STRUGGLING TO SURVIVE: ADDRESSING THE GRADUATION RATE OF CAL POLY'S

BLACK MEN

By

Malcolm S. Mills

Advised by

Dr. Ryan Alaniz

SOC 461, 462

Senior Project

Social Sciences Department

College of Liberal Arts

CALIFORNIA POLYTECHNIC STATE UNIVERSITY

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Senior Project Research Proposal

The purpose of this research project is to address the six-year graduation rate for Black males at Cal Poly and provide a critical analysis of the current rate. Through interviews with current and former students, the questions "why are the rates the way they are?" and "what can be done to improve them?" can be answered and analyzed. Another goal of this project is to advocate the implementation of sound, research informed strategies by Cal Poly's administration and other appropriate agents of the University to address the graduation rate of Cal Poly's Black male students.

Accomplishing the Goal

Due to the lack of research conducted on this matter at Cal Poly, a combination of Critical Race Theory and Grounded Theory will guide the way to achieve the goals laid out above. Grounded theory is the construction of theory through data analysis. This will be a qualitative research project focusing on analysis of in-depth data gathered through interviews with current and former Black male Cal Poly students. Critical Race Theory will be another theoretical lens used. Critical Race Theory prioritizes the voices and experiences of the Black men who participate in this study. It validates their experiences, while at the same time challenging contemporary "colorblind" beliefs that permeate through today's contemporary "post-racial" society.

Hypothesis

A hypothesis is not typically formulated prior to data collection with Grounded Theory methodology. However, simply by examining current events on Cal Poly's campus, considering the result of Cal Poly's Campus Climate survey from the 2014 winter quarter, prior personal

interactions with Black male students at Cal Poly, and being a Black male myself, there are a few hypotheses that can be drawn:

1. Cal Poly's campus environment is not welcoming to Black male students. Black male students encounter hostility through student interactions, faculty interactions, and through institutional actions by Cal Poly administration.

2. The lack of Black faculty and staff at Cal Poly does not allow Black men to successful models when it comes to navigating life at Cal Poly.

3. Current resources and the current student community at Cal Poly are insufficient for supporting Cal Poly's Black male students' success, leading to lower graduation rates.

Significance of Project

In 2014, Cal Poly's University President, Dr. Jeffery Armstrong, delivered an address to Cal Poly regarding his vision for the University in 2022. In his address he calls for Cal Poly's campus to "Create a rich culture of diversity and inclusivity that supports and celebrates the similarities and differences of every individual on campus," to "have an enriching, inclusive environment where every student, faculty and staff member is valued," and to "Enhance student success." Addressing the graduation rates of Cal Poly's Black male students meets every one of the goals President Armstrong set for Cal Poly. This project will serve to address obstacles towards achieving these goals. In addition, this project can serve as a source of data for the university to refer to as they hopefully address issues of retention regarding their faculty, staff, and students of color. Furthermore, this project can serve as a reference for other students who may come along interested in studying other issues affecting Black students at Cal Poly.

Annotated Bibliography

Credle, J. O., & Dean, G. J. (1991). A Comprehensive Model for Enhancing Black Student
Retention in Higher Education. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development,
19*(4). Retrieved March 12, 2017.

This article sets out to create a model to enhance Black student retention in higher education.
The authors focus specially on tailoring this model for Black students attending predominately
white institutions. The authors utilize critical race theory as a base to challenge the notion that
predominately white institutions are post-racial in their philosophies governing their students.
The authors identify institutional barriers that predominately white campuses face in
implementing this model. They identify these barriers as "a) lack of orientation toward the
culture of Black students; (b) lack of awareness of the needs of Black students; (c) the inability
to respond to the needs of Black students; (d) inappropriate academic standards for Black
students; (e) inability to help Black students survive in the complex systems of the institution;
and (f) negative attitudes toward Black students by faculty, staff, and administrators." The
authors then proposed steps predominately white institutions must implement in order to
overcome these barriers. Steps include examining the institution's philosophy and mission,
assessing the institution's ability to work with Black students, assessing Black students'
academic and social readiness, being proactive in inoculating Black students to the campus
through early visits, establishing rapport with Black students, helping Black students learn to
work within the organizational structure, and developing a mentoring program for Black
students. This article provides solid strategies that Cal Poly, a predominately white institution
can implement to increase their graduation rate of Black men. (236 words)

Hunn, V. (2014) African American Students, Retention, and Team-Based Learning: A Review of
the Literature and Recommendations for Retention at Predominately White Institutions.
Journal of Black Studies, 45(4), 301-314. doi: 10.1177/0021934714529594

This article goes over literature regarding retention of Black students at predominately
institutions (PWIs). Topics the author reviews in literature include finding a sense of belonging
and academic integration, mentoring first generation college students and mentoring students of
color by faculty of color. The author focuses on trends from Kentucky colleges and universities
and their regional retention characteristics. The author analyzes a popular learning pedagogy
called *team-based learning*. The author finds that on a theoretical level, the pedagogy is an
effective one. However, the pedagogy has no empirical evidence at the time of the article's
publication. The author finds research that showed linked courses, or courses where there are
multiple classes needed to meet the curriculum requirements, in team-based learning structures
resulted in participants with statically higher results in the related topic, higher motivation levels,
and a high recommendation rate for the courses. The author calls for more research into this
pedagogy as well as its effectiveness. Research finds that learning pedagogies that are not
culturally sensitive are detrimental to retention of Black students. Challenges to this popular
team-based learning include feelings of isolation of Black students in White learning groups,
Black students not included in relevant team work, feeling uncomfortable working with students
of different races/ethnicities, and how the educational experience of the students are affected
because of the discomfort. This article will be valuable to this project by providing the literary

background to assist with the analyses of the interviews conducted. It will help provide some insight into why certain responses are given during interviews with participants. (261 words)

Keels, M. (2013). Getting Them Enrolled Is Only Half the Battle: College Success as a Function of Race or Ethnicity, Gender, and Class. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 83*(2,3), 310-322. doi:10.1111/ajop.12033

This article examines gender and racial gaps in college grades and graduation from a 1999 freshman cohort of students attending 24 predominantly White institutions and the factors influencing observed gaps. The author was guided by the question of whether gender, race or ethnicity, and socioeconomic status combined affect college outcomes or whether they interact where outcomes are more positive or detrimental for one group over another. The author found gender gaps for Black and Latino students. For Black students, the gender gap in degree attainment widened once sociodemographic factors were considered. In contrast, the gender gap for Latino students narrowed and became insignificant when sociodemographics were controlled. The author found other in-group interactions. For example, the 6-year college graduation rates were higher for Black females than for males whose mothers did not have college degrees, but no gender gap existed when the mother had a college degree. The author concludes that among that sample of academically motivated students, the significance of gender depends on race and socioeconomic status. The author argues that improving minority success, especially for Black men at PWIs, requires extending the analysis beyond prior academic preparation to creating more supportive college environments. This article analyzes a very similar situation that I will be researching for Cal Poly's Black men. The results from this study can serve to illuminate similar factors potentially affecting the graduation rate for Black men at Cal Poly. It can also be used to better inform potential strategies Cal Poly can implement to address the issue. (252 words)

Jones, J. D., & William, M. (2006). The African American Student Center and Black Student Retention at a Pacific Northwest PWI. *Western Journal of Black Studies*, *30*(4), 24-34.

