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## **If We Admit Them, Will They Stay?**

*Understanding the Role of Social Connectedness in the Retention of African American Students in a Recreation and Leisure Studies Program*

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### **Abstract**

The retention of racial minority students lies at the core of diversity efforts instituted by colleges and universities across the nation. Withstanding the changing racial demographics of the U.S. and the need to have qualified racial minority professionals serving diverse communities retention and matriculation heighten in importance. With the retention challenge that many predominately White institutions (PWIs) face, this study aimed to understand how “social connectedness” related to African American student retention in a recreation and leisure studies program. Focus group methodology was utilized to chronicle the lived experience of African American students. From the analysis of the data three key themes emerged: (1) Connectedness to the academic program; (2) connectedness to the campus; and (3) importance of faculty. The third theme includes two sub-themes: diverse faculty and importance of minority faculty. The findings suggests: 1) overall, the focus group participants did not feel socially connected to the academic program nor the campus; and 2) these particular students did not have a strong sense of belonging, as demonstrated by supportive relationships with faculty.

**KEYWORDS:** African American, social connectedness, student retention, focus groups

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*Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruled that school segregation deprived “the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities” (Cozzens, 1995). As a result, during the Civil Rights Movement, many believed that education was the key to creating equality in the U.S. While colleges and universities have provided racial minorities with greater access to higher education, there is a significant difference in the graduation rates of racial minority and White students. Fifty-nine percent of White students graduate within six years, while the graduation rate for African American students is 38% and 46% for Latino students (Smith, 2004, p. 48). Part of what influences this rate disparity is the campus experiences of racial minority students (Tinto, 1993).

Research shows that the social aspect of collegiate life is essential for racial minority student academic success (D’Angeli & Hershberger, 1993; Black Issues in Higher Education, 2002). For example, formal social integration had a greater effect on African American students’ academic performance than did informal social integration (Furr & Elling, 2002). Moreover, Furr and Elling (2002) operationalize the term social integration as participation in campus social life (Furr & Elling, 2002, p. 189).

Student organizations that represent racial minority students also have a great impact on retention by offering academic support programs that recognize students’ cultural backgrounds and provide them the necessary academic tools (Rhoads, Buenavista, & Maldonado, 2004). It is important for racial minority students to develop peer networks and gain support from faculty. Combined, these processes work together to create a positive social climate for racial minority students, which subsequently increases the likelihood they will graduate (Frater, 1997; Shinew & Hibbler, 2002).

Little is known about the status of racial minorities that are employed in parks and recreation and leisure services agencies in the United States (Ricucci, 1986; Bartlett & McKinney, 2003). Manpower and occupational mobility studies conducted during the 1970s and 1980s helped to address the issues surrounding the status of racial minorities employed in the industry. For example, Godbey and Henkel (1976) conducted the first nationwide manpower study commissioned by the National Recreation and Parks Association. The study gathered demographic data and occupational status information for minority and non-minority employees. The data revealed that minority employees had less formal education than Whites and they were concentrated in the lower levels of agencies (program leadership and first-level supervision).

Subsequently, McDonald (1981) and Waller (1989) conducted career mobility studies that examined barriers to occupational advancement among African American parks, recreation, and leisure services employees. In both studies, educational attainment was significantly related to career mobility for African Americans. In light of the significant gap in scholarship, there is a need to further examine the relationship between professional education, organizational entry, and career mobility for African Americans. Anecdotal evidence suggests that racial minorities are under-represented in the upper managerial ranks of the park and recreation management profession (Shinew & Hibbler, 2001). Moreover, Outley and Dean (2007) argued, “while no concise estimate exists, people of color generally are believed to be underrepresented in leisure services (commercial, non-profit and public), especially in managerial positions” (p. 77). Despite the fact that African American and other minorities are increasing both in numbers and as a percentage of the U.S. population, the number of people of color working in public leisure services

continues to be modest (Hibbler & Shinew, 2002). In a study of African Americans and Hispanics employed in public recreation in Illinois, Hibbler and Shinew (2002) sought to discern the respondents' "perceptions of equity" with their White counterparts. They found that: 1) the majority of the respondents felt minorities were not being prepared adequately to assume management-level responsibilities, and 2) greater effort needed to be made to recruit and retain minorities in the field. Furthermore, Shinew and Hibbler (2002) surmised that in order to systematically correct these employment disparities, minority students must enter and successfully graduate from park, recreation, and leisure studies curricula (p. 58).

