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PREVIEW

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**Ethnic minority students' process of community building on a
predominantly white campus**

Brown, Martha L., Ph.D.

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1994

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PREVIEW

ETHNIC MINORITY STUDENTS' PROCESS OF COMMUNITY BUILDING
ON A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE CAMPUS

by

Martha L. Brown

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Interdepartmental Area of Administration, Curriculum and Instruction

Under the Supervision of Professor John W. Creswell

Lincoln, Nebraska

December, 1993

DISSERTATION TITLE

ETHNIC MINORITY STUDENTS' PROCESS OF COMMUNITY BUILDING

ON A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE CAMPUS

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GRADUATE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

ETHNIC MINORITY STUDENTS' PROCESS OF COMMUNITY BUILDING ON A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE CAMPUS

Martha L. Brown, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1993

Advisor: John W. Creswell

This study was undertaken to understand how ethnic minority students experience and build campus community. Interviews and observations were conducted with 23 black and hispanic freshmen during their first 6-10 weeks at a private, predominantly white university in the midwest. Constant comparative data analysis proceeded within a grounded theory framework which incorporated theoretical sampling procedures to generate categories at an increasingly abstract level. Categories were related to each other in terms of the phenomenon, causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, and consequences of actions or interactions. A grounded theory model of the process of campus community building was inductively derived from the data.

The core definition of the "community" phenomenon described by the study participants was feeling a sense of belonging resulting from **feeling cared about** and **feeling needed** by other community members. Black males and

hispanic females tended to express a stronger sense of campus community than black females or hispanic males.

The data suggested the nature of relationships with peers was the primary causal condition of community building. Peer interactions were positive, negative, or mixed depending upon the context of intervening conditions and upon the strategies employed by students. Racial influences comprised an important subcategory. Many participants had experienced negative interactions with majority and minority students that detracted from their sense of community. Black females, in particular, expressed strong feelings of alienation from upperclass black female students.

Intervening conditions of ethnicity, gender, background, and sense of self influenced peer interactions and thus, community building. No direct relationship was found between feeling a sense of community and retention because many minority students had a strong determination to succeed academically despite feelings of personal unhappiness and alienation.

Recommendations included advising college administrators to examine ways to increase positive peer interactions within smaller communities and to direct cultural education and awareness activities towards caucasian students. Future research should explore issues of community with students from other ethnic backgrounds, including caucasian, and should involve longitudinal studies.

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CHAPTER ONE

Focus of the Study

Who will be the college students of the 21st century? By the year 2000, the Census Bureau projects 30% or more of the United States school and college-age population (5 to 24-year-olds) will be members of ethnic minority groups (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1986). Ironically, while the percentage of minorities in the population and the number of minority high school graduates has continued to rise significantly since the early 1980s, the numbers enrolling in college has not changed appreciably during the past decade while white student enrollment rose steadily throughout the same time period (Blackwell, 1990; National Center for Education Statistics, 1992).

Influenced by escalating costs and shrinking enrollment, higher education is increasingly concerned with student retention. Changing national demographics are shifting the potential pool of traditional-age college students to an increasingly higher percentage of ethnic minority students. However, college attrition rates are much higher for minority students as compared with caucasian students (Fleming, 1984; Justiz & Rendon, 1989). It is important to understand how ethnic minority students experience the campus environment and their sense of connection and campus community so colleges can provide appropriate programs and support services to enhance that connection and retain them in school.

Literature Overview: Framing the Study

Over the past twenty years, considerable emphasis has been placed on studying what keeps students in college and what influences them to leave before graduation. Well-developed models of student retention and attrition increase understanding of how pre-entry attributes, institutional influences, and college experiences may shape these important student decisions (Bean, 1982; Spady, 1971). Vincent Tinto's student attrition model was a seminal work, contributing greatly to an understanding of the impact of social and academic integration on student retention (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1987).

Research has been conducted on the influence of precollege characteristics (Boyle, 1989; Getzlaf, Sedlacek, Kearney & Blackwell, 1984; Nelson, Scott & Bryan, 1984; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1978), the importance of student-faculty contact (Astin, 1984; Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977, 1980; Young, Backer & Rogers, 1989), environmental influences (Pascarella, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Tracey & Sherry, 1984; Whiston, 1989), and the impact of orientation and support programs (Giles-Gee, 1989; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfe, 1986). The constructs of academic and social integration have been studied extensively and found to be critical retention factors (Stage, 1989; Stoecker, Pascarella & Wolfe, 1988; Terenzini, Lorang & Pascarella, 1981; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980).

Attrition and retention issues as they relate specifically to ethnic minority

students have also been examined. This research has consistently identified issues of alienation at predominantly white institutions as one of the major reasons these students do not stay in college (Fleming, 1984; Kraft, 1991; Suen, 1983). Even if minority students are doing well and are satisfied academically, they may leave college due to issues of social and cultural alienation (Hughes, 1987; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Thompson & Fretz, 1991).