This article is an analysis of the African American Student center at a predominantly white institution in the Pacific Northwest. The authors seek to evaluate the effectiveness of the center in supporting the Black students at this predominately white institution (PWI). They address the history of higher education in the United States; highlighting the fact that the first University in the United States (Harvard) was structured for and only allowed White men to attend. This essentially set the standard the clear majority of other institutions that have been founded in the U.S. While most universities allow essentially anyone to attend, this institutionalized racism permeates through university policies, curriculum, and overall climates today on predominantly white institutions. This leads to low persistence rates of Black students, who more often than their white counterparts leave these universities. The African-American student center at this predominately white institution in the Pacific Northwest serves to combat that this. In the study, the authors found that the center on campus served a vital role in helping retain its Black students by providing a haven from the racism they face on campus. It also serves as a model for the students on how to navigate through the racism they encounter at this PWI as well as how to succeed in the face of it. What was interesting to note was the demographic of those interviewed. Only Black male students were interviewed through this study. This gives a unique perspective

on how Black men at this PWI, which makes this article a very relevant source of information for this project. (265 words)

Love, B. J. (1993). Issues and Problems in the Retention of Black Students in Predominantly White Institutions of Higher Education. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 26*(1), 27-36. Retrieved March 18, 2017.

This article explores why Black students have been struggling to stay enrolled at predominately White institutions. The author explores why Black students graduate at a rate of one third less often than their White counterparts. Research at the time identifies several contributing factors to the issue. The author finds that predominately White institutions implemented various retention programs without success. The author theorizes that predominately White institutions fail with their retention programs because they focus on changing Black students. The author argues that resources and programs need to be implemented to change the institutional racism present at predominately White institutions. With this article the author record identified factors affecting retention in research. She then evaluates the efficacy of existing retention programs implemented and tests those programs against the identified factors. The author identified seven main retention issues facing predominately White institutions when it comes to their Black students. The author also identified twenty-seven elements of characteristics making up retention programs at numerous predominately White institutions. She found that of the seven main factors, only five of the factors were addressed by the twenty-seven elements. The author found that twenty-two of the programs' characteristics focused on changing Black students to fit the mold the institution was looking for. The author found that these programs are largely ineffective because they focus on changing the Black student instead of addressing the institutional racism present. She recommended a few strategies such as developing programs to eliminate racism on campus, providing racial training for institutional leadership, having faculty become more self-aware of their prejudices and interactions with Black students, and conducting more research on the Black students who are successful at their institutions. This article could serve as a blueprint for my project when it comes to developing strategies to address issues facing Black men attending Cal Poly. It also provides a lot of good insight from the literature review on the history of racism and its impact on major institutions in the U.S., including higher education. (332 words)

Malagon, M. C., Huber, L. P., & Valdez, V. N. (2009). Our Experiences, Our Methods: Using Grounded Theory to Inform a Critical Race Theory Methodology. *Seattle Journal for Social Justice, 8*(1), 253-272. Retrieved March 12, 2018, from http://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/sjsj/vol8/iss1/10

The author created this article as a response to their "collective frustrations with traditional, qualitative methods to accurately understand and document the complex experiences of Students of Color, their families, and their communities." The authors would often get ineffective explanations for the behavior and social circumstances that traditional methods would offer to their analyses of people of color in their research. Therefore, they set out to find a qualitative research methodology that would be able to reconcile abilities to have lived experiences in a broader "sociopolitical framework" throughout their research and in their product. Through their struggles employing tradition Critical Race Theory to their qualitative research, they participated in a conference where they shared how they were building and extending work in critical race

methodology that always centers on an anti-racist social justice agenda. After analyzing and contrasting the elements of Cortical Race Theory and Grounded Theory methodology, they come to a result: Critical Race-Grounded Methodology. The authors present this unique methodology to afford them the ability to draw from their own cultural intuition and explore themes that derive from their data by engaging in a research process that allows them to reframe a research problem and the questions asked. Their Critical Race-Grounded Theory is informed by three grounded theories: Theoretical Sampling, a Conditional Matrix, and Collaboration by including research participants in the data analysis to co-create knowledge. This article will help me by giving me a road map on how to structure the theoretical framework of my own paper. The issues the authors themselves ran into is one that I struggle with when conducting research involving people of color. (271 words)

Palmer, R. T., Wood, J. L., Dancy, T. E., & Strayhorn, T. L. (2014). *Black Male Collegians: Increasing Access, Retention, and Persistence in Higher Education: ASHE Higher Education Report* (1st ed., Vol. 40). Hoboken, NY: Jossey-Bass.

The chapter in this book focuses on factors identified as critical Black men's access and success in higher education. The authors identify three programs that were implemented to help Black men have better access to Higher education. These programs they identify and discuss are the TRIOS programs, Affirmative Actions, and college readiness programs (also known as remedial education. The authors go on to discuss the history and efficacy of these various initiatives. They find that these initiatives were effective in increasing access to higher education for all people of color across the board. They find however there was not enough research on Black men specifically to determine the efficacy for them. The authors also look at Black men attending various higher education institutions around the country. They break it down to three categories: Historically Black colleges and universities, Historically White colleges and universities, and community colleges. They find that research has focused so heavily on the quality of life for Black men at HWCUs that not enough attention has been given to the lives of Black men attending HBCUs. The authors also explore the factors contributing to Black male student engagement and success at higher learning institutions. They find that these factors promote engagement on campuses, which in turn lead to a sense of belonging for Black male students. These factors include involvement in student organizations, supportive faculty-student interactions, positive peer interactions, involvement in Black Greek Letter Fraternities, academic initiatives designed for Black men, and active mentoring. This chapter can help inform the possible strategies that can be suggested for Cal Poly to adopt to promote their Black male graduation rates. It can also give a good insight for this projects literature review regarding the differences in the various institutions of higher education for Black men. (296 words)

Sinanan, A. (2016). The Value and Necessity of Mentoring African American College Students at PWI's. *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, *9*(8), 155-166.

This article examines the need for mentoring of Black students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) of higher education. The author sets up their case through addressing the impact of racism in the United States, the history and impact of forced integration of the educational system, and the cultural and psychological challenges Black students face when beginning their academic careers as students in academia. The author goes into depth regarding

the impacts of racism on the Black community in the United States; particularly when it comes to educational achievement. The author identifies critical race theory as the framework most effective in addressing the race and its impact on people who are oppressed as a means of critically analyzing educational institutions. The author argues that the theory allows for the notion that educational instructions are "race-neutral" to be challenged. Institutionalized racism is also focused on throughout the article as it is one of the more relevant forms of racism when discussing predominately white universities. The author also makes a point to address the achievement gap between Black male and female students in higher education as a whole, as it plays a significant role in higher educational achievement in the Black community. The author makes the case that educational institutions must encourage mentoring of Black students as research has shown that this significantly increases the likelihood of Black students succeeding at and graduating from predominately white universities. This article presents information salient to my senior project by providing valuable information regarding the impact of racism in predominately white institutions (which Cal Poly is) as well as providing some information on the achievement gap between men and women in the Black community. (278 words)

Smith, W. A., Allen, W. R., & Danley, L. L. (2007). "Assume the Position ... You Fit the Description": Psychosocial Experiences and Racial Battle Fatigue Among African American Male College Students. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *51*(4), 551-578.

