused on understanding the success pathways of African Americans, which should then be used to fashion interventions. More to the point, in higher education there persists a tendency among administrators, staff and faculty to impose programs or "solutions" on minority groups. The result is that the students won't use the programs, or when they do, the services don't meet their needs. This research offers program directors valuable information that can be used to aid African American students in their pursuit of academic success.

1.1 Racial Identity and Academic Success

Challenges to a canon of eugenics-based, Euro-dominated research that has historically pathologized African-American educational experiences has finally emerged. This current study is a continuation of an approach to research of African-American students, which seeks to explore the positive influences of Black identity development, peer group associations and college environment on the academic achievement of successful African-American students. The earliest challenges to a negative Euro-dominant approach of studying African-American students came from researchers influenced by the work of Sinthia Fordham and John Ogbu, who are perhaps the most influential researchers throughout this field.

Ogbu (1978) contends that due to the continuing presence of racism and discrimination against Blacks in the educational system and job market, many African Americans mentally withdraw from the structures of society or engage in active rebellion against the oppression that is before them (p. 238). This rebellion is typified in how African Americans define or view society. Ogbu contends that Blacks learn to label certain practices, values, spaces, places and institutions as "White." These aspects of society are viewed as a threat to the life chances of African Americans, resulting in Blacks mentally withdrawing from these segments of society. Consequently, Ogbu (1978) contends that African Americans have come to define education as a "White" institution, and subsequently developed an "oppositional identity" in conflict with the values of American education (p. 240).

Furthermore, Ogbu and Fordham (1986) have compiled ethnographic data and case studies through interviews and focus groups of both successful and unsuccessful African American students at a high school in Washington, D.C. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argue that:

One major reason black students do poorly in school is that they experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance in regard to academic effort and success. This problem arose partly because white Americans traditionally refused to acknowledge that black Americans are capable of intellectual achievement, and partly because black Americans subsequently began to doubt their own intellectual ability, began to define academic success as white people's prerogative, and began to discourage their peers…from emulating white people in academia. (p. 177)

They recognize that Blacks have a form of *collective identity* and *cultural frame of reference* that is an adaptive response to a historic legacy of economic, political, social, and psychological oppression at the hands of Whites. (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). In other words, African American students learn to rebel against the

educational system because they associate it with White culture and its continuing perpetuation of oppressive racism and discrimination against African Americans.

Furthermore, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) assert that Black students' peer groups are the key functional sphere in which the collective adaptive response is perpetuated (p. 165). They conclude that peer pressure to adhere closely to the group's Black collective identity and cultural worldview is the mechanism that leads Black students to withhold academic effort and intellectual talent. They go on to note that Black students develop coping mechanisms to deal with being academically successful, and subsequently being labeled as "acting White" by their Black peers. One of these coping strategies is hiding academic potential, so as to avoid verbal and sometimes physical confrontations with their Black peers.

Moreover, Fordham (1988) attempts to describes an adaptation that successful African American students undergo (p. 61), by introducing the concept of "raceless persona." She concludes that, in order for African American students to succeed, they must become "raceless", and divorce themselves from Black culture and the Black community at large. In sum, Fordham and Ogbu (1978, 1986, 1988) conclude that Black students' underperformance is caused primarily by how Blacks respond to a limited opportunity structure in their educational and social lives. Overall, this line of thought suggests that due to perceived and real barriers in society, African Americans define education as "White," and as a result Blacks who want to succeed in education cannot relate strongly to their heritage and/or must become "raceless" in order to succeed academically.

1.2 Peer Groups, School Environment and Academic Success The second challenge to the canon of academic literature linked to the putative innate inferiority of African Americans is characterized by the position that African Americans **can** succeed in education, and retain a strong connection with their heritage. Sanders (1997) contends that African American students "respond to racial discrimination, particularly educational and occupational discrimination, in different ways" (p. 9). She explains that the oppositional adaptive response noted by Ogbu is just one of many responses by students. In fact, Sanders asserts that some students in her sample of African American high school students possessed a strong sense of racial identity coupled with a commitment to academic and occupational success. Sanders asserts, that this relationship is the result of "positive racial socialization" (p. 9). This has been achieved in part

by transmitting an awareness of racial discrimination and an achievement orientation…Black students' family members, teachers, ministers, and others responsible for their upbringing and socialization may diminish the likelihood that these youths will have a negative orientation toward schooling and academic achievement. (p. 9) Sanders (1997) clearly demonstrates that historically, education has been perceived and used by African Americans to overcome oppression, discrimination and racism; so, being Black is **not** antithetical to academic success.