Currently, it is unclear how many racial minority students are enrolled in park, recreation, and leisure studies curricula across the nation. In general, the available data shows that the number of African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities entering U.S. undergraduate and graduate park and recreation programs has shown marginal growth (Bialeschki & Dorward, 1996 as cited in Shinew & Hibbler, 2002; Frater, Howe, & Murray, 1997). Similarly, Floyd-Jones, Brooks, and Mak (2008) in their study of sport management programs in the U.S. argued that the lack of diversity within sport management (including sport & recreation management) programs remains an area of concern due to the low number of racial minorities enrolled in both undergraduate and graduate programs. Bedini, Stone, and Phoenix (2000) argued that recreation and leisure studies programs can strengthen their enrollment and retention efforts by developing mentoring programs, providing student funding for minorities, connecting students to role models and facilitating social involvement.

Shinew and Hibbler (2002) conducted a three-phased workplace equity study (telephone interview, focus group, and questionnaire) involving African Americans employed by public parks and recreation agencies throughout a Midwestern state. One of the key results emanating from the focus group was that "the field needed to do a better job of working with faculty at colleges and universities in an effort to deal with the recruitment and retention problem" (p. 52).

As suggested above, there is a need to enhance the racial minority representation in the recreation and leisure profession. One method of increasing racial minorities is to increase the number of racial minority students in recreation and leisure studies programs. In order to retain racial minorities in recreation and leisure studies programs, it is imperative that these programs create environments where racial minorities feel connected and a sense of belonging.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the degree to which African American students in a recreation and leisure studies program in the southeastern U.S. feel connected to their program. This research endeavor is important because it: 1) examines the importance of social connectedness in student retention; 2) provides insight into the experience of African American students within the academic program and department; 3) contributes to an evolving line of scholarship.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Two theoretical constructs that can help uncover the degree of social integration college students experience on campus are social connectedness and sense of belonging.

Given the role that social integration plays in racial minority student retention (Tinto, 1998), it is helpful to understand how these constructs operate and their link to retention.

### **Social Connectedness**

Social connectedness is defined as an internal sense of belonging to a social group and “the subjective awareness of being in close relationship with the social world” (Lee & Robbins, 1998, p. 338). It is also conceptualized as the degree to which a person is integrated into her or his social environment, and how deep one’s social networks are (Timpone, 1998). Social connectedness is developed through relationships with family members, friends, peers, acquaintances, communities, and the greater society. A person’s sense of connectedness is intensified through satisfying long-term relationships with others who accept the person as s/he is (Lee & Robbins, 1998).

Social connectedness influences a person’s feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in social situations (Lee & Robbins, 1998). People with high levels of social connectedness tend to identify with and participate in activities with others in their network. In general, social connectedness is a measure of how attached a person feels to others. For example, Lee, Keough, and Sexton (2002) suggested that social connectedness is measured by the degree of interpersonal closeness that is experienced between an individual and his/her social world as well as the degree of difficulty in maintaining his/her world” (p. 356). Moreover, social connectedness allows people to better manage their own needs and emotions through self-evaluation and social comparisons (Tesser, 1991).

For college students, social connectedness can impact one’s ability to adjust to a new environment and new norms during a critical developmental time period in a young adult’s life. Specifically, one study revealed that students who felt a strong sense of community on their college campus believed they had a high degree of support, were more involved in campus activities, and had higher achievement than students who did not feel a strong sense of community (Pretty, 1990). Racial minority college students’ degree of social connectedness appears to be influenced by their perception of how culturally friendly the campus is. If racial minority students perceive their campuses as being committed to diversity, they feel more socially connected to the campus (Lee, Kellerman, LePhuoc, & Rundell, 1999). Social connectedness is related to one’s sense of belonging, which is discussed next.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Sense of belonging has been defined as one’s involvement in an environment such that a person feels like an integral part of that environment (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992). One’s sense of belonging includes the notion of having similar or complementary characteristics to others, which allows a person to feel part of a group (Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, & Early, 1996). There are two components of sense of belonging: 1) being valued, needed, and considered important by other people or groups, and 2) fitting in with others (Hagerty et al., 1996). These conceptualizations suggest that sense of belonging is a measure of how socially integrated a person feels in a particular environment (Steinkamp & Kelly, 1987).