The following article explores psychosocial experiences faced by Black men on college. The authors examine the experiences of 36 Black male students from Harvard University; Michigan State University; University of California, Berkeley; University of Illinois; and the University of Michigan. The paper formulates the concept of Racial Battle Fatigue. According to the authors, racial battle fatigue is the result of Black students consistently dealing with racial micro and macroagressions while attending their various institutions. The authors solicited participants through purposive sampling, seeking men who identified as Black at the various institutions mentioned above. The researchers then conducted focus groups held in classrooms and conference rooms at the respective institutions. Some students were emailed open-ended questionnaires asking for responses regarding the participants' experiences on campus. The researchers analyzed the responses and found two prominent themes emerge: (a) anti-Black male stereotyping and marginality (or Black misandry), which caused (b) extreme hypersurveillance and control. The authors also found that their participants experienced a number of racial microagressions in three major domains on campus: in academic settings, in social settings, and in public spaces on campus. The authors found that Black men are consistently placed under increased by the local community and policing tactics on campus and in the community. The authors found that Black men are often viewed as being "out of place" or as illegitimate members of the community. The students reported many psychological stresses and symptoms of said stresses. The authors concluded that a college environment is much more hostile than other environments to other groups on campus. This study highlights many similar issues that Cal Poly's Black men may be facing. It provides an insightful concept (racial battle fatigue) that seems to fit almost perfectly with what Cal Poly's Black men are combatting. (287 words)

Smith, W. A., Mustaffa, J. B., Jones, C. M., Curry, T. J., & Allen, W. R. (2016). 'You make me
    wanna holler and throw up both my hands!': campus culture, Black misandric
    microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in
    Education (QSE)*, *29*(9), 1189-1209. doi:10.1080/09518398.2016.1214296

This study is an expansion on the previous article cited above. The primary author, W.A. Smith,
reopens the effects "elite" college campuses have on Black men attending them. The study
expands its review of literature with updated research done between the 9 years of this study and
the previous study. Literature reviewed include acknowledging interlocking systems of
oppression and the social cost of Black misandric campus environments. The article also uses its
2007 study to expand on the concept of racial battle fatigue and the racial micro and
macroaggressions that contribute to the phenomenon. With more research done on the concept of
microaggressions and their impacts on individuals who experience them daily. The researchers
conducted a similar study as the one from 2007. They selected another 36 participants from
Harvard University, Michigan State University, University of California Berkeley, University of
Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, University of Michigan, and the University of Michigan Law
School. As before, they used purposive sampling to select participants for the study. They held
they held focus groups as wells as semi-structured interviews to gather their data. They also
emailed another set of questionnaires to participants whom they could not meet with. The
researchers found similar results to the prior study. Two themes emerged again: (a) anti-Black
male stereotyping and marginality and (b) hypersurveillance and control directed at Black men
by Whites. They found again that students reported stereotyping and increased police
surveillance on and off campus. Students reported feeling "out of place" and being an
illegitimate member of the community. The study found that respondents suffered from racial
battle fatigue through feelings of frustration, shock, anger, disappointment, resentment, anxiety,
helplessness, hopelessness, and fear. The study found once again that a college environment was
more hostile to Black men than other groups on campus. The study above builds upon the solid
base it built 9 years and adds more credence to racial battle fatigue and the experiences Black
men attending Cal Poly are facing. (327 words)

Project Outline:

Struggling to Survive: Addressing the Graduation Rate of Cal Poly's Black Men

1. INTRODUCTION
   a. President Armstrong's 2014 Address to Cal Poly
   b. The importance of high graduation rates for Cal Poly; its current average 6-year rate
   c. Cal Poly's current 6-year graduation rates broken down by race and gender
   d. The project's purpose, the projects thesis, factors in literature review, and preview of sections to come

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
   a. Racism and the impact it has on Black students
      i. Include a working definition of racism and microaggressions
      ii. Combating systematic racism
      iii. The concept of double-consciousness
      iv. Challenges Black students face in higher education
   b. Institutionalized Racism and Historically White Institutions
      i. White people have developed all institutions in the U.S. to serve their needs
      ii. Many historically White colleges and universities (HWCUs) lack experience meeting the needs of Black students
      iii. Institutional Leadership and Institutionalized Racism
   c. Black students' perceptions of campus climate at HWCUs
      i. Black men at HWCUs
      ii. Racial Battle Fatigue

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND THEROTICAL FRAMEWORK
   a. Theoretical Framework
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   b. Research participants and questions
      i. How participants were selected
      ii. The demographics of the participants
      iii. Structure of the interviews

4. NARRATIVE ANALYSIS
   a. Racial Isolation
      i. Black male students perceive themselves as alone on campus
      ii. Being odd man out constantly on the mind
      iii. Stark lack of anyone that looks like them

   b. Racial Battle Fatigue
      i. The constant buildup of microaggressions
      ii. Getting tired of addressing racial aggressions

           iii. The feeling of fear, feeling of inferiority, and the lack of understanding from peers

    c. Sunk Cost
        i. Explanation of what sunk cost fallacy is
        ii. Would like to leave, but it's not worth it now
        iii. Felt obligated to come back to Poly after leaving
        iv. Leaving is too much work
        v. Considering leaving every year; everyone else is leaving and seem happier elsewhere

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION
    a. Strategies moving forward
        i. First step to solving any problem: acknowledging the problem
        ii. More visibility of Black people on campus; whether they are students, faulty, or staff
        iii. Address Black faculty and staff retention
        iv. Cal Poly needs to be a more welcoming environment to Black men
        v. More spaces are needed for Black men to safely congregate and seek guidance
        vi. Campus leadership must take a stronger stance towards racism on campus
        vii. The hypocrisy of the Milo Yiannopoulos event
        viii. Campus leadership must not remain silent
        ix. Create more opportunities for education on race issues
        x. Call for more classes on Black contribution to U.S. society
        xi. More research must be done on this issue
    b. Conclusion

6. REFERENCES

INTRODUCTION

On May 2, 2014, President Armstrong addressed the California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly) community about his vision for the University in 2022. In his address President Armstrong states Cal Poly will be a campus that "will have an enriching, inclusive environment where every student and staff member is valued" and a campus that "enhance(s) student success." Armstrong set the goal of creating a "rich culture of diversity and inclusivity that supports and celebrates the similarities of every individual on campus." If retaining and graduating racially underrepresented groups is any measure of an inclusive campus which enhances student success, Cal Poly has much work to do to reach President Armstrong's vision for 2022.