This school of thought is further represented by the work of Datnow and Cooper (1997), who suggest that Black students attending elite independent schools face a form of "double marginalization" that results in dissonance between these Black students, their families and communities (p. 112). Also, in elite independent schools, Black students experience dissonance with the core culture of their schools, which was essentially White. As a result, Datnow and Cooper (1997) contend that the informal and formal peer associations of African American students within elite independent schools are key to understanding Black students' academic performance and racial identity development. More importantly, Datnow and Cooper's (1997) findings reveal that African American students can possess strong racial and academic identities in predominantly White school settings.In sum, their study demonstrated how Black students within essentially White educational environments can use peer associations to affirm both their racial and academic identities.

Moreover, Sellers, Chavous, and Cooke (1998) conducted arguably the first study that directly measured the relationship between racial identity and academic success among African American college students. They also studied students from both Historically Black Colleges (HBCUs) and Predominantly White Institutions by employing a conceptual model called the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI). Their quantitative model is complex, but its two most important components provide significant theoretical constructs: r*acial centrality* and *racial ideology*. In short, *racial centrality* measures the importance of race to a student, while *racial ideology* measures their definitions of and the attributes they associated with their race (Sellers, Chavous, and Cook, 1998, p. 12).

The Sellers, Chavous, and Cook study (1998) resulted in four general racial ideologies that African Americans embrace (p. 13-15). First, the *nationalists* are those students who stress the "uniqueness of being Black", and the importance of Blacks solving their own problems apart from any assistance from other groups. Secondly, the *minority ideology* focuses on oppression, and its wide-reaching effects on many groups. Thirdly, an individual emphasizing that he or she is an American, and attempting to enter into or blend in with the mainstream society characterizes the *assimilationist ideology*. Lastly, the *humanist* believes that everyone belongs to one race, the human race; and they claim not to see gender, class, or race. According to the

researchers, this was the first true measurement of racial identity and educational success using a sample of college students. In fact, the other researchers who measured this relationship used samples consisting of students from urban high schools (e.g., Datnow & Cooper, 1997, Fordham, 1988, Fordham & Ogbu 1986, Sanders 1997). Also, according to Sellers et al. (1998), the vast majority of studies on racial identity have used college samples, but did not directly measure the effects of racial identity on educational attainment (p. 3).

Perhaps the single most important finding from Sellers et al. (1998) study is that "individuals for whom race was a more central aspect of their self-concept reported higher GPAs" (p. 12). This suggests that at least among some African American college students' educational achievement and a "raceless persona" are not related. The sum of their two findings seems to suggest that African American students embracing their heritage find this to be beneficial to their education, but when they consider their race and experiences as unique, their racial identity hinders their academic performance.

More recently, Dafina-Lazarus Stewart (2015) has conducted research on African-American students at PWIs and she noted that "once achieving college matriculation, Black collegians must navigate and negotiate an environment that is structured to attack the self, while attempting to successfully resolve identity development processes both internally and as a member of multiple campus communities" (p. 214). It is this very point that this research seeks to deconstruct and advance: how does total marginality in a PWI affect the identity formation of African American collegians who are successful in their university studies?

III.   METHODOLOGY

While many studies on racial identity and the academic performance of African American students are quantitative studies, they often lack the depth necessary to uncover the processes and experiences that lead to academic success or failure. On the other hand, qualitative studies seek to discover the underlying social processes and experiences at work in a particular social setting. (Creswell, 1994). Strauss and Corbin (1998) add that researchers should use qualitative methods to "understand the meaning or nature of experiences of persons with problems…the act of "coming out" lends itself to getting out into the field and finding out what people are doing and thinking (p. 11). Simply stated, qualitative research is centered on exploring meaningful dialogue and interactions (Coffey and Atkinson). In this context, the lives, experiences, words, thoughts, and actions of academically successful African American college students become paramount to understanding and addressing many of the educational dilemmas of African American students.

3.1 State University

This study was conducted on African American college students at a large, majority White, Midwestern university in the US, that we refer to as "State University." As of fall 2015, there were approximately 18,000 students, and African Americans comprised 7.7% of the total student body—1,427 undergraduate and graduate students, combined. This data is from the university's 2015 FactBook.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The participants were selected first by randomly approaching students to determine if they were upperclassmen, and if they would take part in this study. Then, based on the original contacts, a snowball sample of possible participants was confirmed. Ultimately, the study consisted of three female seniors, two female juniors, three male seniors, and two male juniors. Specifically, 6 seniors and 4 juniors were selected, and this distinction is important because upperclassmen tend to be more adjusted to college life and have a more developed sense of identity. Also, upperclassmen were able to offer more experiences and insights concerning the adjustments that they made to reach their junior and senior years. Lastly, focusing on older or more experienced students allowed for a more robust exploration on the academic and racial identity formation processes at several different stages.