One’s sense of belonging helps people develop and manage their relationships with others (Hagerty, et al., 1996). People who lack a sense of belonging often experience

loneliness and depression (Hagerty & Williams, 1999), which can cause a person to withdraw from their academic.

Similar to middle and high school students, a college student's sense of belonging is associated with academic motivation (Freeman, Anderman & Jensen, 2007). Additionally, the more a student feels accepted socially (e.g., members of the university accept the student for who he/she is), the greater the student's sense of belonging at the university level. In fact, a student's perception of social acceptance by other students and faculty appears to be the most important variable in that student's sense of belonging (Freeman et al., 2007). Another recent study by Hausmann, Schofield and Woods (2007) discovered that a college student's sense of belonging was associated with peer group and faculty interactions, and peer and family support.

### **Relationship with College Student Retention**

Both social connectedness and sense of belonging play an important role in racial minority student retention. The more aligned or connected college students are to their institution, the more committed students will be to the institution (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002), and the more likely they are to remain at that institution and graduate (Gardner, 2005). Invariably, it must be noted that an individual may feel connected to the department and not to the institution and vice versa. In a study of third-year college students, Allen, Robbins, Casilla and Oh (2008) found that social connectedness had a positive, direct, and significant effect on whether or not students remained at the institution or dropped out.

On a university campus, students can be connected to the university overall, the college in which their major is located, and/or their specific department. While we asked questions to determine the students' degree of connectedness to each unit, this study is primarily concerned with the level of connectedness students feel to the department. Since students will take the majority of their courses in the department, and will engage with faculty, staff, and other students in the department, these interactions and experiences will play a key role in determining how connected students feel. This sense of connectedness appears to be particularly important for racial minority students.

In a study conducted by Rogers and Molina (2006), racial minority students indicated that the degree of social support they received from faculty, staff, classmates, campus support groups, and department committees had a significant impact on their decision to remain at their institution. This social support is reflected in the degree to which racial minority students feel connected to and a sense of belonging to their academic institutions.

Feelings of belonging have been associated with academic motivation, persistent effort in school, and expectations for success (Freeman et al., 2007). In one study (Voelkl, 1997), students with higher academic achievement and greater classroom participation had higher degrees of identification with school. Other research has discovered that students who developed interpersonal ties, which helped them feel "cared for," and provided them with guidance and feedback on academic issues, were "more resilient and comfortable in the university environment" (Hoffman et al., 2002, p. 237). Moreover, college students who have a greater sense of belonging also report a greater likelihood to persist in college (Hausmann et al., 2007). The above research suggests that social

connectedness and sense of belonging are important factors in retaining ethnic minority students on predominately White institutions (PWIs).

### **The Campus**

**University.** The university is nestled near a national park in the southeastern U.S. It is home to over 27,000 students (21,475 undergraduates and 5,773 graduate students). Demographically, the university's student population is gender balanced with 13,434 males and 13,814 females. The institution classifies as a predominantly White academic institution, in that 83.5% of the students are White, approximately 7.9% are African American, almost 4.9% are Asian or Hispanic, and 0.4% are American Indian. Additionally, for unknown reasons, four hundred and four students failed to report their race/ethnicity as a part of the data collection (Cunningham, Waller, & Halic, 2008).

The one-year retention rate for students who entered the university as first time, full-time freshmen in the fall of 2007 was 83.6%. Male and female students had a similar retention rate (83.0% for males and 84.2% for females). White students had a slightly higher retention rate than racial and ethnic minority students (Whites = 84.2%, African Americans = 78.8%, and Other = 82.0%). Determining the one-year retention rate for freshman students entering into the Recreation and Leisure Studies (RLS) program was not possible, because freshman must complete a series of courses prior to entering the major in their sophomore year or later. In 2002, the six-year graduation rate for the university as a whole was 59.8%. A larger percentage of females graduated compared to males (63.1% to 56.3%), and Whites had a slightly higher, (but not significantly different) graduation rate than racial and ethnic minorities (Whites = 60.1%, African Americans = 58.3%, and Other = 57.4%). In 2010, the five-year graduation rate for the RLS program was 70.0%. Similar to the university's statistics, the female graduation rate was higher than their male counterparts (77.0% and 60.0% respectively). No data on graduation rates for specific racial minorities in the RLS program is available at this time. Of the 1,405 full-time faculty in the university, 84.6% are White. Asians comprise 8.8%, African Americans 3.5%, Hispanics 2.6% and 0.4% of the faculty identify as American Indian. The majority of the faculty are also male (62.3%) (Cunningham et al., 2008).