Cal Poly always strives to produce high achieving students and successful alumni. When students are successful during their time at any university, prospective students are more likely to apply to said university. This cycle of student success produces a thriving student body and alumni community. Universities use factors such as high graduation rates to tell prospective students they are likely to succeed. A high graduation rate tells students they are likely to see a return on their educational investment in the form of a degree from a prestigious university and an increased likelihood of meaningful employment. Between Cal Poly's 2001 and 2010 fall cohort, first time first year students have graduated in six years on average a rate of 75.6% (Cal Poly Institutional Research, 2016). 82.6% of Cal Poly's 2010 fall first time first year students graduated within six years from Cal Poly (Cal Poly Institutional Research, 2016). When compared to the entire California State University (CSU) system where the 2008 fall cohort saw 54% of students graduate within six years (The California State University Division of

Institutional Research and Analyses, 2015), Cal Poly seems a sound investment for any student's

education.

When Cal Poly's graduation rates are disaggregated by race, the data highlights another

story; a story highlighting racial disparity. At Cal Poly, 76.3% of White students who were part

of the 2006 fall cohort graduated in six years. In comparison, 68.6% of Asian students graduated

within six years. 67% of Black students graduated in six years. 63.3% of Latino students and

58.4% of Native American students graduated in six years (California Polytechnic State

University, 2015). When the racial groups are broken down by gender and race, the inequities

become starker. For 2006 fall's White male students, 71.4% of them graduated in six years from

Cal Poly. 57.2% of Asian males graduated in six years. 53.8% of Black males graduated in six

years. 52.8% of Latino males graduated in six years. Only 30% of Native American men

graduated in six years from Cal Poly from the 2006 fall cohort (California Polytechnic State

University, 2015).

This project aims to identify key factors contributing to why Black men are graduating at

a significantly lower rate than the average rate. Issues such as perceptions of a hostile campus

climate, lack of social support, and difficulty navigating a space not designed to support or

accommodate Black students are main factors contributing to the low graduation rate of Cal

Poly's Black men. A literature review highlights these factors as well other factors contributing

to trouble retaining Black male students on predominately White campuses. To discover the

primary factors contributing to the low graduation rate of Cal Poly's Black male students, this

project gathered data through semi-structured interviews of Black male students from Cal Poly.

Through analyzing the responses given by interview participants, key themes are identified that

contribute to Black men at Cal Poly not graduating at the average 6-year graduation rate. The

project offers potential strategies Cal Poly administration can implement to promote the retention and graduation of Black male students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As noted above, contemporary scholarship has acknowledged various causes of low Black male student retention and graduation rates in the United States. Theories are often broken into two camps. On one hand, some researchers have found that institutional factors have played a major role in repressing Black male achievement. On the other hand, some theorists underscore the importance of campus culture impacting this group of students. Below is literature from both camps. Reviewing literature from both camps acknowledges this issue as a combination of both institutional factors and campus culture impacting Black male achievement. Definitions for racism and microaggressions are also reviewed along with the psychosocial impact they have upon Black men in predominately White higher education environments.

Racism and Its Impact on Black Students

While determining the true definition of racism is beyond the scope of this paper, having a definition as a framework is crucial to the overall context of this project. Therefore, Adams's, Bell's, and Griffin's (1997) definition from *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook* will be used:

> [Racism is] The systematic subordination of members of targeted racial groups who have relatively little social power in the United States (Blacks, Latino/as, Native Americans, and Asians), by the members of the agent racial group who have relatively more social power (Whites). This subordination is supported by the actions of individuals, cultural norms and values, and the institutional structures and practices in society. (pp. 88–89)

Long before the United States' inception, Black people in America have had to combat racism on both an individual and systematic level. For hundreds of years, systematic racism has been the vehicle for installing sentiments of inadequacy, self-doubt, low self-esteem, and social isolation amongst members of the Black community (Sinanan, 2016). Much of Black cultural history in the United States consists of the conflict between maintaining an independent sense of group identity, social cohesion, and integrity while managing and resisting policies designed to deny Black peoples' sense of humanity (Marable, 2003; DuBois 1903).

With the rise in the concept of *colorblindness*, or the idea race is not important in contemporary U.S. society, it is important to realize contemporary racism has evolved to become subtle, subversive, and discreet. Only acknowledging gross, blatant examples of racism no longer suffices. Contemporary racism comes in the form of cumulative mini-assaults, or *microaggressions*. Racial microaggressions are "everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership" (Sue, 2010 as cited in Smith et al., 2016). The ability to survive and thrive in racially charged environments is something every Black person in America must learn. Racism permeates through every realm of a Black person's life in America and education is no exception (Love, 1993).

Education can help level the playing field on multiple fronts for Black Americans (Harris & Harper, 2012 as cited in Sinanan, 2016). But even in education Black students must combat racism present at many institutions around the country. Racism in higher education institutions take on a wide range of manifestations: microaggressions perpetrated by members of the institution, lack of representation at the institution, lack of acknowledgement of Black peoples'

roles in all facets of society through the various fields of study in the curriculum, among others. While invisible to many White students and university personnel, this racial tension is a "visible reality" to many Black students on college campuses (Sinanan, 2016). College can be viewed as foreign land with a foreign language, which new students must learn to navigate to succeed. New students must develop a new skill set which includes research skills, socializations skills, and more effective study skills. While these challenges are already daunting by themselves, Black students must learn this new skill set while simultaneously combating racism (Sinanan, 2016).

Institutionalized Racism at Historically White Institutions

White people developed all major institutions in the United States to serve their needs and interests; higher education is no exception (Love, 1993). Historically White colleges and universities (HWCUs) were formed and structured to serve White students. White students' goals and aspirations are, purposefully and historically, prioritized (Love, 1993). Most HWCUs were established and developed during a time when Black people were excluded from many higher education institutions; by law or by the institution's admission practices. Cal Poly itself was established in 1901; fifty-three years before the Supreme Court's decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* which would have prohibited the university to bar admittance of any student, regardless of race, into their school. Love (1993) summarizes the situation rather aptly:

> Despite this historical reality, there has been little institutional recognition of White racism, little discussion of how it is manifested on campus, and little attention to how it affects Black students, even in the absence of overt intent to discriminate. Not only has there been little institutional recognition, often there has been vehement institutional denial. This disavowal of the presence and effect of institutional racism is one way that

racism affects the life experience of Black students at [predominantly White institutions] (p 29).

Many HWCUs have had little contact or experience in addressing or meeting the needs of Black college students (Credle & Dean, 1991). Due to exclusionary practices of HWCUs and lack of experience with Black college students, retaining and graduating Black students present hefty challenges to these institutions. Credle and Dean (1991) describe a few of these challenges at Predominately White Institutions (PWI)[1].

