

Learn By Leaving:

An Analysis of Recruitment and Retention Rates Among Faculty/Staff of Color

Erica Claybrook-Cookman

Comparative Ethnic Studies Department

California Polytechnic State University

Comparative Ethnic Studies Department

CALIFORNIA POLYTECHNIC STATE UNIVERSITY

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By

Erica Claybrook-Cookman

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AUTHOR: Erica Claybrook-Cookman, Comparative Ethnic Studies Major

ADVISOR: Dr. Elvira Pulitano, PhD

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Dr. Elvira Pulitano, PhD

X_____

Erica Claybrook-Cookman

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ABSTRACT

Learn by Leaving is an analysis of recruitment and retention rates among faculty/staff of color at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), specifically, California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo) in San Luis Obispo, California. This project aims to answer the following: How does the presence, or lack thereof, of faculty/staff of color impact the success of students of color at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo? Additionally, how has the presence, or lack thereof, of faculty/staff of color shaped the overall college experience for students of color at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo? In the context of this research, student success is defined holistically and not quantified. These questions are approached using the framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Therefore, the project employs the use of narratives and storytelling as its primary source of data. This data is collected from both current and former students, as well as current and former faculty/staff at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo via interviews. This project also draws upon existing research conducted at other universities to supplement its own data. Ultimately, *Learn by Leaving* serves the purpose of empowering its participants and enlightening readers on the issues that people of color (POC) face at PWIs such as Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo.

Key-words: Critical Race Theory, Faculty, People of Color, Predominantly White Institutions, Tenure/Tenure-Track, Qualitative Research

TERMINOLOGY

Critical Race Theory (CRT) - A framework that focuses on racial inequities within law, society, and education.

Faculty - A professor or lecturer at an institution of higher education.

Implicit Bias - A prejudice that one has against another group that may or may not be known.

Microaggression - An indirect and subtle form of discrimination that may or may not be intentional.

People of Color (POC) - In the context of this project, refers to anyone that does not identify as White.

Predominantly White Institution (PWI) - An institution of higher learning that has a White student population of fifty percent or higher.

Staff - In the context of this project, anyone who works for an institution of higher learning that is not a professor/lecturer.

Tenure - Guaranteed employment in a teaching position.

Qualitative Research - A form of data collection that focuses on narrative as opposed to numerical/quantitative data.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Terminology.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	4
<i>Introduction</i>	4
<i>CRT Overview</i>	4
<i>Predominantly White Institutions and Integration</i>	5
<i>Barriers for Faculty/Staff of Color</i>	7
<i>Impact on Students of Color</i>	8
<i>Possible Solutions</i>	9
<i>Summary</i>	11
Methodology.....	12
<i>Background</i>	12
<i>Context</i>	12
<i>Method</i>	13
<i>Data Collection</i>	13
<i>Participants</i>	14
<i>Ethical Considerations</i>	15

Discussion.....17

 Introduction.....17

 Faculty and Staff Themes.....17

 Student Themes.....19

 Faculty and Staff/Student Suggestions.....21

 Summary.....22

Conclusion.....24

Works Cited.....26

Appendices.....28

 Appendix A – *IRB Application*.....29

 Appendix B – *Consent Form*.....33

 Appendix C – *Faculty/Staff Questions*.....34

 Appendix D – *Student Questions*.....35

INTRODUCTION

I am a scholar of Comparative Ethnic Studies at the California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo). According to the university's statement on diversity, Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo "support(s) a climate that allows all students, faculty, and staff to feel valued, which in turn facilitates the recruitment and retention of a diverse campus population" (OUD&I). With such a bold assertion, one would imagine Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo to be an open and welcoming campus with a vibrant community composed of peoples from various backgrounds and cultures. Unfortunately, this could not be further from the truth. Instead, my university is an anomaly. As a public institution in one of the most diverse states in the nation, Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, holds the title as the whitest in the California State University system. Of the 20,944 students enrolled, 11,985 of them are white (Malhotra). Of the 2,811 faculty and staff, 1,755 of them are white (OUD&I). As a student of color on this campus, I found myself tired of the façade of diversity and inclusivity, when my day-to-day experiences proved otherwise. Through my years as an undergraduate, I watched several faculty and staff of color, my mentors, leave. In the past academic year alone, Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo saw 40% of its black employees resign (OUD&I). Contrary to what one might assume, they did not leave because a higher-paying job came along, nor did they leave because they had served Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, for 50+ years and it was simply their time to retire. They left because they could not bear to come into work another day. They could not stand to work for an institution, let alone live in a community, that never actually accepted them. It seemed obvious to me that this cyclical pattern was not just worrisome, but also symptomatic of a toxic campus and community climate. Yet, no one was talking about it.

I felt a strong need to investigate Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo's diversity issue. Particularly, I saw the need for qualitative analysis of recruitment and retention rates among faculty and staff of color at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. Furthermore, I wanted to answer the following: how does the presence, or lack thereof, of faculty/staff of color impact the success of students of color at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo? Additionally, how has the presence, or lack thereof, of faculty/staff of color shaped the overall college experience for students of color at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo? Hence, how *Learn By Leaving* came to fruition.

