Predominately White Institutions: Transition Programs to Address Academic Underpreparedness and Experiences of Discrimination

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Although Black student enrollment and retention in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) is steadily rising, Black students continue to have higher attrition rates than their White student counterparts. Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) have responded to Black student (among other underrepresented groups) attrition through the development of high school to college transition programs. These programs vary across university setting; nonetheless, their primary goal is to increase retention with a strong focus on academic preparedness and general social adjustment (e.g., developing a peer network, connecting with faculty, getting accustomed to campus life). Although there is evidence that transition programs are theory-driven, increase academic readiness, and ease general social adjustment woes, they fail to explicitly address Black students' unique social adjustment challenges (e.g., perceived discrimination, microaggressions, belonging uncertainty). To mitigate transition challenges for Black students, the authors provide recommendations for how to integrate culturally sensitive program components into transition program curriculum. Furthermore, alternative approaches to increasing Black student retention and fostering an inclusive environment at Predominantly White Institutions is discussed.

Keywords: Black student experiences, PWIs, student retention, transition programs

Students who participate in transition programs are more likely to have academic success their first year and to complete their undergraduate education (Conner & Colton, 1999; Noble, Flynn, Lee, & Hilton, 2007). Although universities offer high school to college transition initiatives such as "Welcome Week" or orientation for all incoming students, an increase in the enrollment of historically underrepresented students (e.g., race/ethnic minorities, first generation students) has led Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) to develop separate programs with the goal of improving the transition experiences of these groups. Traditionally underrepresented college students embody a collection of groups with widely diverse sociohistorical experiences and Black college students are among the largest racial/ethnic minority group

(Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). The literature provides a solid foundation for centering on Black college students, as the literature is replete with studies specifically investigating their academic and social outcomes (e.g., Strayhorn, 2012; Walpole et al., 2008). Thus, this article will primarily focus on Black college students' unique experiences.

Subsequent to the legislation mandating the integration of public colleges and universities in 1954, an increasing number of Black students have enrolled in college. In 2012, approximately 32% of Black 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in a college or university (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). Before 1954, Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCUs) educated the majority of Black students. Currently, 85% of the Black student population attends PWIs (Collins, Davis, & Hilton, 2013). Although the number of Black students enrolled in 4-year institutions is rising (Strayhorn, 2012), Black students are significantly less likely to graduate when compared with their White counterparts (Walpole et al., 2008).

Walpole et al. (2008) argued that low retention rates are related to academic unpreparedness and social adjustment difficulties (e.g., de-

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veloping a peer network, connecting with faculty, getting familiar with campus life, academic self-efficacy). Notably, participation in transition programs is key to first year academic success and retention (Conner & Colton, 1999; Noble et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). Some institutions recognize that students of color may have unequal access to educational resources and have developed diversity or affirmative action policies for admissions purposes (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). Nevertheless, there is little evidence that these policies address the university's culture, attitudes, or norms toward inclusion. Regrettably, Black students report PWIs as having unwelcoming, unsupportive, and hostile environments (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002; Saddlemire, 1996). Given this knowledge, it is important that administrators at PWIs understand how institutionalized oppression pervades the campus environment and impacts Black students' social and academic trajectories. Acknowledging students' experiences with prejudice and discrimination can help PWIs create more culturally sensitive transition programs.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the efficacy and limitations of PWIs' transition programs, specifically highlighting Black students' academic and social outcomes. The authors begin by describing the historical context for Black students' academic underpreparedness and discuss how encountering discrimination, microaggressions, and feelings of unbelonging at PWIs can lead to poor performance and psychological distress. Furthermore, the theoretical rationale, benefits, and limitations of transition programs are presented. Finally, the authors offer recommendations on how transition programs can increase retention by mitigating Black students' social adjustment strain.