There are many ways in which institutional barriers manifest themselves. The barriers can be categorized as: (a) lack of orientation toward the culture of Black students; (b) lack of awareness of the needs of Black students; (c) the inability to respond to the needs of Black students; (d) inappropriate academic standards for Black students; (e) inability to help Black students survive in the complex systems of the institution; and (f) negative attitudes toward Black students by faculty, staff, and administrators (p. 2).

Because of how these campuses were established and have been developed, Black students are expected to assimilate into the campus environment, regardless of whether the campus culture affirms them as students. (Jones & Williams, 2006).

Institutional Leadership and Institutionalized Racism. Black students manage poorly at HWCUs where the institution's leadership lack understanding of institutionalized or individualized racism, and are unwilling to take strong, public steps towards eliminating racism on their campuses (Sudarkasa, 1988 as cited in Love, 1993). When university leaders are silent or do not address issues of racism directly, the message delivered to Black students, and all students of color on campus, is that of little willingness to address racism on the campus.

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[1] PWI and HWCU both refer to institutions where there is a majority of white students and have been so since the institutions was established. Since most PWIs are also HWCUs, the terms are often interchangeable.

Students may feel this is adding insult to injury to the incident. As one student explained, "University officials are very reluctant to come out strong against racism, and that reluctance is seen by Whites as not only tolerance, but permission to act out their prejudices" (Washington, 1998; as cited in Love, 1993). Black students hold university officials responsible for a campus's environment and climate that allow for students, faculty, and staff to feel secure with acting out on their racism. (Love, 1993).

Black Students' Perceptions of Campus Climates at HWCUs

At historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Black students are in an environment that is built for them. Black students feel welcomed, comfortable, and valued. Here's an excerpt from Love's (1993) description of Black students at HBCUs:

> After classes, clusters of Black students can be seen leisurely "hanging out" in familiar gathering places. At Fisk University Black students can be seen walking across the campus, talking with the president at Arkansas A.M.& N. Black students at Morehouse gather around a professor on the steps of the science building, intently discussing a problem from the day's lecture. A comfort level is achieved by HBIs [Historically Black Institutions] that puts Black students at ease. (p. 28)

At HWCUs, One would be hard pressed to find "clusters" of Black students at all; much less them simply "hanging out" in common areas in the university. One would be even harder pressed to see Black students interacting casually with university officials or gathering around professors discussing any topic. The more likely situation is Black students being left out of class discussions, shunned from campus social life, and being ignored by or harassed by the police (Love, 1993). While increasingly Black students are attending PWIs, many "experience a chilly campus climate at these institutions" (Palmer, Wood, Dancy, & Strayhorn, 2014). There have

been several studies finding Black students attending HWCUs experience heightened feelings of social isolation, stress, and personal dissatisfaction. These studies also find that Black students tend to view the campus environment of these institutions significantly more negative than their White counterparts (Keels, 2013). This ultimately leads to Black students leaving these institutions before graduating.

Black Men at HWCUs. While most Black students share remarkably similar needs across the board, the intersection of gender and race also highlight the need for more research and action regarding Black men and college graduation. According to the U.S. Department of Education, Black men in the 2007 National Freshman cohort had lower graduation rates from four-year universities for bachelor's degrees than any other racial and gender group (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Adapting to college life can be a difficult challenge on its own. Dealing with additional ongoing challenges of institutionalized racism, micro-aggressions, and hostile campus climates can overwhelm a Black male student.

All people of color must constantly allocate some amount of time and energy (consciously or unconsciously) to determine if any situation they encounter is not only a typical stressor of life, but also a racially charged stressor. Not only must they constantly make this assessment, they must then decide how, if they should at all, to respond to the situation. As a result, many Black males will often perceive their environment as extremely stressful, exhausting, and detrimental to their feeling of agency over their life (Smith et al., 2016).

Racial Battle Fatigue

According to Smith et al. (2016), Black men are often enduring racial battle fatigue when attending HWCUs. Racial battle fatigue is the overall impact of racial micro and macroaggressions on racially marginalized targets' psychosocial and physiological well-being

(Smith et. al., 2007). Racial battle fatigue often occurs when one from a racially marginalized group is having to consistently encounter and navigate situations where racial aggressions occur (i.e. a HWCU). As Smith et al. describes,

> Unlike typical academic stress, racial battle fatigue is a natural response to living and working under mundane conditions of heightened distress, especially when facing potential perils or dangers because of tough, violent conditions or the perception that one's life, personal dignity, or character is being threatened. (2007)

Racial battle fatigue can be experienced on both individual and group levels and has the potential to affect multiple generations through group experiences, racial socialization, and coping methods (Smith et. al., 2007).

Black men in environments with constant micro and macroaggressions will often view their situation as stressful, exhausting, and detrimental to their senses of control and comfort while simultaneously bringing about feelings of loss, strain, ambiguity, frustration, and injustice (Smith et al., 2007). This process often starts before college. Black students begin feeling the pressure of being unwanted on a PWI campus and in the surrounding community when still in the transition from high school to college. PWI campuses limit activities Black males engage in as a group. Black men attending college are constantly having to combat prevalent misconceptions surrounding Black men in academic settings, leading to policing of their identities (Smith et al., 2016). Black males tend to be the last one selected as research partners and are more often to be suspected of cheating when receiving high marks on an exam. Black men are constantly viewed with suspicion by law enforcement on campus and in the community (Smith et al., 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This project utilizes qualitative research to best capture the experiences and insights of the Black men who attend or attended Cal Poly. By choosing a qualitative approach, the voices of these men are not reduced to numbers and statistics as the experiences and lives of Black men frequently are. With a qualitative approach, factors affecting the graduation rate of Cal Poly's Black men can be identified which would otherwise be missed if only numbers were analyzed. Quantitative data would not be able to capture the observations, the emotions, and the contexts of the experiences of these Black men. This approach helps identify significant factors that otherwise would be missed through pure quantitative research.

Theoretical Framework

A combination of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Grounded Theory are used as the frameworks guiding this project. Grounded theory, "Provides a systematic, yet flexible approach to developing theories grounded in data rather than deducing a testable hypothesis from existing theories" (Malagon et al., 2009). This project is an exploratory project seeking to identify the factors for why the graduation rate for Cal Poly's Black men is significantly lower than their White counterparts, as well as their Black women counterparts. Rather than limiting this project to predicting and testing one factor affecting this issue, the project seeks to identify as many issues as possible so that a comprehensive plan of action can be proposed and potentially instituted by Cal Poly to effectively address as many factors as possible simultaneously.

Critical Race Theory emerged as a strategy of dealing with the "colorblind" power structure that emerged in the post-Civil Rights era obscuring White privilege and veiled racism behind the use of rhetoric such as "fairness" and "merit" (Malagon et al., 2009). Critical Race Theory operates under five tenets which to use within research:

1. The intersectionality, or the interactions, of race and racism with other forms of subordination

2. Challenging dominant ideology (we live in a post-racial society based on meritocracy)

3. Commitment to social justice

4. Focus on the experiential knowledge of people of color

5. A transdisciplinary perspective (utilizing knowledge and methodological bases from different fields of studies such as sociology, ethnic studies, women's studies, history, and law)

Critical Race Theory is used to expose and challenge ways racism produces inequality in our society and the institutions upholding inequality; including higher education.