This project is composed of four main components which serve to answer my research questions. The first of which being the "Literature Review." In the review, I examine how qualitative research methods through the theoretical framework Critical Race Theory (CRT) are vital to discussing issues pertaining to race and racism. I also briefly cover the history of educational segregation and how it worked to establish Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). The bulk of the review, however, focuses on existing research on recruitment and retention of faculty and staff of color at PWIs, the barriers and obstacles they face, and the consequent effects on students of color. This is followed by a brief overview of potential solutions previously proposed by scholars in the field. The next section, "Methodology," provides insight into the logistics of my research, namely, the process of gaining approval for fieldwork, the ways in which I selected participants and collected data via interviews, and my justifications for doing so. The third section is the "Discussion," where my findings from my fieldwork are thematically analyzed. The results of my project are compared to the preliminary research featured in the literature review and conclusions are drawn accordingly. The last section is the "Conclusion," in which I provide a summation of my research and provide suggestions for improvement and expansion by future scholars.

I strongly believe that Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, is in dire need of research such as *Learn By Leaving*. Up until now, the only data available pertaining to campus climate was collected and presented by the administration itself, via the Office of University Diversity and Inclusivity (OUD&I). Upon accessing the OUD&I website, one is greeted by pictures of smiling POC captioned with very statistic-heavy, quantitative terminology regarding diversity and inclusivity initiatives. However, the campus climate data itself is not easily accessible, nor is it easily interpretable. The first pages of the report boast the statistic that 80% of respondents are “comfortable/very comfortable with overall campus climate” (OUD&I). However, this claim does not reflect that faculty/staff and students of color reported being markedly less comfortable with the campus climate in comparison to their white colleagues. Additionally, faculty/staff and students of color reported higher incidences of hostile and exclusionary interactions compared to white colleagues as well. This manipulation of data presentation is not conducive to honest and uncensored dialogue, which subsequently does not lead to substantial reformation. Thus, my project is paramount in getting Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo administration on board with the values they claim to uphold.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This review was conducted using a variety of databases available through the Robert E. Kennedy Library at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. This review serves to complement “Learn By Leaving” by providing a general compilation of existing research related to issues of equity and diversity in higher education. The review is structured into five sections; Critical Race Theory Overview, Predominantly White Institutions and Integration, Barriers for Faculty/Staff of Color, Impact on Students of Color, and Possible Solutions.

Critical Race Theory Overview

When thinking of what is considered credible research, many perceive quantitative methods – number-heavy, statistic-based, scientific experiments – as the end all and be all. However, one must not dismiss the importance of qualitative methods in creating a meaningful and transformative project. Particularly, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is useful in analyzing issues of race and racism, by placing higher emphasis on narratives and story-telling as opposed to quantitative data. CRT is a framework that examines race and power using a variety of qualitative-based methods. The most widely credited originator of CRT, Derrick Bell, originally used this framework in the 1980s to critically examine racial and power dynamics within the legal field in the United States of America. Within the past three decades, however, CRT has been adopted by scholars from a variety of fields within the humanities. While CRT, historically, has not been regarded as highly in academia as traditional Eurocentric methodologies, it’s impact is paramount in furthering racial awareness and fighting racism.

CRT is particularly invaluable when addressing People of Color (POC) in higher education. Respected Higher Education professionals Dorion McCoy and Dirk Roddicks expand on CRT's role in higher education, asserting that race and racism must be at the center of conversation in order to challenge educational inequality, and the implementation of CRT provides an efficient way to do so (16). By using narratives to expose incidences of overt racial discrimination and harassment, attention is shifted from the oppressor to the oppressed. This allows white administrators, educators, and students at PWIs to view racism from a more critical lens.

Predominantly White Institutions and Integration

Predominantly White Institutions are colleges and universities that have a majority White student population. In the United States, most institutions that are not designated Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) are considered PWIs. There are six categories of MSIs:

1. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs): an institution founded prior to 1964 with the sole purpose of educating Black students
2. Black-Serving, non-HBCUs, also referred to as Primarily Black Institutions (PBIs): an institution founded after 1964 that has at least 25% of Black student enrollment
3. Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs): an institution that has at least 25% of Hispanic/Latinx student enrollment
4. Asian-Serving Institutions (ASIs): an institution that has at least 25% of Asian student enrollment
5. American Indian-Serving Institution, also known as Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCU): an institution that has at least 25% of American Indian student enrollment

6. Other Minority-Serving Institutions: Any institution that is not predominantly White but does not fit into any of the above categories (Carroll and Li 3)