3.3 Methods and Data Analysis

This research consisted of 10 "semi-structured life world interviews" of African American students (Kvale, 1996). Data analysis consisted of a phenomenologically-based meaning condensation technique gleaned from the ideas of Steinar Kvale (1996). The qualitative approach to this research provided an opportunity to students to openly address and express the different ways they have experienced life as an African American college student immersed in a PWI. The phenomenologically-based meaning condensation technique (Kvale, 1996) allowed for the triangulation of data--based on interviews, field notes, and feedback from participants at two critical points: after initial data interpretations and when the final report was completed.

IV.   FINDINGS

Total marginality, was first purposed by James, Hall, Liles, Williams, & Marrero (2016) as a unifying theory for the field of research concerned with the experiences of Black students attending PWIs. *Total marginality*, describes the cumulative cultural, social and academic pressures that Black students encounter at PWIs, which detracts energy and effort away from their educational pursuits. These researchers reviewed past studies, and found that they described marginality as isolated instances rather than considering its cumulative nature, thus total marginality was put forth. The findings from this present iteration further explores this dissonance-laden existence, and how it forces Black students to search out and create spaces where they feel comfortable and wanted. For many Black students attending PWIs, that space becomes their self-selected peer group. This space is critical to explore, since the formation of informal and formal peer groups directly impacted how students in our sample developed their racial identities and improved their academic outcomes.

4.1 Migration & Gravitation: Informal and Formal Peer Formation Processes

African American students attending a PWI form both informal and formal peer groups to meet their needs for academic, social and cultural acceptance. Thus, peer groups represent one of the many coping strategies employed by Black students to counteract the marginality and hostility which they encounter on predominantly White campuses. For all students interviewed, their first interactions with other African American students was informal in nature, such that it occurred during *chance encounters* or through an exploratory process, called *migration*. Yet, as time passed students began to *gravitate* into various formal groups such as the Black Student Union, Black Writers'/Poetry Clubs, religious organizations, fraternities and sororities.

The most common forms of *migration* encounters were during summer pre-college orientation programs. *State University* sponsors any number of summer visitations, tours and orientation programs, which provide African American students with opportunities to view the campus, learn about student support services and socialize with other African-American students.

Concerning this issue Malcolm stated:

I visited SU during a summer program for freshmen. Our tour guides were students and one was a Black sister and she was a senior. They took us all over the campus, showed us our dorms, and we got our ID's and classes. So, it was really helpful, but I know that I was wondering where are the Black students? Besides the one tour guide we did not see any other Black students and I was wondering, "what was going on at this school?" And I was not the only one, because when the Black students sat together for lunch we were all thinking the same thing. So, later on that day me and one of the other brothers went to the housing office to request each other as roommates. After that I was cool because I knew for a fact that I would know at least one Black person, because my roommate would be Black.

For many Black students, the connections that they made with other Black students during these orientation programs eased the transition from their communities to campus.

In addition to orientation programs and prior relationships, new informal peer group associations developed as students began attending classes. In essence, some students began noticing the same Black students in a couple of their classes, and friendships often developed over time. From the students' perspectives, knowing the other Black students in class helped to reduce their feelings of marginality.

In reference to this issue Bawi responded:

I had class with this Black girl in the morning and it turned out that she was in my afternoon class too. So, we started talking before and after classes, and as the semester went on we supported each other when issues of race came up during our classes. We both felt more confident when the other person was in class, because you weren't the only Black person in class. Also, chance encounters *often led* to the development of an informal support structures, which are key to counteracting feelings of marginality, isolation, and facilitating student adjustment. Initially, Black students *migrated* toward social activities like parties, comedy shows, sporting events, and other organizationally sponsored events. For some Black students making these early informal connections helped to ease the culture shock that they were experiencing, while other students sought to expand their social network through by gravitating into formal peer networks.

Moreover, following the development of informal connections Black students begin to *gravitate* toward deeper and committed formal relationships and formal peer group associations such as Greek fraternities and sororities, Black and Caribbean cultural clubs, and student religious organizations. *Gravitation* is the process by which Black students select and are accepted into committed formal relationships and formal associations with other African American students. This process was on-going and the types of formal organizations varied from mostly Greek organizations in Freshmen year to mostly identity (Black Student Association, etc.) based

organizations as upperclassmen. Yet, these choices and association patterns are further highlighted in how students described clusters of Black students on campus.