Grounded Theory provides a systematic approach for developing theories from research. Critical Race Theory challenges any "colorblind" arguments against the factors affecting Black men graduating PWIs. Critical Race Theory recognizes that as a PWI, Cal Poly's very structure was built, developed, and maintained for White students. Cal Poly has very little experience with addressing the needs of Black students broadly, and Black male students in particular. Without the need to ever address such issues, Cal Poly has developed a campus environment that is not supportive of high non-White student graduation rates.

Research Participants and Questions

To identify and investigate some of the factors that are contributing to the graduation rate of Black men at Cal Poly, this study examines the responses of five Black men between the ages of 20 and 23. Through purposive sampling, participants were found through their membership in Black campus student organizations and referrals. Four of the participants were undergraduate students attending Cal Poly at the time of the interviews. The fifth participant is a former Cal

Poly student that withdrew from Cal Poly prior to obtaining his bachelor's degree. The four Cal

Poly students were approached in person by the researcher and asked to participate in the project.

The interviews were conducted in person.[2] The participant who left Cal Poly prior to graduation

was solicited through a referral. This interview was then conducted via phone call.

The interviews were semi-structured in format and covered respondents' personal

backgrounds, experiences at Cal Poly regarding their academic and social lives, and observations

and thoughts about the graduation rates of Black men at Cal Poly. Follow up questions were

asked for further clarification on any issues the interviewee brought up in their answers. The

participant who left Cal Poly prior to graduation was asked questions regarding his current

situation, future educational plans, and specific reasons which influenced his choice to leave. To

respect the privacy of the participants, pseudonyms were assigned.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The following section is the breakdown of responses from the interview participants. A

narrative analysis takes the responses given and identifies themes that arise during the interview.

Each interview revealed various thematic factors affecting Black men graduating from Cal Poly.

The following are the most vivid and consistent themes the participants brought up across all

interviews.

Me Versus the World: Racial Isolation at Cal Poly

Cal Poly is certainly not unique in its challenges retaining its Black male students.

According to Hunn (2014), PWIs are "continually challenged with retaining African American

students because of barriers to matriculation including racial climate, campus climate, culture,

and lack of diverse faculty and staff." Black students will spend a great deal of time and energy

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[2] Interviews approved by the Cal Poly Institutional Review Board (IRB).

attempting to establish credibility at PWIs (Love, 2008). Frequently "Students are unsuccessful, perceive themselves as unwanted, or receive clear messages that they are not wanted at PWIs" (Hunn, 2014).

"Are there any Black people here?" is a question that many Black students at Cal Poly, especially Black men, struggle with daily throughout their time here. Despite knowing they are not the only ones on campus, every single interview participant expressed the feeling of social isolation based on their race while at Cal Poly.

Freddie, a 3rd year Ethnic Studies major, originally is from an area that is predominately Black and Hispanic; with his high school largely mirroring the surrounding community. He lays out his take on the situation for Black men at Cal Poly:

> We're not really represented here on campus. You're hardly ever gonna meet your peers here. And basically, because there's already this social stigma attached to black people and black men, specifically, you're probably not gonna be welcome here as much. And if you're going through college in isolation, that's tough on you. I know for me, the background that I come from, and then, coming here, it's stressing. It's so emotionally stressing, because you don't know where to turn to.

Trayvon, a 4th year Psychology major, grew up locally in an area where his family was one of the only Black families in the neighborhood; with the rest being overwhelmingly White. His high school's demographics were similar. His feelings are point blank, "Cal Poly is definitely a pretty conservative [campus], and an isolating one at that." He also states that "[Black] people probably just aren't comfortable being here." Oscar, a 4th year student in the College of Science and Math, describes his observations:

This school is not diverse, but even their Asian population is 10% of the population of

students here, so I feel like they have a pretty big community. You might see two or three

Asian people in class and they can bond over that. But black people in class, you can hear

from almost every black student here, there's, at least, two to three classes each quarter

where they're the only black person in class. And then, normally, if they're not, it's just

one other, and... I don't know. Just because the lack of black people here, it makes it even

more... It makes you even more different. I guess the more diverse a place is, the more

different you are. It doesn't really matter, 'cause everybody's different. But when

everybody's same, when it's a homogeneous population, anything not a part of that group

or a part of certain bigger groups is seen as way more different. So it might be harder for

you to connect, or talk to someone, or even if they're not looking at you different, or

they're not staring at you different, or thinking anything of it, it's always in your mind,

because you're outside that homogeneous group.

Tamir was a 2nd year student before he decided to withdraw from Cal Poly. In addition to

being a student, Tamir was an athlete for Cal Poly's football team. Despite having what would be

considered a built-in support system through the athletics program, his assessment echoes other

narratives:

School at Cal Poly is already hard enough, and mind you, we're on the quarter system, so

it's only 10 weeks. So, school is hard and they just made it harder. And now you don't

have support. Like, you're in an unfamiliar environment, and I know that's how college is,

it's supposed to be a new place. But the makeup and the culture of Cal Poly isn't

conducive to a Black [learning] environment, I would say, just because there are so few

[Black people].

It is the following statement which highlights the sense of isolation: "[Cal Poly is] just a setting where…I felt alone. Yes, I had my friends. But, I mean, I felt alone. Like, I felt like it was really me versus the world."

I Don't Think They Get the Struggle: Racial Battle Fatigue

Racial battle fatigue was consistently brought up by the interviewees. Racial battle fatigue is an important factor which contributed to Tamir's withdrawal from Cal Poly. When informed and questioned about the current graduation rate for Black males at Cal Poly, Philando, a 4th year Engineering student, intuitively responds:

I feel it like there could be a psychological stress that is implanted on a black male, even subconsciously, that can affect performance at this campus. It may not be something that's, what is that word, something that's conspicuous as open-ended racism towards somebody. But a lot of different factors, like little factors, can build up. Again, being the only one in class and not knowing who to talk to about those kinds of academics.

When asked why Black men choose to leave Cal Poly, Philando's answer echoes his earlier response:

Well like I said, the factors build up. After a while you just can't take it anymore; don't wanna deal with it. It's not necessarily dealing with it in the sense like, "Oh dude get over it," I mean, just, like you don't wanna. You get tired. You get tired of correcting people, or trying to deal with microaggressions, or being alone in class. I can see why Tamir left if he doesn't have a feeling of strong support, like someone there to just always be there for him. If there's times when you can just go home and you're just like home alone, that weighs on you when you'd rather be at home than having to deal with that here. Even if you try to, even if you talk to the health center, which I recommend doing. I keep telling

myself I'm gonna go. There's still the fact that you feel like you're gonna be sitting... Like some things are gonna come up and they're just not gonna be able to help you with it. Because they haven't experienced it…

Trayvon expresses a rather strong sentiment about others not understanding the experience of being Black at Cal Poly:

While a lot of my buddies, my friends, or whatever, are good intentioned, I don't think a lot of them get it. I don't think they get the struggle. They don't get the paranoia. They don't get the fear. They don't get the feeling of inferiority, in a sense. And just trying to overcome that on a regular basis…it would be nice to go out on campus and be able to talk to people, and not feel... Not necessarily to question people's motives or intentions or whatever. To feel like these people, my peers, understand my struggle, and care about my struggle…

For Tamir, this racial battle fatigue is something he experiences. He is also consciously aware of the issue. When asked about the graduation rates for Black males at Cal Poly, the first thing that he responds with is, "Being a black male already comes with a weight on it; and societal stress. So that has an effect when you go to college. There's also societal things going on with a black male being in college. So, if you want to even further that more, when you go to Cal Poly, you're in an environment that I would personally say, isn't built for you."