It is of utmost importance to recognize the historical need for, and subsequent origins of, MSIs. To do so, it is crucial to understand that PWIs are rooted in the “binarism and exclusion supported by the United States prior to 1964” (Brown and Dancy 523) and thus serve(d) as literal institutions of racism and discrimination. In the past half-century, there have been attempts to integrate and diversify the student populations of PWIs. Perhaps the most well-known, and, consequently, most controversial, is affirmative action, as detailed by prominent educational advocate Ibrahim Karkhouthi. Affirmative action dates back to the late 1960s, and refers to any social policy that aims to undo past practices of discrimination and exclusion in the school or work force (Karkhouthi 61). In terms of higher education, affirmative action justifies the consideration of racial/ethnic background in admission selection. While it has been proven effective in increasing enrollment rates of students of color at PWIs, affirmative action policies have been met with considerable backlash since their implementation (Karkhouthi 62). The main argument against affirmative action is that it values race over merit, giving students of color an unfair advantage over “more worthy” White students. However, there is an obvious flaw in a meritocracy-based, color-blind approach to college admissions, and that is that it ignores systemic barriers faced by marginalized communities. For example, a Black student attending an inner-city public school might not have access to the advanced placement courses that a White student attending an affluent private school would, thus making the White student appear more qualified on paper despite no real evidence of intellectual capability and superiority. By moving away from color-blindness and acknowledging the obstacles faced by POC, affirmative action

serves as an attempt to level the playing field and “open the doors of higher education for minority students” (Karkhouthi 63).

Barriers for Faculty/Staff of Color

Authors Willie Edwards and Henry Ross argue that there is one main institutional barrier that faculty of color at PWIs face that do not plague their white colleagues: lack of education on the process of (and subsequent obtainment) of tenure (4). Scholar Jalelah Abdul supplements this argument, citing that while more and more POC are obtaining doctoral degrees and pursuing careers in professorship, the percentage of POC obtaining tenured status remains stagnant in comparison to white faculty (52). Faculty of color are less likely to have mentors that can advise them during the process of pursuing tenure. Additionally, current tenure selection processes have been found to be implicitly biased against POC (Abdul 53). What is the importance of a faculty-member being awarded tenure? Tenure not only increases salary, it also increases one’s rank in the academic community. With better pay and more respect from colleagues, tenured faculty are more likely to stay at their institution. Additionally, tenured faculty have more flexibility and authority in advocating for students on their respective campus, since their employment is, essentially, protected. Thus, a lack of tenured faculty of color results in a lack of support for students of color.

Another issue that is unique to faculty of color is tokenism and/or isolation as explored by Diggs et al. White professors may come to faculty of color expecting them to speak on issues pertaining to race, and when racially-charged controversies arise such as the #BlackLivesMatter or No DAPL Movement, faculty of color find themselves unwillingly put in the spotlight. White students with a professor of color might also question that professor’s credibility in their field and ability to teach effectively (Diggs et al. 315). For many faculty of color at PWIs, the need to

assimilate to be accepted by colleagues and students is particularly strong. In many cases, a professor might find that they are the only POC within their academic department, and thus feel they have to behave in a certain manner as not to perpetuate any racial stereotypes.

Institutional racism does not only affect instructors of color. Staff of color also face similar incidents of blatant discrimination and bias. Perhaps the most glaring disparity in terms of POC and whites in non-instructor positions can be found within higher education administration. Administrators are often viewed as the leaders of a school. Historically, leadership positions have been kept away from POC, for the obvious reason of keeping whites in a position of power. Thus, the lack of POC, especially African-Americans, in administrator positions is intentional and/or structural and a direct act of racial discrimination (Wolfe and Dilworth 8).

Impact on Students of Color

In the United States, higher education is the primary way in which one can transcend their previously ascribed socioeconomic status and achieve the quintessential “American Dream.” The mantra of “get a good education, get a good job” is one that echoes in the ears of school children from a very early age. In a nation that was rooted in the destruction of Indigenous communities and built upon the backs of slaves, it is no mystery that the American Dream was not historically extended to POC and remains largely inaccessible in the present day. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that institutions of higher education, particularly PWIs, are not devoted to nor conducive to the success of students of color.

Not shockingly, attending a PWI negatively impacts students of color. By attending a PWI, students of color are less likely to have instructors and advisors from similar racial/ethnic

and/or socioeconomic background as themselves, all of which hampers their college experience. Furthermore, the divisive and exclusive environment that many PWIs perpetuate through instances of racial discrimination and harassment prevents students of color from accomplishing their goals, both academically and personally. For example, Black students that attend a PWI have higher drop-out rates and significantly lower academic performance compared to their peers that attend an HBCU (Karkhouthi 65). Additionally, Black students who attend an HBCU have better relations with their instructors, more access to resources, and, subsequently, higher academic achievement (Karkhouthi 65). Racial exclusivity and lack of guidance is also a common problem for Latinx students attending PWIs. Many Latinx students are seen as intellectually incapable by their white peers and instructors, and thus face feelings of inadequacy and isolation (Von Robertson et al. 2).

In Creighton's piece for *International Electronic Journal For Leadership In Learning*, she argues that institutional racism within PWIs has a multitude of disastrous effects: from psychological trauma and emotional stress, to substandard academic performance and the lowering of graduation rates among students of color (3). While there are several factors that contribute to low retention and completion rates, the importance of a relationship between faculty/staff of color and students of color, in particular, cannot be denied. Findings support that the presence of instructors and/or advisors of color is the most important social factor that impacts the grade-point average and completion rates among minority students (Creighton 4).

Possible Solutions

Improving recruitment and retention rates of faculty/staff of color should be a top priority at all PWIs, and not only for the psychological well-being of students of color – but for the ultimate success of white students as well. White students with instructors of color are exposed

to different ideas and methodologies, which in turn makes them more culturally competent and competitive in the rapidly-growing global market upon graduation. (Karkhouthi 67) Thus, the diversifying of faculty and staff at PWIs benefits the entire student population and educational institution. The question to ask, then, is how?