4.2 Variations in Blackness: Racial Identity Clusters

State University's Black campus community is not a homogenous mass of individuals connected by a universal code, language or personality. In reality, the Black student community at SU consists of several sub-groups into which Black students *gravitate*. What are these sub-groups, and how do students navigate their emerging racial identities to distinguish them from each other? Based on the findings of this research, perceptions of *racial identity* were quite varied among the interviewees and they perceived that other Blacks had equally diverse ways of structuring their *racial identities*. *Racial Identity* refers to how a student defines or describes Black culture; what being Black means; and how important their race is to them. In the present study, we determined that it was not possible to create a homogenous and clearly defined Black identity that captures all the unique meanings students shared concerning their race. This diversity within the Black student community is described in Tifi's statement concerning racial identity among African Americans on campus:

You got the good people and the bad people. You got the people who want to do stuff, and help other people reach certain goals, then you have the people who only care about themselves. So, I mean it varies. I am not saying that all Black people down here are bad, because that's not true. You know because in my opinion (laughs) there are two types of Black people down here. You have the African Americans and the N-----s (*socialites*). However, most participants typically described three distinct Black personalities, which were the *integrationists*, the *socialites* and the *African Americans*.

While Tifi offered two distinct categories of Blacks on campus, Summer and Uncle Kel described another existence, one that allowed them to associate with Whites and Blacks alike. In fact, they both dated White students for three years while in college, while maintaining friendships and other social ties within the Black community. Also, they possessed a strong awareness of their Blackness, and of racial inequality on campus. This identity is referred to as the *integrationist*, and it is described in Summer's description of a "genuine Black person":

I would say a Black person would be a person who can get along with other races, a person who does not choose sides and who does not deny who he/she is. Who knows where they come from, but doesn't dwell on it, but tries to make it better. A genuine Black person does not deny their race, or their culture. And you can talk about the issues of race, but after it's over don't hold grudges over what was said.

This identity describes Black students who crossed cultural racial lines regularly, and learned to interact with both White and Black students. Yet, the person with this identity must walk a fine line in order to be accepted in both circles. In Summer's case she feels that she can relate better with White students than Black students, because she grew up around Whites more. Still, Summer knows that her acceptance by Whites is not total, and that some Blacks view her as a "sellout or a want-to-be." This dilemma is captured precisely when Summer stated "I am too White for Black people and I am too Black for White people".

On the other hand, Uncle Kel feels more accepted by Black students, but he is still able to have meaningful relationships with White students. Uncle Kel further explained:

I haven't had any problems with White students, but I think the reason why I haven't is because I try not to put myself in that situation. I respect all people and I think many Whites if they see that you respect them and they respect you everything is pretty much cool. I mean the White people that I ran across on campus seem to conduct themselves in a respectful manner. I mean a lot of White people are really curious about African American issues and lifestyles. So, they come to me with questions and I try to answer them. When you come off like that people respect you. But on the other hand, I feel just as comfortable sitting in all Black areas in the dinning center. I mean many times I will be sitting there and the crowd forms around me. So, I just try to be cool with everybody.

Uncle Kel attributed his acceptance by Blacks to him growing up in a Black community, and his ability to have White friends to him going to a majority White high school. So, Uncle Kel learned to interact with both Blacks and Whites, whereas Summer interacted mostly with White-Americans prior to college. So, integrationists' feelings can range from sentiments of exclusion from both races at some levels to feeling accepted by both White and Black students, and these changed as they progressed through college.

The second racial identity cluster discussed by participants is the *socialite*, which typified Black students who sought to redress total marginality through socializing primarily with African Americans. Tifi further describes the Socialites as:

You see it all the time, the N----s are the ones who care about the material things, wearing this and that, gottaget their hair done every week, only care about themselves, involved in themselves, so much self-indulgence that it's almost sickening. The N----s only cares to try to get through school so that they can make money.

This description sounds stereotypical in many ways, yet nearly all of the participants provided similar descriptions of the *socialites*, and admitted to going through a socialite phase themselves as freshmen. In addition to this description, the *socialites* were typically seen as the social leaders of the Black community, the fraternity and sorority members, the athletes and the freshmen "want-to-bes." Furthermore, Blacks who fit this personality rarely socialized with Whites and typically accused Blacks like Summer of acting, talking and wanting to be White. The socialite identity is not static, rather it represents a phase of cultural and social responses or forms of resistance to marginality.