Academic Underpreparedness in Historical Context

Presenting a comprehensive review of Black American history in education is outside of the scope of this article. Nevertheless, highlighting the impact of systematic education discrimination, socioeconomic oppression, and underrepresentation in higher education on Black students' present day academic underpreparedness and social adjustment is crucial. In the United States, education discrimination began with the

institution of slavery, when enslaved Blacks were prohibited from attending school or learning to read and write (Anderson, 1988). As a result of the landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, historically White institutions were mandated to accept racially/ethnically diverse students. However, minimal efforts were made to accommodate the diversity of the new student body (Saddlemire, 1996). Since 1954, universities have likely increased their efforts to create more welcoming environments; nevertheless, Black students continue to report perceived discrimination (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008), psychological distress (Mitchell, Wood, & Witherspoon, 2010), low levels of satisfaction (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002; Saddlemire, 1996), and less sense of belonging than White students (Cohen & Garcia, 2008).

Scholars have presented a range of factors (e.g., IQ, access to resources, socioeconomic status) that influence disparities in academic performance (American Psychological Association, Presidential Task Force on Educational Disparities, 2012). However, centuries of systematic educational deprivation grounded in racial oppression (Anderson, 1988) likely contributed to present-day achievement gaps. The following section illuminates the ways in which Black students' underpreparedness and social adjustment difficulties are connected to educational inequity and experiences of prejudice, discrimination and perceived mistreatment.

Oppression in Academic Settings

PWI transition programs seek to diminish Black student attrition through increasing academic readiness; yet, to adequately support their transitions, an understanding of power, privilege, and oppression is paramount. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2011) describe oppression as the combination of prejudice, power and discrimination. The active ingredient in oppression is POWER. Without the power to influence culture, policies or norms, prejudice and discrimination are merely personal thoughts and individual actions (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2011). Conversely, the combination of power, prejudice, and discrimination results in structural and systemic oppression (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2011). Lewis and colleagues (2008) assert that education is designed in a "social-structural in-

equality paradigm, which argues that schools are born from, maintained by, and reproduced by racist philosophies, policies and practices . . . which perpetuate race- and class- based social inequalities in American society" (pp. 136–137). This assertion illustrates that institutionalized oppression is embedded in the foundation of the American education system.

Privilege is defined as systemically conferred dominance by which the beliefs and values of a dominant group are "made normal and universal" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57). Privilege is a multifaceted concept and is demonstrated in multiple ways across situational contexts. For example, Delpit (2006) discussed that children from middle-class homes tend to do better in school than their working-class peers, not only because of increased access to resources (e.g., textbooks, technology, school infrastructure), but their ability to identify with the privileged (e.g., White, middle-class) culture. For instance, privileged children are often socialized to understand the cultural codes (i.e., language, communication strategies and self-presentation) of power (Delpit, 2006). Delpit (2006) described these codes as "ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of dressing and ways of interacting" (p. 25). Operating outside of these "ways" of being can lead to marginalization and discrimination (Delpit, 2006), particularly on college campuses.

Discrimination at PWIs

Transitioning to college can be difficult for any student, regardless of their demographic characteristics or the academic institution. However, in addition to adjusting to the social norms of campus life (e.g., independent living, developing peer groups, choosing a major), Black students attending PWIs may also require strategies to navigate perceived discrimination and the effects of numerical underrepresentation (Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Yeager et al., 2014). Numerical underrepresentation could pose a challenge—particularly to students who strongly value their racial identities, as expectations about not fitting into the dominant social group can increase belonging uncertainty (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Cohen and Garcia (2008) define belonging uncertainty as "doubt to whether one will be accepted or rejected by key figures in the social environment" (p. 365). Black students experi-

encing belonging uncertainty report higher levels of stress and dissatisfaction, decreased motivation to achieve, and lower GPAs than their peers who do not share these experiences (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