As reviewed by academic Taj'ullah Sky Lark, multiple solutions have been proposed to increase the recruitment and retention of POC at PWIs, including but not limited to:

- Establish More Inclusive Standards for Judging Faculty/Staff Yearly Performances
- Provide Opportunities for Authentic & Spiritual Expression
- Institutionalize Diversity Goals
- Promote Sharing Leadership for Diversity
- Establish Recruitment/Hiring Retention Plans
- Diversify Student Body/Faculty/Staff
- Provide Training on Faculty/Staff-of-Color Issues
- Provide Opportunities for Collegial Networks and Collaborations
- Provide Connections to Diverse Community
- Reduce Salary Inequities
- Provide Research Support
- Promote Policies Supportive of a Diverse Faculty/Staff
- Promote Mentoring Programs
- Establish More Inclusive Standards for Tenure and Promotion (6)

There is also much to be said against the additive-value approach taken by many PWIs when addressing race and racism. By discussing discrimination and bias in terms of “racial sensitivity”

and similar color-blind terminology, the historical destruction of POC through oppression is minimized (Diggles 36). Instead, resolutions must be targeted and assertive to truly begin to dismantle institutionalized racism in higher education.

Summary

In summation, the amount of research specifically related to my driving questions is quite limited. While broader topics such as affirmative action and institutional racism have been researched for several decades, the particular issues that POC face at PWIs appear to be a relatively recent inquiry, with most of the data being collected within the past ten years. Even then, though similar projects do exist, none have been conducted in the Western United States, let alone within the California State University system and at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. Furthermore, the majority of case studies focus on private PWIs. Cal Poly San Luis Obispo is a public institution partially funded by tax-payers in the state of California. Thus, “Learn By Leaving” will contribute to this area of study by adding regional and institutional diversity to this field. Additionally, much of the literature reviewed conforms to more “traditional” Eurocentric methodologies and analysis. “Learn By Leaving” seeks to actively break away from these academic models by providing a platform where participants are not just welcome to, but encouraged, to remain uncensored and unfiltered.

METHODOLOGY

Background

I am a graduating scholar of Comparative Ethnic Studies. Within my work, I have focused on America's educational system and its role in the power dynamics of systemic and institutional racism. But, above my academic and professional credentials, I am simply a biracial student at a Predominantly White Institution and an unapologetic advocate for educational equity. My motivation for completing this research stems from my own unaddressed issues with my university in regards to my social location and racial/ethnic identity. I do not wish to be seen as a "researcher" but, rather, a participant, alongside the others that are involved with this project.

Context

My research took place at California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo), in the town of San Luis Obispo. San Luis Obispo, also referred to as SLO, is a small affluent town in San Luis Obispo County. It is located on the central coast of California, situated halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. San Luis Obispo has a population of 46,377 residents. The San Luis Obispo community is racially homogenous, with 68.5% of permanent residents identifying as White, 24.2% identifying as Hispanic/Latinx, 3.1% identifying as Asian/Pacific Islander, 1.8% identifying as Black, 0.6% identifying as Native American, with the remaining 1.8% being placed into the "Other" category (slocity.org).

Cal Poly San Luis Obispo has a population of 24,399 students, faculty, and staff. Of the 20,944 students at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, 57.2% identify as White - thus making the campus a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) - 15.6% identify as Hispanic/Latinx, 12.2% identify as

Asian/Pacific Islander, 0.8% identify as Black, 0.2% identify as Native American, with the remaining 14% falling into the “Other” category (Calstate.edu).

Method

Ethnographic narratives were used to answer the driving questions and investigate the various factors that influence whether faculty/staff of color stay at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, and how their presence, or absence, affects students of color. The use of narrative was particularly helpful in the development of this project. As argued by qualitative research scholar Rosaline Barbour, narrative can “simply relate to individualized accounts of particular processes or events” (125). This qualitative method is best explained through Critical Race Theory (CRT). As previously discussed in the review of literature, CRT is useful in analyzing issues of race and racism, by placing higher emphasis on narratives and story-telling as opposed to quantitative data. CRT is invaluable when addressing People of Color (POC) in higher education. Race and racism must be at the center of conversation in order to challenge educational inequality, and the implementation of CRT provides an efficient way to do so (McCoy and Rodicks 18). By using narratives to expose incidences of overt racial discrimination and harassment, the oppressed are validated in their experiences. This also allows white administrators, educators, and students at PWIs to view racism from a more critical lens (Diggles 38).

Data Collection

Scholar Rosaline Barbour describes interviews as the “gold standard of qualitative research” that involves a “rarefied in-depth exchange between researcher and researched.” (111) It is a fitting then, that the main method of data collection was through interviews. Interview

participants included both current and former faculty/staff and students of color. Interviewees were carefully selected based on their connection to Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. When choosing faculty/staff, the position they hold/held while at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo and their level of involvement on campus were taken into consideration. The same protocol was followed when selecting students and alumni. Interviews began in March of 2017 and continued through May 2017, taking place at various locations both on and off campus. Six people were interviewed, with interviews being approximately fifteen to thirty-minutes long, but no official time limit assigned. Questions revolved around their personal experiences at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo and what changes, if any, they would like to see on campus. In staying true with the narrative and story-telling tenets of CRT, interviewees are encouraged to express themselves with no filter or inclination to use formal speech unless desired. While I did take manual notes during the interviews, the interviews were also auditorily recorded and subsequently transcribed for further analysis. By recording (through auditory means) interviews, another dimension was added to the data, in the form of capturing interviewees' linguistic expression and tone.