Lastly, an afro-centric perspective on life and education characterizes the *African American* racial identity. More than the other Black students, these individuals tend to see and articulate how the university struggles with race relations. Students who lived out this identity described their racial personality with complex nuances and usually combined it with their religious and educational beliefs. For instance, when researchers prompted Tanya to describe, what does it mean to be Black? She replied:

I am unashamedly Black and unapologetically Christian. I am not ashamed from where I come from I embrace every part of my culture. Some Black people say that they just want to be called American, but that's denouncing everything that our ancestors fought for here in this country and represent. An Irish American will not drop their Irish heritage, so why should Black people drop our African culture? And above all things I am proud to be a Christian, my belief and my faith comes first. I refuse to be a bad student, because Black people need good examples and God requires Christians to be good examples.

In response to the same question Vanessa replied:

It's just who I am. Being Black is such a wonderful thing. I am a descendent of the Motherland, and to me that's something that I am really proud of. Regardless of what society tries to make us think about Black people, I am proud to be Black. When I speak to people as a Black person I want them to know that we are the original people. We have been through a lot, but our strength will help us through. And as a student I know that if I work hard and pray God will get me through my senior year.

These examples clearly illustrate that students with an identity referred to as *African Americans* possess a different perspective on race and life than the *socialites* or the *integrationists*. However, their views on education are more evolved, because they see education as a way to give back to their families and communities. More importantly, the *African American* persona represents a level of maturity that connects students' present academic efforts with the historic struggle for Black equality. Currently, most of the participants fit into the *African American* or *integrationist* identities, but they recalled early in their college careers when they were *socialites*. In sum, students formed informal and formal peer groups to counteract their marginal existence at a PWI. Students *migrated* into informal social networks within the Black campus community, and then *gravitated* into formal organizations. Equally important is that the findings from this research clearly show that the Black campus community consists of three distinct racial identity clusters that shift and evolve overtime as students develop more mature understanding of themselves in as Black Americans. However, these findings only lay the groundwork for the succeeding discussion on *racial identity*, *peer groups* and *academic maturation*.

4.3 Blackness and Astuteness: From Mis-education to Re-education

Finally, it is critical to examine the role that *racial identity* and *peer group associations* play in the academic success of African American students at State University. The process of becoming a successful student is called *academic maturation*, which is formally defined as the process of developing the necessary skills and focus essential for success in college, despite exposure to total marginality. However, many African American students in this study obtained these skills and focus through trial and error. In fact, all of the participants in this study recalled how they struggled academically throughout their freshman and during the early portions of their sophomore years. The central question that remains is how did they persist despite these early troubles? To answer this question each participant answered a series of questions regarding their academic performance, racial identity and peer group during each year of their college careers. Moreover, exploring how students overcame these early struggles is key to understanding and creating solutions to assist other students who experience similar challenges. The focus, then, is to consider how students' racial identities and their peer group associations informed their *academic maturation*.

The early struggles of Black students can be captured and conceptualized as *mis-education*, which is a student's flawed belief that he/she is participating and fully engaged in their own education. This is the condition that impedes, fights against and blocks the *academic maturation* of Black students. The notion of *mis-education* is based upon the collective experiences of Black students, and represents for many Black students their failed attempts to adjust to the condition of *total marginality*. However, as Black students persist they

undergo another process termed *re-education* that allows them to develop the educational values and efforts which leads to academic success as they resist marginality and racism at a PWI. These phenomena can be best understood when examining students' racial identities and peer group associations throughout their college careers.

First, during their early struggles, students reported possessing the *socialite* racial identity. As previously described, the *socialites* are the Black students whose racial identities are characterized by an emphasis upon participating in the various Black social activities on campus in an attempt to immerse themselves in supportive social-culture spaces. Consequently, *socialites* often struggle to keep focused academically, which is particular troubling because this stage of evolution tended to occur in their early college careers. For instance, in the following statement Vanessa recalled her racial identity and academic struggles as a freshman:

Parties, Yes lots of parties. I participated in a lot of extracurricular activities (laughs). During that time I was more into finding ways to entertaining myself, than finding my way to the library or to class. My first couple of semesters I was one of those Black students who went to every Greek function or party, and my grades suffered because I didn't put myself into them.

George also recalled a similar struggle during his freshman year:

When I first got here I wanted to adjust quickly to this` environment. So, I went to a lot of entertainment programs. Like comedy shows, football and basketball games, parties and I went to peoples' apartments or rooms to just chill out and relax. I just interacted and had fun. I was not trying to just sit in my room, do homework and play games all day. So, my freshman year during mid-semester evaluations I received a D, F, C, B, and I went from like A's and B's in high school to this. I was shocked and I didn't know what was going on.

In part, *mis-education* is a by-product of students' attempts to compensate for the marginalization they are forced to endure at this PWI. In other words, *socialites* adjust well socially, but they failed to make the necessary adjustments that contributed to academic success. These *social for academic exchange* helped them find supportive cultural and social connections, but as young adults they failed to balance their social life and study habits, which impacted their academic coursework.