As openly endorsing racist ideologies have become socially unacceptable, overt acts of racism (e.g., slurs) are far less common than covert racial incidents (e.g., microaggressions) (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). Microaggressions are subtle, verbal, nonverbal, or behavioral insults in which the offender conveys offensiveness or insensitivity toward people of color (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue et al., 2008; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). According to Sue and colleagues (2008), microaggressions send a message to Black students that they are intellectually inferior, abnormal, not to be trusted, and do not belong. Microaggressions can take on many forms, including acting on assumptions that someone is disadvantaged or at-risk based solely on perceptions of race (Solórzano et al., 2000). For instance, if a Black student provides a substantive argument to a class discussion and the professor expresses surprise at the contribution, the professor's reaction may convey an underlying message that Black students are unintelligent (Sue et al., 2008). Other examples of microaggressions include academic advisors recommending less challenging classes, ideas being ignored during group projects, or White students requesting a new dorm assignment when they discover they were assigned to reside with a Black student. Some scholars assert that microaggressions both activate and perpetuate stereotype threat consequently contributing to a hostile campus environment (Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue et al., 2009).

Stereotype threat is the perceived risk of confirming stereotypes about one's group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Microaggressions, or subtle reminders of negative stereotypes associated with one's race (e.g., Black students are deviant or admitted via affirmative action), have been demonstrated to adversely impact test performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Furthermore, the threat of endorsing a negative stereotype can initiate a process of either internalization or externalization (Massey & Owens, 2014). During internalization, Black students may choose to avoid feelings of inferiority by de-identifying with the idea of academic success and putting

forth minimal effort so that poor performance cannot be attributed to his or her true intellectual abilities (Massey & Owens, 2014). During the process of externalization, Black students may expect majority students and professors to hold discriminatory beliefs about their group. The perceived expectation of incompetence can arouse anxiety about performing poorly, resulting in diminished confidence, poor performance, or academic disengagement (Massey & Owens, 2014; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Negative Impacts of Discrimination

The education and social psychology literature is replete with studies investigating Black student experiences at PWIs and how stereotype threat and perceived discrimination impact academic performance (see Inzlicht & Schmader, 2012, for a review). Among the many negative outcomes associated with racially oppressive experiences in higher education are poor academic performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995), psychological distress (Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Utsey & Hook, 2007), feelings of invisibility and marginalization (Sue et al., 2008), diminished sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007), mistrust/perceived mistreatment (Yeager et al., 2014), and academic disengagement (Massey & Owens, 2014).

Schmader, Johns, and Forbes (2008) sought to understand in what ways stereotype threat damages cognitive processes and lead to poor performance. They found that individuals confronting stereotype threat demonstrated impairment in prefrontal processing, experienced declines in their ability to actively monitor performance, and struggled to suppress negative thoughts and emotions (Schmader et al., 2008). In other words, Black students encountering stereotype threat experience challenges in decision-making, moderating social behavior, and channeling mental energy toward completing academic tasks. Evidence of the impairment of cognitive processes provides insight to the mental strain Black students endure while navigating invidious encounters. While academic transition programs could be more intentional in their efforts to mitigate Black students' social adjustment challenges, the literature supports that transition programs increase academic readiness and allay general social adjustment difficulties.

Academic Transition Programs

Nearly 45% of institutions across the United States offer academic transition programs for incoming students (Barefoot, Griffin, & Koch, 2012). These programs teach participants how to succeed academically, and offer skills on how to ease their transitions (Barefoot, Griffin, & Koch, 2012). Most commonly, transition programs offer opportunities to live on campus; an introduction to campus regulations, policies and resources; academic and professional development workshops; and summer courses in mathematics and writing (Kezar, 2000). As programs vary across institutions (e.g., specific goals, length), the population of focus also varies. However, most academic transition programs are intended for underrepresented college students (i.e., race/ethnic minorities, first generation, low income), as they are considered most at risk of premature withdrawal from a given institution (Kezar, 2000; Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013). Transition programs target underrepresented populations to balance the disparate education outcomes that may result from attending high schools with low resources (Strayhorn, 2011) or that fail to provide rigorous and standards-based instruction (McDonough & Fann, 2007).