A secondary data source was the information provided by the Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo Office of University Diversity and Inclusivity and California State University website. Information from other media platforms such as Mustang News and individual department websites was gathered. This extant data will provide facts and figures that complement the narratives of participants and give statistical background for my research.

Participants

The participants are all self-identifying People of Color that were individually invited to participate in this research. They were all connected to Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo in some way,

either as current or former faculty/staff, students, or alumni. Due to the high potential for professional and/or social ostracization interviewees could face, I chose to keep them all anonymous, referring to them as only as “Participant A”, “Participant B”, “Participant C”, etc.

There were six participants total. Participant A is a current student at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo and she identifies as Black. Participant B is a current student at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo and she identifies as Indigenous. Participant C is an alumni of Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo and he identifies as Hispanic/Latinx. Participant D is a former staff member of Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. She identifies as Hispanic/Latinx. Participant E is a current faculty member at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo and he identifies as Hispanic/Latinx. Participant F is a current faculty member at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo and she identifies as Black, Puerto Rican, Filipino, and Portuguese.

Ethical Considerations

Given the nature of my research, certain paperwork was submitted to the university’s Institutional Review Board in order to move forward. Approval was granted by Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo’s Human Subjects Committee within the University Grants and Development Office. Ethically, this project posed one major risk – the potential professional and/or social ostracization of interviewees. However, steps were taken to ensure participants were protected – including the absence of visual recording, as well as the use of non-descriptive participant labels, in lieu of actual names. Interviewees also had the option to review their transcripts prior to release. Participants were provided with a list of resources, including counseling and ombudsman services should they require that support. Additionally, no interview took place without a signed consent form, releasing the university of any liability should the participant experience negative

consequence. As Barbour discusses in her chapter on Ethics, “qualitative researchers...prize our capacity to empathize” (103). Thus, in keeping with the spirit of qualitative research, all necessary steps were taken to ensure maximum protection of participants.

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to discover what external and/or internal factors impact the recruitment and retention rates of faculty and staff of color at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo and analyze the subsequent impacts on students of color at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo.

In an effort to protect the identities of participants, complete interview transcriptions are not available to the public. However, direct quotes from the interviews are referenced and the interview questions can be found in the Appendices (see Appendix C and Appendix D).

Faculty and Staff Themes

Of the three interviews of faculty/staff of color, the responses were relatively consistent. Two major themes were identified; tokenism and lack of community. All of these results were similar to the pre-existing research discussed in the literature review. Particularly, barriers to community building and microaggressions within their respective departments/offices and/or by administrators were highlighted in all three interviews.

TOKENISM:

Tokenism is defined by Merriam-Webster as “doing something (such as hiring a person who belongs to a minority group) only to prevent criticism and give the appearance that people are being treated fairly.” In practice, especially at PWIs, this is assigning a minority to be the spokesperson of their respective community - such as consulting a Black professor on issues

related to the Black struggle or Black culture. This was a common complaint among faculty and staff interviewees, with Participant D stating:

Whenever there was a question of what is considered offensive, like, ‘ Oh - Is Cinco de Drinko insulting?’, I became the go-to Mexican consultant. At first it did not bother me because I felt people were coming from a place of genuine curiosity, you know? But I realized it was ignorance and placing me as the scapegoat or the token Latina. I was always asked to be in photo campaigns for diversity. Stuff like that that made me feel more excluded, placed on a pedestal but not, uh, in a good way I guess.

Similar sentiments were expressed by the other two participants. The results are not surprising, as tokenism was previously identified as an obstacle for faculty/staff retention by scholar Gregory Diggs. As Participant D was able to conclude, placing people of color in the role of “spokesperson” is, ultimately, more isolating and exclusionary than beneficial.

LACK OF COMMUNITY:

As explored in the literature review, not having a support system at one’s respective institution can severely hinder retention rates among faculty and staff of color. Taking into consideration not only Cal Poly San Luis Obispo’s demographics, but the entirety of the town of San Luis Obispo as well, it is no surprise that POC on campus do not feel a sense of belonging. Participant D reveals her struggle to fit in, and how it influenced her decision to leave:

Um, you just get tired of not feeling accepted. I was tolerated, but not accepted. I was tolerated, not loved. You get what I’m saying? Yeah there were some other Latinos. But nothing felt concrete. We would all come and go. How long could I handle these white people looking at me funny? It was a big deal - not having any sense of family. So I left.

Participant F complements this, saying that what is missing is a more inclusive infrastructure: “Help build an infrastructure to meet the needs of your diverse populations. Team up with the community to bring diverse hair salons, restaurants, and services so that people have what they need to feel like they belong and or welcomed here.”