Furthermore, *socialite*s like many inexperienced college students are characterized by a blindness and ignorance to their own frustrating condition. As a result, the efforts made by university faculty and staff, and successful Black students to inform *socialites* about the skills and focus necessary for academic success falls on deaf ears. For this reason, more mature Black students with the *African American* racial identity become intensely frustrated with Black *socialites*. For example, Bawi recalled his efforts to assist Black students:

When I meet younger students, I try to mentor them and help them out, because I remember how tough it was for me during my freshman year. I usually ask them, "if you are putting on social programs and going to parties all the time, how is Foundations class and your math class coming along?" I ask them that and some of them are like 'well I really don't feel like studying hard or going to class all the time.' And I try to tell them that you can't expect to do well in college when you are down here and party all the time, always out kicking it, always trying to hang out. Then when it comes down to your school work you can't come home at 3:00am and have an 8:00am class with a paper due, and expect to do well or even get up on time for class. But most of the time they just look at me like I am crazy, and keep doing what they have always been doing. It makes no sense whatsoever!

Socialites' inability to perceive their academic troubles entangled them in the web-like nature of *mis-education*. In order to make the appropriate academic adjustments *socialites* must first perceive that an adjustment is warranted by them.

Perhaps the stickiest strand in the web of *mis-education* is students' false belief that they are fully engaged and participating in their own education. The observable behaviors students noted to describe an individual who is fully participating in their education were: going to class every day, reading class material prior to lectures, taking notes, being involved with class discussions, completing assignments on time and accurately, and having working relationships with professors. The participants recalled that they struggled academically as freshmen because they rarely, if ever, developed these skills that often contributed to academic success later in college. Instead, their time, creative energy and focus as *socialites* were on trying to avoid racism, and seeking out affirming social outlets. In reference to this issue Malcolm exclaimed:

When I got to college I attended all of the programs for freshmen and they warned us about all the different pitfalls of college life. But, at that time that stuff did not mean anything to me. I was on my own for the first time and I wanted to have some fun. I wanted to prove to those people that I could kick it [party] hard and still be a student. So, I joined a fraternity, and met a lot of people really quickly. I was pretty popular,

everybody knew me and my fraternity commanded respect from everybody. But somewhere in all of that, I gradually stopped thinking about classes and my grades. Before I knew it, a semester passed by and I failed all my classes.

Furthermore, *socialites* were not active agents in their own education, in part because they struggle to reconcile their Blackness and education. Simply put, during their early years students' racial identities did not converge with their values toward education. Rather, education and its requirements to be a full participant were viewed as impediments to the *socialites'* efforts to express their Blackness through whole participation in what they perceived as the Black campus community. An important note here is that the students reported that being authentically Black meant socializing mostly with Black students. Thus, they were expressing and practicing their "blackness" through their social lives. However, this research revealed that participation in education was not defined as being "white;" rather education was not as high of a priority as being "Black" in a predominantly White setting among the most inexperienced students. This is why *socialites* practiced *social for academic exchanges,* such that they focused the energy and skills meant for education on their social lives.

However, it is possible for a Black college student to couple his/her racial identity with high educational values and effort. Furthermore, the participants themselves are living proof that a *socialite* can mature to develop an *African American* racial identity. This progression in thought, perspective and action toward one's own Blackness and education represents a positionality in which Black students reconcile and harmonize their Blackness and educational success. As stated previously, *African Americans* view education as an indispensable tool in Black Americans' efforts to obtain equality and justice, rather than an impediment. Thus, the process of unweaving the web of *mis-education* so that an *African American* college student can become fully engaged and successful is termed *re-education*.

For many of these students' *re-education* occurred over a series of years, and following earlier stumbles. This progression begins when *socialites* were placed on academic probation and/or they took courses taught by an African American or another professor of color. For instance, Candice recalled the impact of being placed on academic probation following her freshman year:

When I first got here college was a joke. I just didn't take it seriously. I would not go to class on Friday and Mondays if my friends and I went out of town for a party. I never studied, and I did not care, but after I got my first semester grades and they told me I needed to do much better next semester or I would lose my financial aid and would be suspended academically I got more serious and barely made the grades I needed to come back for my second year. But that summer I got serious about school and I came back focused. I just stopped going to parties altogether. I just learned that you can be Black and intelligent too.