Summer Bridge programs are the type of transition programs most commonly implemented (Greenfield et al., 2013) because they are cost-effective (Barefoot et al., 2012) and most expected to produce positive student outcomes (e.g., academic self-esteem) (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Summer Bridge programs have the dual purpose of academically and socially preparing students for the rigors of college (Gutierrez, 2007). Such programs aim to support students in developing academic self-efficacy, goal setting, time management, connecting with faculty, and staying engaged in the classroom (Kezar, 2000). Students who participate in Bridge programs are more involved in the campus community, demonstrate stronger academic performance, and are more likely to persist through the first year (Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997). Summer Bridge programs are designed to help students develop skills and supportive peer networks that lead to academic

resilience (Kezar, 2000; Garcia & Paz, 2009). Therefore, they are often required for those who are conditionally admitted, eligible for Equal Opportunity Programs, or historically underrepresented (Greenfield et al., 2013).

Transition programs are loosely grounded in Tinto's (1975) interactionist theory of student persistence and Noble and colleagues' (2007) student socialization model (Noble et al., 2007). Tinto (1975) asserts that when students do not hold values similar to their institutions, and have insufficient collective affiliation with peers, faculty, and staff, they are more likely to voluntarily withdraw before the end of their first academic year. Noble and colleagues (2007) contend that when a student is adequately socialized to the university environment he or she is more likely to persist through graduation. Furthermore, it has been argued that successful "first year experience" programs are created on the principle that both social and academic integration are critical influences on student persistence (Tinto, 1975; Spady, 1970).

As academic transition programs were established in response to the growing number of underrepresented students gaining access to higher education (Greenfield et al., 2013), one can viably consider them an attempt to address some of the educational disparities that impact students prior to attending college. There is evidence that transition programs are effective at mitigating academic inequalities and easing general social transitions (Conner & Colton, 1999; Noble et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). Although past research has investigated the efficacy of transition programs with samples of underrepresented students, research on programs that have successfully targeted Black students' unique social adjustment issues on White campuses is scarce (Strayhorn, 2011). In forthcoming sections, a brief review of successful transition programs is presented in terms of academic and social adjustment outcomes.

Addressing Academic Outcomes

Academic outcomes are commonly associated with impacts on GPA and academic skills (e.g., use of technology, asking questions in the classroom, understanding syllabi) (Strayhorn, 2011). Studies exploring the effects of participation in transition programs consistently show a positive effect on academic outcomes. Employing a longitudinal qualitative method that spanned two years, Walpole and colleagues (2008) found that program participants demonstrated higher levels of academic and social engagement, which are variables that have been linked to institutional retention and satisfaction (Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1993). Strayhorn (2011) also found a positive gain in academic skills and academic self-efficacy—belief in or judgment of one's ability to complete academically oriented tasks.

Wolf-Wendel, Tuttle, and Keller-Wolff (1999), Walpole et al. (2008), and Santa Rita and Bacote (1997) each conducted studies on the impact of participation in Summer Bridge programs with traditionally underrepresented students, in which Black participants were the majority. Scholars reported observing positive impacts on academic outcomes from the program's introduction to campus resources (Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997), training on how to maximize campus resources (Walpole et al., 2008), and learning to assess one's academic abilities (Wolf-Wendel, Tuttle, & Keller-Wolff, 1999).

Addressing General Social Adjustment

Strayhorn (2011) sought to explore how Summer Bridge participation impacted students' sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy. Participants reported positive impacts on their academic self-efficacy, yet no affect on their sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2011). Similarly, although Velásquez (2003) sample reported an increased sense of competence (i.e., understanding of one's general abilities, identifying strengths and weaknesses), social integration (i.e., felt a part of campus life), and having developed supportive peer and faculty networks at program completion, they also reported feelings of marginalization as a result of numerical underrepresentation. Although the program included a diversity component that demonstrated a desired effect on the participants' ethnic identity development, there was no formal discussion of the aim of the diversity component (Velásquez, 2003).