**College.** At the college level, approximately 6.6% (1,434) of the total student enrollment at the undergraduate level and close to 19% (1,159) of graduate and professional students are enrolled in the college. For undergraduates, females account for almost 70.0% (997) of enrollment. Similarly, approximately 72% (830) of students enrolled in graduate programs are female. The limited diversity of the university as a whole is mirrored within the College. White students represent the bulk of students in both the undergraduate and graduate programs in the College (1,238 [86.3%] and 973 [83.9%] respectively) with African Americans following second with 8.3% and 7.6% (120 and 89 respectively) for undergraduate and graduate programs. Faculty in the college represent 9.8% (139) of the total faculty employed at the university. The faculty in the college are predominantly White (White = 84.1%, Asian = 8.6%, African American = 6.4%, and American Indian = 0.7% (Cunningham, et al., 2008).

**Department.** The department has been re-organized twice over a ten-year period. At differing points, the Recreation and Leisure Studies program was integrated with tourism in another college and later combined with key programs into form its current structure

with a second college. At the undergraduate level, the department that includes the Recreation and Leisure Studies (RLS) program contains approximately 28.0% (397) of the College's student body. Mirroring the overall University's gender ratio, the department's student body is divided almost equally between males (208) and females (189) and is largely White in its composition (White = 337, African American = 32, Asian = 10, Unreported = 10, Hispanic = 5, American Indian = 3). More specifically, the RLS program contributes 21.0% to the student enrollment in the department and of that 59% are female. The racial makeup of the students in the RLS program, like the university and the college, is predominantly White (White = 86.0%, African American = 8.0%, Unreported = 5.0%, Asian = 1%, American Indian = 0%). No data is available at this time for the graduate level. However, data indicates that the faculty in the department are comprised predominantly of White males (White = 90.0%, African American = 6.0%, Asian = 3.0%, Males = 17, Females = 14) with the composition of the faculty in the RLS program being a single female and three males, of which only one is African American.

### **Methodology**

In alignment with the purpose of the study, focus group methodology was utilized. One of the advantages of focus group methodology is the dialectic relationship among participants. (Babbie, 2007). Gibbs (1997) noted that focus groups are "particularly suited for obtaining several perspectives about the same topic" (p. 1). This process would allow the researchers to explore how specific group of students perceived their experiences on campus (Babbie, 2007; Morgan, 1996). This analytical approach gave participants the opportunity to share their personal experiences in their own words.

This study employs qualitative research methods because they place emphasis on the "socially constructed nature of reality and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). Qualitative methods work best with research that attempts to disclose the nature of individual experiences in particular instances, and can yield intricate details about phenomena and provide new perspectives on situations (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

A list of all ethnic minority graduate and undergraduate students in the department was generated, and e-mail messages were sent to these students encouraging them to voluntarily participate in a series of focus groups that were designed to ascertain their experiences at the university. Additionally, announcements about the study were made in all classes. Faculty voiced their support of the project and encouraged students to participate in the study. Despite the inability to determine the total number of racial minority students in the department, 12 African American students responded (six graduate and six undergraduate). Additionally, 11 White students (six graduate and five undergraduate) responded and subsequently four focus groups were created (one comprised of White males, one with African American males, one with White females, and one with African American females).

The groups were comprised of African American students and were designed to be homogenous by gender and class standing (undergraduate and graduate). Kahan (2001) noted that, "focus groups should be homogeneous with respect to the topic of interest because the objective is to highlight areas where agreement exists" (p. 130). Since the

goal was to uncover any racial differences, the focus groups were categorized by race and then gender. Due to the low number of volunteers and the importance of maintaining focus groups of four to six people, the White male focus group contained both graduate and undergraduate students. Additionally, pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of focus group participants (see Appendix A).