Freddie sees not only Black male students at Cal Poly are affected by this fatigue. He describes an issue which affects Black student populations significantly: retention of faculty and staff of color. While responding to a question, Freddie addresses another question previously asked: Have you ever thought about leaving?

I wanted to leave. I wanted to leave because I saw all of these faculties and staff of color

leaving. And I'm like, "These people are college educated. They got their degrees. They

got their bachelor's. They got their master's and their PhDs, but they're still being road

blocked by this thinly veiled racism, prejudice, and [unwillingness] to help people of

color in power, and stuff like that." And it's just like, "Is that my future? Is that what my

future's gonna be like? Facing these same problems and issues…?"

When asked what would be the final straw that would convince him to pack up and move

on, Oscar answered, "It'd probably be the fatigue." Even with the following drastic example,

Oscar would still not leave "Because I feel like, even if…we found out 20% of the student

population was in the local White supremacy group, then I'd still be just like 'okay, well I'm

gonna stick it out. Fuck them. I'll stick it out.'"

I Should Just Get My Degree: The Sunk Cost of Cal Poly

Considering Cal Poly's Black male graduation rate, it seemed reasonable to ask the

participants still attending Cal Poly whether they considered leaving Cal Poly. Did these men

give serious thought to packing up and heading back home? What about transferring to another

institution? What kept these men here that drove others away? The interviews revealed every

participant who still attended Cal Poly gave serious consideration to withdrawing from Cal Poly.

What was more striking was the reasoning for them to stick it out until the end: the sunk cost.

In economics, a sunk cost is any past expense that has already been paid and cannot be

recovered. For Cal Poly's Black male students, the cost would be the tuition paid for classes,

money spent to support themselves while attending the university, and time spent at Cal Poly.

While costs are unavoidable in any aspect of life, people often succumb to what is known as the

sunk cost fallacy. The sunk cost fallacy is where an individual continues investing time, using

resources, or engaging in behavior simply due to their previous investment in the endeavor. The key to the fallacy: the cost cannot be recovered. If a cost cannot be recovered, a "rational" perspective dictates one should not take prior investment into account when making future decisions.

Many of this project's participants have come to view their time pursuing their degree at Cal Poly as a massive sunk cost. All of the participants were asked whether they have ever considered leaving Cal Poly, and if so, what was it that made them leave. Trayvon describes his feelings about leaving Cal Poly in no uncertain terms:

> I totally would love to leave, but I'm almost done. It's literally like running a marathon, and leaving when you have 800 meters to go. All I have to do now is my senior project and stuff like that, and I'm just coasting through. So, there's no point in me leaving now. But I can tell you this, I can't wait to leave.

Trayvon decided upon Cal Poly for financial reasons. Originally a local resident of San Luis Obispo County, attending Cal Poly and living at home was initially a plan to keep cost of living expenses low. Trayvon states he originally intended to "Do really well my first year…then I'm just going to transfer."

Philando's situation was unique from the other project participants still attending Cal Poly. Philando was a first-time freshman. Due to difficulties with balancing academics, extracurricular activities, and trying to maintain his well-being, Philando did not return for classes at Cal Poly after his fall quarter of sophomore year. Philando went back home and took some time attending classes at the local community college for two years. Philando describes what was going through his head as he was preparing to return:

I regret nothing that I did over my first year here. I was very upset; very upset that I had

to [leave Cal Poly]. I wanted to make sure that I returned…But after going to community

colleges, seeing the diversity there, and seeing all the other options after community

college for people who were transferring to other schools…it made me think twice about

it; about first returning [to Cal Poly] ...Then, I felt like I had no other option. I felt like

it'd be very hard for me to get into another school based off of my current GPA at the

time, and other things like that. [My GPA] was one of the biggest factors that weighed on

me. [Because of it] I was like, 'Okay I probably should return to Cal Poly.'

Despite having the option, as well as the ability, to attend another school, Philando did not feel

like he chose Cal Poly because he wanted to. Philando felt obligated to return to Cal Poly.

Freddie and Oscar had identical perspectives on the matter. Oscar considered leaving Cal

Poly, "Every year; every year until this year. Because I'm almost done." Later on, Oscar adds

more detail to his resolve:

Transferring would take a lot of work. Moving again, finding housing, and everything

else. It's not just transferring. You gotta find housing in that place. You gotta register for

classes. See which classes match up; which credits will transfer over, which is the real

hard part. So it's not just about applying to another school, getting accepted, and leaving.

I feel like I should just stick it out.

Oscar does add an interesting piece at the end. Oscar decided to "Make moves to fight back. I

wouldn't just duck down and try to push through. I'd make moves to try and fight back against

events that I didn't feel comfortable with."

Freddie's response left little need for clarification:

[I consider leaving] every single year; probably every quarter actually. I just feel... I feel

like now that it might be too late for me. I should just get my degree, right? Because I'm

so close, and I have my credits. It's not like I'm failing my classes, or I'm in danger of

being kicked out, or anything…I do get those thoughts a lot of the times, especially when

I hear or talk to people who have left in the past and see what they're doing [now]. And a

lot of times, people just sound like they're happier wherever they are. They sound like, at

this other university, or even what they're doing at community college, it feels like they're

getting everything that they needed; [things] they weren't getting here at Cal Poly.

Freddie concluded with something that should give administrators and other campus leaders

pause: "This is supposed to be the best CSU out there, and what? They're not even able to adjust

to serious problems that they have on this campus? [Problems] that are making students leave?"

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Strategies Moving Forward

When initially stepping onto Cal Poly's campus, most people notice the size of its hills,

the surrounding scenery, and its quaintness. Once people have gotten their fill of the natural

environment, they start noticing the people walking around. For many people of color, the people

walking around is the first thing they notice when coming to Cal Poly. The following statement

from most people of color is almost always guaranteed: "There sure are a lot of White people

walking around here." You can always expect the next question from Black visitors: "Are there

any Black people here?"

The first step to solving any problem is recognizing there is one. Cal Poly must publicly

acknowledge the discrepancy in graduation rates among racial and gender lines. The disparity

will not be resolved with the current route the University has been taking. While this project so

far has exposed just a few issues surrounding this important problem, the goal of this project is also to serve as a springboard for strategies moving forward.