A Summer Bridge program located in a southern university offered on-campus accommodations, relationship-building activities, peer advising, and tutoring (Noble et al., 2007). Noble and colleagues (2007) found the aforementioned program components increased partici-

pants' sense of community and opportunities for campus involvement. Participants in Santa Rita and Bacote (1997) reported that program participation aided in their social adjustment to their institution. Specifically, students believed that the program's academic and nonacademic goals improved their confidence, self-image, and self-direction.

Scholars have produced empirical evidence that demonstrates the positive impact of transition programs on academic outcomes and general social adjustment challenges. In sum, transition programs have proven successful in increasing academic self-efficacy (Strayhorn, 2011), academic and social engagement (Walpole et al., 2008), accessing campus resources (Santa Rita & Bacote, 1997), and social integration (Velásquez, 2003). However, one significant gap observed in the literature is the lack of an intentional discussion of how transition programs address challenges associated with experiencing prejudice and discrimination. Furthermore, many studies conducted research on students of color with little attention to how the identities of individual groups (e.g., Black students vs. Asian students vs. low income students) may produce different barriers to a successful transition. Given that students of color comprise the majority of transition program participants, investigating how program participation provides support for coping with negative racialized experiences is paramount.

Recommendations

There is evidence to support the idea that academic transition programs improve academic outcomes (Strayhorn, 2011), mitigate general social adjustment challenges (Noble et al., 2007), and increase student retention (Walpole et al., 2008). The inclusion of culturally relevant program components that address Black students' experiences with prejudice and discrimination would likely enhance the current success of academic transition programs at PWIs. To address these concerns, it is necessary to modify transition program curriculum, university policy, and how research is conducted.

Transition Program Recommendations

First, transition program administrators and staff should be educated on institutionalized oppression and its relationship to academic underpreparedness. Second, program administrators and staff must be aware of Black students' perceptions of PWIs as the literature is replete with studies that have examined this phenomenon both qualitatively and quantitatively (e.g., Saddlemire, 1996; Smith et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2009). Raising awareness on the psychologically straining effects of encountering daily microaggressions has the potential to increase Black students' coping ability (Sue et al., 2008). "One cannot overstate the importance of demystifying microaggressions for Black Americans in producing clarity of vision and a sense of liberation in being able to define their own racial experiences" (Sue et al., 2008, p. 7). Put simply, transition program staff can employ past research to develop curriculum that introduces Black students to potentially unfamiliar concepts (e.g., microaggressions, stereotype threat) and healthy ways to manage the invidious experiences they will likely encounter.

For instance, Sue and colleagues (2008) conducted focus group interviews to understand how Black Americans interpreted and responded to microaggressions. Three important themes emerged: (a) Healthy paranoia, (b) Sanity checks, and (c) Self-validation. Participants promoted healthy vigilance to avoid impulsive responses, encouraged sharing experiences with trusted others, and discussed avoiding internalizing the offender's insults (Sue et al., 2008). If transition programs explicitly acknowledge discriminatory behaviors that are likely to surface in a predominately White environment, Black students may be better equipped to adjust in uncomfortable social situations.

Other approaches have been supported in the literature as effective in mitigating some of the unique social adjustment challenges of Black students. For instance, Cohen and Garcia (2008) and Sherman, Kinias, Major, Kim, and Prenovost (2007) recognized social identity as a psychological resource to buffer the effects of stereotype threat. Both studies found that positive self-affirmations significantly reduced perceived threat (Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Sherman et al., 2007). Specifically, students who were asked to write a reflection paper on their values and positive social identities achieved higher grades than students in the control group that completed a neutral writing task (Cohen & Garcia, 2008).

There is also evidence that increasing sense of belonging positively impacts academic success (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). In a recent study, Walton and Cohen (2007) implemented an intervention to decrease belonging uncertainty in a sample of first year Black college students. Students were asked to read a passage stating that regardless of race, all first year students feel out of place and that those feelings diminish with time. Students who received the intervention reported more consistent levels of belonging and higher GPAs than the control group (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Program developers must be careful not to overgeneralize the use of these culturally sensitive recommendations as the interventions presented in this article were tested with samples of Black college students exclusively. Furthermore, racial identity and racial centrality can mediate how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to discriminatory encounters (see Sellers, Chavous, & Cooke, 1998, Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Although this article is a focus on Black students, it is clear that underrepresented minorities have diverse experiences (e.g., Houshmand, Spanierman, & Tafarodi, 2014). Future studies should build knowledge on this subject by investigating these potentially distinct experiences.