Student Themes

Of the three interviews of students and alumni of color, the responses were relatively consistent. Every participant noted their lack of interactions with faculty of color and wishes for the expansion of programs/resources for students of color. Additionally, all three participants concluded that the campus climate has worsened since their first-year as students at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, as stated by Participant C:

[O]verall as a campus climate with professors and students I feel the campus climate has worsened. During the election, lots of ignorant and bigot people were brought out and kind of showed the true feelings of majority of white people on campus. It was full of hate and simply not understanding what one of color actually goes through. Simply speaking in generalizations and not of fact. Felt uncomfortable once I graduated knowing my campus has become not welcoming.

Two major themes were identified; impacted academic performance, and lack of school pride. Most of the results were similar to the pre-existing research discussed in the literature review.

IMPACTED ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE:

Of the three participants, only Participant C held a cumulative GPA of over a 3.0, and his reasoning behind motivation for this was more personal - not wanting to let his family down - than it was due to support by the institution. The other two participants have below a 3.0, and have found themselves on academic probation multiple times. Participant A states:

My first two years, I was doing, like, poorly in my major courses. Just straight up average. I just couldn't get it and didn't understand why until my second year I took a class with um, an Asian male professor and Black woman professor, and seeing them and them explaining to me that the reason I was doing poorly was because I wasn't used to being in an environment that was all white ... and I couldn't see myself in it, a lot of my classes weren't clicking because I didn't connect to it ... Now I'm purposefully taking my classes with professors of color.

Additionally, Participant C was the only student that did not seriously consider dropping out, once again, due to his commitment to making his family proud, and not because he felt any real connection to Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. This was in direct contrast to Participant B, who expressed her desire to leave due to her racial/ethnic identity not being welcomed:

“I've thought of dropping out. If anything taking community college courses...A lot of the pressure from professors and students have made me think about it [her racial/ethnic identity in relation to Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo] more than anything else.”

LACK OF SCHOOL PRIDE:

Many students look back on their college years fondly, and with great pride in their respective alma mater. This was not the case with my participants. Participant A explicitly stated: “The campus, especially administration, is so trash. Cal Poly is shit.”

And Participant C admitted:

“Even now as an alumni...still don’t feel that welcoming feeling.”

These feelings of animosity and indifference towards Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo are the result of a mediocre college experience negatively impacted by a lack of diversity and inclusivity. Unfortunately, such sentiments are commonly held by students of color at PWIs, as verified by scholar Ibrahim Karkhouthi in his research comparing students of color at PWIs and HBCUs.

Faculty/Staff and Student Suggestions

Every single participant included their own personal recommendations for what change they would like to see enacted at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. Most of their suggestions directly address administration, with Participant F stating:

The administration needs to approach diversity and inclusivity training and awareness more aggressively, starting from the top down. I would like to see all of the administration participate in an intensive diversity based higher education training or workshop and work with their teams to educate others on the same ideas. As of now they are encouraging change from the bottom up and that doesn’t work, especially when you have superiors who are averse to the ideas. The administration needs to set the standard.

Additionally, Participant B expressed the need for more inclusive hiring practices to allow POC into staff positions on campus: “It would be more helpful for the people of color on campus, um, just because retention rates, you realize, the majority of places that do have higher retention rates of people of color are places that have people of color in those positions of being a resource.”

These direct approaches are commonly expressed wishes among POC at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, and could easily be applied to PWIs in general.

Summary

Overall, the data collected answers my driving questions in two ways. First, it confirms that there is a unique relationship between faculty/staff of color and students of color, as previously discussed in the literature review. Secondly, it explores that connection, and ultimately reveals that a lack of faculty/staff of color negatively impacts students of color in terms of academic success and overall wellbeing.

All four themes from the data are consistent with ones previously explored by scholars in the literature review, further supplementing the established research. This also allows for the results from *Learn By Leaving* to be applied to PWIs as a whole, supporting the assertion that occurrences of racism, bias, prejudice, and discrimination ultimately stem from and flourish through the inherently racist structure of PWIs. Thus, the argument that such acts of racism, bias, prejudice and discrimination at PWIs are merely “isolated incidences” is rendered inaccurate.

Perhaps the most concerning finding within the data is the participant’s unanimous displeasure with the Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo administration. At such a prestigious and nationally ranked university, dissatisfaction and subsequent lack of school pride should be, largely, a nonissue. Furthermore, the inaction by administration is in direct contrast to the

supposed goals of diversity and inclusivity expressed by the OUD&I, and should lead one to criticize the ways in which campus administration claims to address said problems.

This research provided invaluable insight to the issues facing faculty/staff and students of color at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. The interviews allowed people of color to express their unique experiences and emotions, and the anonymity of the interviews further encouraged participants to be unfiltered and genuine in their responses. To my knowledge, similar research has never been conducted at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, thus, *Learn By Leaving* has provided an excellent foundation on which future humanities scholars can build upon.