Furthermore, the influence of having a Black professor can be seen in Vanessa's statement:

The best professor that I had was an African American professor, and she was great. She made me see the larger purpose for a college education for Blacks. From her I learned that knowledge is power, so to gain power I must obtain knowledge. It was so helpful to see a real live, educated, Black woman, and she inspired me so that I modeled myself after her. These narratives reflect the shock of being placed on academic probation, along with the power of inspiration embodied in many professors of color. As a result of having classes taught by professors of color, students who were interviewed felt motivated to explore their racial identities more deeply and to link education to the Black struggle for equity. The space created by the process of re-education enabled the participants to be both *African American* and educationally successful collegians.

Overall, developing a healthy African American racial identity informed the creation of, while simultaneously undoing, the students' *mis-education*. Black students who retained the *socialite* identity fell into a web of *mis-education*, because they responded improperly to *total marginality*; did not adjust well academically; were blind to their troubled state; falsely engaged educationally; and struggled to reconcile their Blackness and education. However, as socialites were placed on academic probation or took courses taught by a professor of color, their racial identity began to transform to the *African American* racial identity. This new identity provided space where they could reconcile their Blackness with high values and efforts in their education. In sum, *re-education* enabled the participants to be fully engaged and active participants in their own education.

4.4 Standing Together: Peer Groups as Sites for Change

Moreover, *mis-education* and *re-education* are group-based phenomena, such that students and their peers participate in this iterative process to *mis-educate* and *re-educate* themselves and each other. In response to *total marginality* Black students searched out and created peer groups, in which they felt wanted and comfortable. Students' peer groups informed their *social adjustment*, but more importunately peers greatly impacted the *academic maturation* process. In fact, the functional unit in which educational values and efforts were defined, reinforced and practiced became the peer group. Together students defined shared educational

values of *socialites* and *African Americans,* as well as provided opportunities and support for each other as they lived out these values. Thus, *mis-education* and ultimately its cure, *re-education,* results from the day-to-day interactions of Black students with their peers. Peer groups took part in *mis-education* by defining priorities and supporting practices antithetical to academic success. During their early struggles the participants believed that education was important to their future success, yet their everyday habits clearly demonstrated that they lived out a different set of priorities. Students' peer groups are key to understanding this contradiction and its effects on *academic maturation*. It is important to note that students who performed poorly academically rarely struggled in isolation. Typically, their peers took part in this process by influencing how the participants engaged socially and academically.

Social adjustment is Black students' efforts to achieve a level of comfort on a White campus and in relation to the Black student community. As students attempted to adjust socially they *migrated* and *gravitated* into peer groups based upon pre-collegiate relationships or experiences, chance encounters, similar interests or proximity. These networks became the social communities for many black students. So, it should not come as a surprise that students socialized mostly within their peer groups. Furthermore, students socialized in accordance with their group expectations, which determined who they socialized with, where, how long and how frequently. Candice provided a detailed describe of the influence of her peer group on her social life in the following statement:

When I first got here I did not know anyone until I met this black girl who lived on my floor. She was in her second year so she already knew a lot of people. Somehow, we got close and when she went out I would tag along and I became a part of our little clique. We had our little party schedule worked out, Wednesday through Saturday night we would go to the mall, parties, barbeques at people apartments, watch videos, just basically hung out. It made life in this town so much easier knowing that my girls were there for me. But looking back I know we hung out way too much, because just two of us are still here and four left because they could not make the grades.

Candice's comments paralleled the experiences of the other students concerning the influence of their peer groups on their social lives. Many students found themselves flowing into a routine of continuous socializing with their peers. Even when students went to the library to study or work on a paper, their peer groups accompanied them, and instead of studying they ended up talking well into the night. Socializing in and of itself is not the problem, but *academic maturation* is hindered and *mis-education* sets in when a proper balance between social activities and academic life is not achieved. In fact, many peer groups over-socialized, while practicing behaviors that were not conducive to academic success. In essence, students exchanged time and energy essential for academic viability for socializing with their peers, preparing for an upcoming social engagement or for recovering from a prior engagement. For example, Malcolm recalled instances in which his peer group participated in *social-academic exchanges*:

Some weekends my frat brothers and I would help pledge lines at other colleges, so we did road trips. We left Friday morning so we skipped classes and we drove back Sunday night so many times Monday classes were hard to make it to. And I would make it to class Wednesday and we would have a quiz or homework due that I knew nothing about. When we had step-shows (team dance competitions) coming up we would practice all day and night, so classes for that week… basically we went when we could.