University Recommendations

Aside from transition programs introducing interventions to help Black students cope with perceived discrimination, PWIs should develop campus-wide initiatives that aim to foster a culture of inclusion (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). Through adoption of a social justice perspective, dismantling the ideology that Black students and other underrepresented students need to be "fixed" is important. In a recent study, Massey and Owens (2014) suggested that PWIs dedicated to diversity/inclusion might be unintentionally exacerbating stereotype threat by creating transition programs for students exclusively based on race/ethnicity. Furthermore, previous research demonstrates that non-Black students can perform poorly in academic environments where negative stereotypes are activated (Croziet & Claire, 1998; Steele, Bianchi, & Ambady, 2014). Noninclusive learning environments are counterproductive and PWIs should work to combat the pervasiveness of systemic racism by implementing policies that reach the entire student population. For instance, universities can require all incoming students to attend seminars on how prejudice and discrimination pervades educational settings so that all students are aware of the damaging effects of oppression, and that it is not the sole responsibility of minority students to identify strategies to cope with intolerance.

Finally, holding faculty accountable for facilitating safe, inclusive, and culturally sensitive learning environments could foster more welcoming campus communities. Similar to transition program coordinators and staff, faculty should be familiar with the unique issues of Black students and receive training on how to invalidate microaggressions and moderate racially charged classroom discussions. Sue and colleagues (2009) conducted focus group interviews with minority college students who shared their experiences with microaggressions in the classroom. Participants recommended that college professors legitimize discussions on race, validate the feelings of the participants in class (e.g. "you have the right to feel this way"), be open to accepting a different racial reality from students of color, and become more comfortable acknowledging race (Sue et al., 2009, p. 188). Ultimately, a greater focus on cross-cultural relationship building could be useful in promoting inclusion and dismantling the institutional disadvantages that plague some predominantly White campuses.

Researcher Recommendations

In addition to programmatic adjustments and institutional changes to better support student transitions, scholars must also conduct research that addresses the gaps observed in the literature. For instance, although there is evidence to support the effectiveness of the aforementioned program components, few have been implemented outside of laboratories. Future research should examine the generalizability of the recommended strategies in real-world settings. Researchers evaluating the efficacy of transition programs must also examine how these programs affect outcomes associated with culturally specific transition difficulties. Scholars could consider exploring whether transition program participants feel better equipped to combat negative racial experiences or whether they feel a need to detach from their home community and culture to assimilate to the campus culture. Investigating such research topics could

build knowledge on the ways transition programs can potentially mitigate the negative outcomes associated with Black students' invidious experiences at PWIs.

As a final point, researchers are strongly encouraged to use critical theories and methodologies such as Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) or Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2002) when designing future studies. Utilizing critical theories and methodologies is fundamental to improving outcomes for students of color because they center racialized experiences and emphasize the dismantling of systemic oppression.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted how PWIs developed transition programs in response to the increased enrollment of underrepresented students. Transition programs seek to increase retention by addressing educational needs and social adjustment barriers (Greenfield et al., 2013). Although these programs have demonstrated success in promoting academic achievement and minimizing common social adjustment issues (Conner & Colton, 1999; Noble et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012), there is little evidence that transition programs include components that target issues of prejudice and discrimination, which are experiences common for Black students and other historically underrepresented groups. Recognizing the role that systematic discrimination can play in the academic and psychological outcomes of minority students at PWIs, is crucial. Exclusively emphasizing transition challenges such as choosing a major, accessing campus resources, and financial aid is not enough. Increased critical awareness of invidious beliefs and practices can help PWIs create programs that are supportive of underrepresented student experiences.

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