Multiple participants called for more Black individuals to be visible on campus. Whether it be more Black students, Black faculty, or Black staff. Literature on Black student retention cite the importance of Black faculty and staff in retaining Black students at PWIs such as Cal Poly. Faculty of color are considered essential in higher education because they serve as diverse role models, assist in providing effective mentorship to students of color, tend to support causes affecting students of color outside of academia, and give students of color more of a voice when it comes to how universities function (Antonio, 2002 as cited in Jones & Williams, 2006). It is important to realize retention of faculty and staff of color is another significant issue PWIs consistently face.

While Black staff and faculty retention is outside the scope of this project, Cal Poly would do well investing in more Black staff and faculty as well as retaining the individuals already employed. It's also important to realize that expecting current Black faculty and staff to serve all Black students on campus, despite it being outside the scope of their job description, is not only unfair, but unrealistic to these individuals. An effort must be made to hire individuals with the sole purpose of providing academic and personal guidance to Black students.

Another strategy is clear from the interviews – Cal Poly needs to create a more welcoming environment for Black men. While it is apparent Cal Poly has hosted a pre-dominantly White student body since its founding, Cal Poly can take a more proactive approach to creating a more conducive environment for its Black men. Cal Poly must increase resources for Black men. Cal Poly has the Black Academic Excellence Center. While this is a good step, there needs to be more resources. Many of the participants noted a lack of academic resources

they felt comfortable utilizing. Simply put, these resources are not catered to or marketed towards Black students in a way which make them comfortable to utilize. As noted above, one way to create a supportive environment for Black men and women is by hiring and retaining Black faculty and staff who can mentor and encourage students during their academic journey.

Cal Poly has implemented some programs to reach President Armstrong's vision for 2022. The Cal Poly Scholars program is aimed at recruiting and graduating high achieving students from California partner high schools. Partner high schools are typically schools with students who are academically high-achieving and socioeconomically disadvantaged. The Cal Poly Scholars program includes an annual scholarship award, a technology package, and programmatic support through specialized academic counselors trained to address the specific needs of the program's students. Cal Poly Scholars is a step in the right direction. However, more needs to be done for Black men on campus.

For Cal Poly's Black men, there needs to be more spaces for them to meet up and seek guidance from others in similar situations as themselves. They need mentors who look like them who can be there to answer not only academic questions, but also help them navigate non-academic situations which impact them as well. Resources already available need to be improved upon. Simple acts such as moving the Black Academic Excellence Center to a larger space to accommodate the students' various needs is a simple yet impactful step to take. Promote the already available resources in such a way which make Black men feel comfortable approaching and utilizing them when they have the need.

Another change which would go a long way – taking a stronger stance against racist and bigoted incidents that occur on campus. Racist and bigoted incidents happen often at Cal Poly, particularly in recent years. While it is good the President's office addresses these incidents

through a campus-wide email, an email is not enough of a response when issues occur on

campus, such as: a member of the American Nazi Party handing out flyers for meetings in front

of the campus library (Mustang News Staff, 2017); flyers out passed on campus which claim all

interracial rape is carried out by Black men against White women (Leslie, 2018); Islamophobic

caricatures and slurs are written on a free speech wall (Egel, 2015); providing the necessary

security funds for an individual with well documented racist, sexist, homophobic, and

Islamophobic views to headline events on campus (Hayes & Peischel, 2017; Wilson, 2017).

It is hard to believe Cal Poly officials who claim to be striving for an inclusive and

diverse campus would help facilitate an event for a speaker who consistently spews racist, sexist,

homophobic, and xenophobic ideology. Yet, it happened. On January 31, 2017 Milo

Yiannopoulos came to campus during his "Dangerous Faggot" tour. Due to his notoriety and

propensity to stir up trouble, Cal Poly spent over $55,000 for security to have this man on

campus. That is enough money for a full-tuition scholarship at Cal Poly. A full-tuition

scholarship that could have been given to a young Black man to attend and graduate from Cal

Poly.

When there is such a consistent pattern of bigotry and prejudice on campus, leadership at

Cal Poly needs to take a more proactive approach when dealing with these issues. Leadership

does not simply mean the President's Office. The Office of Student Affairs, Deans of Colleges,

Heads of Departments, and the ASI President are all bodies of leadership that can become more

involved addressing racist incidents on campus, including but not limited to hosting forums and

events concerning racial issues or simply responding to racist and discriminatory acts through a

public response. An email from the President's Office is a nice gesture. However, when there are

so many other leaders and other bodies of authority on campus silent when such incidents occur,

when these leaders act as if they do not care, when they are not even aware, this sends a loud and clear message to students of color, especially Black men, on campus: you are on your own.

Cal Poly needs to create more opportunities for other students, faculty, and staff to become more aware of and more proactive regarding issues Black men face. One route Cal Poly can take is to host more presenters on campus who can educate people on issues of racial diversity and other relevant issues. Comedian and media commentator Kamau Bell was hosted on the same day as Milo Yiannopoulos as a response to Yiannopoluos' presence on Campus. While credit is due to Cal Poly's leadership for having the wherewithal to host Mr. Bell, such events should not need promoting from a notoriously inflammatory racist individual speaking on campus to bring well-spoken Black entertainers. Cal Poly must be proactive, not reactive, moving forward.

One interviewee, Freddie, stresses the need for more classes focused on Black contributions to American society and more Black instructors to teach such classes. Cal Poly has such classes listed in their catalog, if only a handful. However, these classes are offered sporadically. There are even fewer Black professors and instructors to teach these sparsely offered classes. According to the last headcount conducted by Cal Poly Institutional Research (2016) there are only 15 Black faculty instructors employed at Cal Poly. It is only too clear what Cal Poly can do in this situation: hire more Black instructors and offer classes focused on Black contributions to American society more consistently.

Lastly, there needs to be more research done regarding the graduation rates for Black men at Cal Poly. Despite this problem being an important one to solve, no campus-specific research could be procured on why this problem persists. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence discussed on campus. However, the stark lack of formal research conducted by anyone at Cal

Poly is telling. The first step to solving any problem is acknowledging there is one. The very next step: ask why.

Conclusion

No institution is without its flaws and Cal Poly is no exception. President Armstrong's vision for Cal Poly is to be, "an enriching, inclusive environment where every student and staff member is valued" and a campus that "enhance[s] student success." To make this vision a reality, there is still much work to be done on behalf of Black male students. This project highlights the fact there is a portion of the student body who do not feel valued and who do not see the campus enhancing their success.

Struggling to survive is not just a title. Struggling to survive is the experience. Struggling to survive is the deep sentiment. It is the very essence of being a Black man at Cal Poly. This paper is not intended to be the final word. It is the opening statement which will hopefully spark a vibrant and productive discussion for change. With a committed administration and faculty, perhaps one day this paper will be cited by another Cal Poly student completing a very different senior project entitled "Successful and Thriving: A Look at the Graduation Rate of Cal Poly's Black Men."

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