Literature Limitations

In spite of all the research on factors related to student retention and attrition and with a growing knowledge of how those factors specifically influence minority student retention, student attrition rates have remained relatively stable for the past 100 years. If so much is known about student retention, why has student attrition not been decreased, thereby retaining more students in college?

A careful review of the extensive body of related research suggests five areas of deficiency that may limit the present state of knowledge about the complex phenomenon of student attrition. First, the models that have been developed and used repeatedly as the foundation for the majority of retention studies have a deductive, positivist perspective and are based on frameworks used to explain some other social or sociopsychological phenomenon. Tinto (1988) based his model on anthropologist Van Gennep's (1960) study of rites of passage among tribal societies and Durkheim's (1954) analysis of individual

suicide. Spady (1971) also was influenced by Durkheim's work in constructing his model. Bean's (1982) theoretical orientation was influenced by his study of employment and he compared student attrition to leaving a job. Although these phenomena may be valuable in understanding student attrition, the assumptions of similarity may have constrained the sensitivity of the researchers to other possible explanations (Attinasi, 1989).

Second, quantitative studies based on Tinto's model, which is the most widely cited and studied, have only been able to account for modest amounts of variance in dropout rates (Stoecker, Pascarella, & Wolfe, 1988). Murguia, Padilla, and Pavel (1991) postulated this may be because the central constructs of the model, academic and social integration, have been incompletely conceptualized and thus not accurately understood and measured by researchers.

Third, Loo and Rolison (1986) discuss the need at the national level for research on ethnic minority and white college students' attitudes and perceptions. However, most retention research has focused on white students only (Christie & Dinham, 1991; Follet, Andberg, & Hendel, 1982; Pascarella, Duby, & Iverson, 1983), comparisons within the same ethnic minority group (Attinasi, 1989; Hughes, 1987; Thompson & Fretz, 1991), or comparisons between one ethnic minority group and a white student population (Suen, 1983; Vela, 1977). Very few researchers, with the notable exception of Loo and Rolison (1986), have studied retention among students from more than one

ethnic minority group to attempt to understand what influences may be felt across groups and which are more particular to one ethnic group.

Fourth, the current research on student retention generally does not focus on the critical period of the first eight weeks of the freshman year. Many researchers have discussed how critical the first few weeks of college are for students' eventual persistence until degree completion (Tinto, 1988) through retention factors such as establishing friendships and developing a sense of community (Boyer, 1987; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Tinto (1988) concludes, "the forces that shape departure during the first year of college, especially during the first six weeks of the first semester, are qualitatively different from those that mold departure in the latter years of college" (p. 439).

Research has shown freshmen make the decision of whether or not to enroll for second semester by the eighth week of their first term (Nelson, Scott, & Bryan, 1984) and that, of the students who drop out of college during the terms of their freshman year (not between terms), half leave during the first six weeks of school (Myers, 1981). The majority of retention studies send out surveys later in the freshman year, survey older students, or ask students to reflect back to the beginning of their freshman year. When describing future research needs at the end of his article discussing his retention study of student perceptions, Attinasi (1989) stated the design of his study should be modified so students are interviewed during their freshman year instead of afterwards. In

order to capture the intensity and confusion of their early experiences, students should be interviewed while they are in their first few weeks of college (S. Dinham, personal communication, February 17, 1992).

Fifth, most research related to retention models and other hypotheses of student attrition has been quantitative by design. It may be that the reliance on the quantitative paradigm to the near exclusion of qualitative approaches has restricted the ability to understand and prevent the complex phenomenon of student attrition. The purpose of quantitative research is to explain causes by isolating variables and attempting to discover how they work together to impact student decisions. That is an important but necessarily limited approach when attempting to gain a holistic picture of why students leave college because analyzing data from records or using forced choice instruments strips the essential context from the phenomenon.

The unique contribution of this study was to use qualitative research methods to understand the meaning and the process of connecting to an institution from the ethnic minority students' perspective. In a Carnegie Foundation report on the undergraduate experience, Ernest Boyer emphasized the importance of feeling part of a community, a sense of membership and belongingness (Boyer, 1987). Students must feel they matter and college administrators and faculty need to understand what influences that feeling of belonging from the students' point of view (Kuh et al, 1991; Upcraft &

Gardner, 1987) if they hope to improve student retention.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to develop a grounded theory of the process of campus community building for ethnic minority students during the first 6-10 weeks of their collegiate experience. Interviews were conducted with black and hispanic students at a private, predominantly white university in the midwest to understand their perceptions of the campus environment and how that shapes their sense of community on campus. "Campus community building" was preliminarily defined as the process of developing a sense of belonging and attachment in relation to the campus environment.

Research Questions

The grand tour research question was:

What is the process of campus community building for ethnic minority students?

Although others developed as data collection and analysis proceeded, preliminary subquestions were:

1. What is the context of campus community building? (e.g. What influences shape ethnic minority students' sense of community? When and under what circumstances do they feel a sense of belonging as students?)
2. What are the causal conditions of campus community building? (e.g. Who or what is important to establishing a sense of community at their