CONCLUSION

I believe that this project is only truly a foundation for research that should be expanded on by either myself in the future or by other scholars in the higher education fields. Countless obstacles prevented this research from reaching the level that I had envisioned during the brainstorming process. From hold ups from the Institutional Review Board, to participants recanting their interviews, to an overall lack of time to devote to this research on my end, *Learn By Leaving* is a rough draft of what could ultimately be something much more impactful and powerful. Should a researcher choose to take on a project of this scope, I would recommend that they begin searching for participants early on and allocate the time to do multiple interviews - more than originally needed - to accommodate for participants potentially pulling their interviews from the research. That being said, the data collected through “Learn By Leaving” and its subsequent analysis would provide invaluable supplementation to similar research conducted on a much larger scale.

My goal was to answer my driving questions: How does the presence, or lack thereof, of faculty/staff of color impact the success of students of color at Cal Poly? Additionally, how has the presence, or lack thereof, of faculty/staff of color shaped the overall college experience for students of color at Cal Poly? I found that my original hypothesis - that poor recruitment/retention of faculty and staff of color would negatively impact students of color, both academically and personally - was correct. As discussed in the literature review, faculty/staff of color presence plays an integral role in the academic success and psychological/social well-being of students of color. The students that participated in interviews all noted how the lack of faculty/staff of color had detrimental effects on their college experience, be it academically and/or personally. However, the ways in which both faculty/staff of color and students of color

on campus deal with said issues of prejudice and bias were unique and not uniform, as I had expected.

Overall, my research was transformative - not just for myself, but for my participants as well. This research was deeply personal for me, and creating this project served as my own act of resistance against racism in higher education. Many of my participants noted the lack of opportunity to express their concerns, and, in completing these interviews, felt more represented. It is my hope that Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo administration will review the data collected and realize the need for active, not passive, reform.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTOCOL APPROVAL FORM

Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo

All Cal Poly faculty, staff, and student research with human subjects, as well as other research involving human subjects that is conducted at Cal Poly, must be reviewed by the **Cal Poly Institutional Review Board** for the protection of human subjects, the researchers, and the University. Human subjects research is defined as any systematic investigation of living human subjects that is designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge. While the ethical guidelines for research are applicable to classroom activities, demonstrations, and assignments, the Cal Poly IRB does not review classroom activities unless data will be collected and used in a systematic investigation.

Researchers should complete all items on this approval form and submit it, along with a research protocol (containing the information detailed in [Guidelines for Human Subjects Research Protocol](#)), to the Office of Research and Economic Development (Debbie Hart, Bldg. 38, Room 154). Please feel free to attach an additional page if your responses to any of the items require more space. Your answers to the items on this form, as well as the research protocol, should be typed. The Committee will make every effort to respond to your submission within two to four weeks. Committee approval should be received prior to contacting prospective subjects and collecting data. Please read carefully [Cal Poly's Policy for the Use of Human Subjects in Research](#) prior to completing this application.

*If you require assistance in completing this form,
contact the Office of Research and Economic Development at (805) 756-1508.*

1. Date:

2. Title of Research Project:

3. Type of Research:

- Senior project
 Master's thesis
 Faculty research
 Other:

please explain

4. Name(s) of Researcher(s)

Principal Investigator:

Department or other affiliation:

Phone: Email:

Position: Faculty Student

Other: *please explain*

Additional Researcher:

Department or other affiliation:

Phone: Email:

Position: Faculty Student

Other: *please explain*

Additional Researcher:

Department or other affiliation:

Phone: Email:

Position: Faculty Student

Other:

Any additional researchers involved in the project should be listed with the descriptive information requested above on a separate sheet.

5. Faculty Advisor (if applicable)

Name: Email:

Department or other affiliation: Phone:

Other thesis committee members if the research is a thesis:

Name: Email:

Department or other affiliation: Phone:

Name: Email:

Department or other affiliation: Phone:

Name: Email:

Department or other affiliation: Phone:

6. Is there an *external* funding source for the project:

Yes, and the source is:

No

7. Is this a modification of a project previously reviewed by Cal Poly's Human Subjects Committee?

Yes, and the approximate date of the last review was:

No

8. Estimated duration of the project:

Starting date: Completion date:

9. Describe any risks (physical, psychological, social, or economic) that may be involved.

See *Specific Ethical Criterion #1* in [Policy for the Use of Human Subjects in Research](#) for a description of the types of risks.

10. Indicate what measures will be taken to minimize risks. See *Specific Ethical Criterion #1* in [Policy for the Use of Human Subjects in Research](#) for a discussion of strategies for minimizing risks.

11. Explain how subjects' confidentiality will be protected. See *Specific Ethical Criterion #5* in [Policy for the Use of Human Subjects in Research](#) for a discussion of strategies for minimizing risks.

12. Describe any incentives for participation that will be used. See *Specific Ethical Criterion #2* in [Policy for the Use of Human Subjects in Research](#) for a discussion of the use of incentives in research.

13. Will deception of subjects be involved in the research procedures?

Yes* No

**If so, explain the deception and how it will be handled. See *Specific Ethical Criterion #3* in [Policy for the Use of Human Subjects in Research](#) for a discussion of the use of deception in research:*

14. Type of review requested:

Exempt from further review* Expedited review Full review

See *Types of Review* in [Policy for the Use of Human Subjects in Research](#) for a discussion of the criteria for exempt, expedited, and full reviews.