It is important to note that neither students, nor their peer groups, intentionally decided to become poor students. *Mis-education* is the result of small, gradual yet persistent *social for academic exchanges*, until students find themselves so far behind that catching academically is impossible. Vanessa provided an illustration of the dilemmas faced by Black students and their peers:

During the first month of classes my freshman year I missed classes Thursday and Friday because my girls wanted to go to Six Flags before they closed. That Thursday I had a paper due in one class and a quiz in another, and Friday I had a group project due and a test in math which I was not ready for anyway. The paper I had due Thursday I turned in for half credit Monday, I lost the points for the quiz, the Friday group project I lost all those points and the math test I made-up on Monday but I failed it because I did not study all weekend. I tried to do extra credit the following week but that made me fall further behind. I was lost in my math class, in my speech class nobody wanted to work with me, and my English class was worse. So, I really shot myself in the foot, because I never really got off to a good start my freshman year.

Overall, peer groups played a leading role in the *mis-education* of their members. Students were influenced to over-socialize and exchange academic time and energy for socializing with their peers. Also, *mis-education* took hold as a result of a series of small decisions, and their devastating consequences.

On the other hand, peer groups also played a critical role in the *re-education process*. As students faced the results of *mis-education,* they found themselves alone in many cases because their peers were no longer students at SU. The participants recalled endless names of students who did not make it through their

first two years of college. This bottlenecking--in tandem with the changes occurring in their racial identities--shocked many of the participants to the point that they and their remaining peers began the process of *re-education*. In this process peers influenced students to exchange the misdirected energies and time used to socialize for focused efforts toward educational success. Following the attrition of many of their friends there were fewer *socialites* present and higher concentrations of *African Americans*. Students began to meet and socialize with people who were more academically focused, and began to participate in cultural, religious and academic functions rather than parties, step-shows, and comedy shows. For instance, Paul recounts his growth over his collegiate career and the changes in his peer group that accompanied his *re-education*:

My freshman year I was not focused on classes and my grades suffered, but I made it through that first year. And to be honest a lot of my friends did not. So, I started meeting new people and I met some presidents of some Black student organizations and they were very popular, and I just learned from them. They constantly asked me how I was doing in classes; they just became a good support system. They interacted with me a lot to find out how I was doing, we ate together and just talked about some things. I knew that they were serious about college, because I could tell by them being in the library studying before they had programs then as soon as the programs were over they were back in the library studying or typing a paper. It's a balance and I learned that from them. You have to try to balance everything and that's what they tried to instill in me.

So, Paul in his second year began to re-educate himself, and his peers played a key role in inspiring him and setting positive examples for him to follow.

In addition, Black student organizations that stressed academic and/or religious values were often involved in the *re-education* process as well. Academically centered organizations created the space and values needed for Black students to address their academic shortcomings. These organizations set up study times, tutoring programs and participated in university-sponsored mentoring initiatives. Moreover, religious based organizations that stressed academic excellence and social responsibility provided students with support systems as they changed their lifestyles from party-centered to study-centered. Uncle Kel reflected on his experiences in a Christian, African American, male group and its influence on him academically:

It has influenced my education greatly in a sense that, I am learning that if you ask God for something, and you pray for it and seek Him, you will receive it. I believe that all my problems that I had in college, not getting the grades and all. I feel that that was a storm that I was going through, a test that God was putting me through. Because I was not seeking him at that time, I was not acknowledging him at all. But now being in a Bible study and talking to a variety of brothers, and seeing people throughout their problems showed me that I was not the only one out here struggling. I am not out here alone, and as long as I pray and have faith and do what I can do that's all I can do; and God will make a way. Going to these Bible studies taught me not to worry about failing, but just to pray and work hard, and if I fail measure the effort that I put into it and double that. Black organizations that focused on education and spiritual development allowed the participants to encounter positive role models and support through the *re-education* process. Black students in turn responded by overcoming their academic difficulties and re-educating themselves and their peers.

V. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the collective and cumulative experiences of Black students attending a PWI were heavily impacted by the experience of *total marginality*. Students had varying ways of navigating this oppressive experience, and students' failed attempts to adjust to *total marginality* both socially and academically produced *mis-education*. This is Black students' false belief that they are participating and fully engaged in their own education. Conversely, it was through facing the harsh consequences of academic failure, access to cultural role models along with supportive peer groups, that many students developed an *African American* identity, in which students also *re-educated* themselves by establishing the values and behaviors essential for academic maturation. Finally, the *racial identities* and the *peer group associations* of Black students informed both their academic failures and successes by creating the space so that students and their peers could *mis-educate* and *re-educate* themselves. This work provides a clear way forward through supporting Black students as they develop peer groups to counteract the impact of marginality. These peer groups can influence how they develop their racial identities, and for Black Americans how they see themselves impacts their educational focus and efforts. As racial tensions increase in the US, Black students will likely face more intense forms of total marginality at PWIs, thus continued research is recommended.

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