**The research protocol submitted for a project presumed to be exempt may be abbreviated but should contain sufficient information to support the conclusion that the project meets the criteria for exemption.*

15. Signatures:

Your signature below indicates that the information presented in this application (the approval form and research protocol) is accurate and that you have read, understand, and agree to follow the [Policy for the Use of Human Subjects in Research](#).

Name of Primary Researcher: _____

Signature: _____

Cal Poly Faculty Advisor's Signature (Required if this is student research)

I have reviewed this research proposal which has been prepared by my advisee(s) in accordance with the [Guidelines for Obtaining Human Subjects Approval](#).

Name of Faculty Advisor: _____

Signature

[Return to the Human Subjects Committee homepage.](#)

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT, *Learn By Leaving*

Senior project research on faculty/staff of color recruitment and retention in correlation to student of color academic performance and collegiate experience is being conducted by Erica Cookman, a student in the Department of Comparative Ethnic Studies at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, under the supervision of Dr. Jenell Navarro. The purpose of the study is to reveal contributing factors on why faculty/staff of color choose to stay or leave at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo and how their decision to stay or leave impacts students of color.

You are being asked to take part in this study by participating in an interview that will be recorded through audio/visual means and published, accessible to the public. Your participation will take approximately one to three hours. Please be aware that you are not required to participate in this research and you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. You also do not have to answer any questions you choose not to answer.

The possible risks associated with participation in this study include recalling events that may or may not be traumatic, and/or feelings of isolation, and/or ostracizing by peers/colleagues. If you should experience emotional distress, please be aware that you may contact Cal Poly's Counseling Services at (805) 756-2511, or San Luis Obispo County's Mental Health Services at (800) 838-1381 for assistance.

Your confidentiality will be protected, by not having your name/face/voice identified in the project. Potential benefits associated with the study include the opportunity to express your feelings and unique experiences, and providing meaningful narratives that may inform other faculty/staff and/or students of color at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo.

If you have questions regarding this study or would like to be informed of the results when the study is completed, please feel free to contact Erica Cookman at ecookman@calpoly.edu. If you have concerns regarding the manner in which the study is conducted, you may contact Dr. Michael Black, Chair of the Cal Poly Institutional Review Board, at (805) 756-2894, mblack@calpoly.edu, or Dr. Dean Wendt, Dean of Research, at (805) 756-1508, dwendt@calpoly.edu.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research project as described, please indicate your agreement by checking the appropriate box and signing below. Please keep one copy of this form for your reference, and thank you for your participation in this research.

Yes, I agree to participate and allow my interview to be recorded.

Yes, I agree to participate but would like to review my recorded interview before it is published.

Yes, I agree to participate but do not want my interview recorded.

No, I do not agree to participate

Signature of Volunteer	Date

Signature of Researcher	Date

Appendix C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS – FACULTY/STAFF

- 1.) Briefly tell us about yourself: Your name (optional), Racial/Ethnic identity, Position(s) held at Cal Poly, Whether you are currently employed by Cal Poly, Length of time employed by Cal Poly.
- 2.) Please elaborate on what your position entails – what duties are specific to your job?
- 3.) Why did you choose this specific profession?
- 4.) In what ways has Cal Poly administration supported you in achieving your career goals?
- 5.) In what ways has Cal Poly administration discouraged you from achieving your career goals?
- 6.) In what ways have your co-workers supported you in achieving your career goals?
- 7.) In what ways have your co-workers discouraged you from achieving your career goals?
- 8.) During your time at Cal Poly, did you/have you ever felt your racial/ethnic identity influenced your ability to succeed professionally?
- 9.) During your time at Cal Poly, were you/have you ever been subjected to racially charged acts? This includes but is not limited to instances of racial discrimination, microaggressions, and/or harassment.
- 10.) Did you leave Cal Poly, if not, have you seriously considered resigning from your position at Cal Poly?
- 11.) Do you feel that your racial/ethnic identity and how others treated you based on that identity influenced your decision to leave/consider leaving?
- 12.) What other factors influenced your decision to leave/consider leaving?
- 13.) If you could give a piece of advice to Cal Poly administration and/or co-workers, what would it be?

Appendix D**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS – STUDENTS**

- 1.) Briefly tell us about yourself: Your name (optional), Racial/Ethnic Identity, Major, Class Standing at Cal Poly, If you are an alumni, please indicate your graduation year.
- 2.) Are you currently on track to graduate/did you graduate within five years of starting your academic program?
- 3.) Is/was your cumulative GPA a 3.0 or above?
- 4.) Why did you choose Cal Poly to pursue your undergraduate degree?
- 5.) How many of your professors have a racial/ethnic identity other than white?
- 6.) In what ways did/has having professors of color impact/impacted your academic experience?
- 7.) Were/are you aware of the resources available on campus for students of color? If so, which ones?
- 8.) Do you feel that having access to these resources helped/has helped you succeed academically?
- 9.) Do you feel that Cal Poly should hire more staff of color to further support these programs?
- 10.) Have you/did you ever seriously considered transferring to another school or dropping out of college?
- 11.) Do you feel that your racial/ethnic identity and how others treated you based on that identity influenced your decision to consider transferring/dropping out?
- 12.) Overall, would you say that the campus climate has improved, worsened, or stayed the same since your first quarter at Cal Poly?