The researchers developed a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B) designed to uncover the degree of attachment the students felt toward the university, college, and department. A structured interview provides no latitude for asking questions beyond those in the protocol, and subsequently can limit the depth and quality of information gathered about the topic. The primary purpose of qualitative methods is to uncover nuanced information and intricate details about phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

The questions focused on socio-cultural alienation, academic challenges, relationships with faculty, department operations, and the students' perception of the university's environment. The overall framework for the focus group interview protocol was based on the study conducted by Loo and Roliston (1986). Their instrument not only served as the framework for this study's focus group interview protocol, but the majority of the questions asked were adapted from their instrument. The questions that measured sense of belonging were adapted from items in the sense of belonging questionnaire developed by Hoffman et al. (2002), as well as the sense of belonging construct of the scale developed by Hurtado and Carter (1997). Some of the questions related to academic preparedness were extrapolated from Murtaugh, Burns, and Schuster (1999), while others were adapted from Loo and Roliston (1986). The socio-cultural alienation and academic challenges questions were adapted from Loo and Roliston (1986), while the questions that addressed the quality of relationships with faculty were derived from Hoffman, et al. (2002). The questions about departmental operations were developed based upon the researchers' experiences with students in the department. Through advising sessions, the researchers were aware of some of the communication gaps that existed between information White students received, and information that African American students received. In their role as advisors, the researchers also became acutely aware that some of the students in the major did not appear to be academically prepared for the level of rigor in the program.

Each of the focus group sessions lasted 60-90 minutes and was audio recorded. Each recording was transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber. Once the interviews were transcribed, the data were coded using the QDA Minor/WordStat qualitative data analysis software program. The initial themes were generated based upon the interview protocol, which was grounded in the literature reviewed for this study, especially Loo and Roliston (1986). For example, the researchers created themes labeled "academic preparedness," "approachableness of faculty," "connectedness," and "sense of belonging," based upon the interview protocol. Other themes emerged from the data during sentence coding. One of the researchers has conducted several qualitative studies, and was responsible for coding all the data. Sentence coding entails reading each transcript sentence looking for a major theme or idea that represents the sentence (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Examples of themes that emerged from the data are: "equal treatment," "barriers to engagement," "inclusivity," and "incidents and issues."



## Findings

Based on the analysis of the data three key themes emerged: (1) connectedness to the academic program; (2) connectedness to the campus; and (3) importance of faculty. The third theme includes two sub-themes: diverse faculty and importance of minority faculty.

### **Theme 1: Connected to Academic Program**

One of the dominant themes that emerged from the analysis of the data was that the study participants did not feel a sense of “connectedness” with their academic program on the whole, but felt somewhat connected to students within the program. Two reasons resonated for the feelings of alienation: (1) the perceived transient history of the program and department within the college, and (2) the operation of “cliques” within the program. Mark, a senior commented that he had difficulty feeling connected to the recreation and leisure program, because the department had re-aligned multiple times. In the dialogue he replied,

I think, especially for recreation administration or leisure studies, it's been difficult for us [RLS students] because we've been moved around the colleges a lot the past ten years, and I think it's difficult to connect with the college and people within that college ...

Graduate student Daisy explained that she felt connected to the other students in the department (which houses three programs), but did not actually associate with these students outside the classroom. She continued,

I was in class yesterday and looking around at everybody and I knew people's names, and it just seemed that everyone knew each other. It's not that I didn't know them, but they seem to have these little like cliques and like, where the heck are these people like associating with each other?

While Daisy knew her fellow students, it seemed as though the depth of the association was enhanced by program affiliation. “I understand a lot of [students] work in the athletic department, so they get to develop bonds.” Although this student had an assistantship and was affiliated with an Institute, she felt disconnected from the other students. Moreover, she infers that she does not know these other students well enough to strike up conversations with them on matters outside of academics.

Moreover, Heather provided an explanation for the lack of connectedness this student felt towards her classmates:

I think it makes a big difference when you actually work and share an office with other students and you spend time in the office. I think that makes a big difference. Then you're just automatically going to feel connected to the other students because you're seeing each other all the time and that sort of thing but, I just wanted to like throw that in there.

Samuel, a senior indicated that the size of the program influenced how easy it was to get to know other classmates. He stated,

... my program was kind of smaller so like knowing everybody [was easier]." He went on to discuss the importance of building relationships with other students, "And obviously you want to know them because you're going to have to work with them in a group so, you're going to have to like them.

### **Theme 2: Connected to Campus**

On the whole, graduate students seemed to be more connected with other graduate students in their department, but not to the campus at large. Haley explained,

I don't really feel connected and it's just probably because I'm a graduate student and most of my time I spend with other graduate students in my department. So I think I probably just feel more with them, but not so much the entire university.

Additionally, Haley felt that she had created a social network, but she did not feel connected to the campus community,

Not very connected at all [to the university]. I mean at this point I feel like I've created a network for myself within a community, but as far as being connected to the entire UT community, not at all.

By contrast, the undergraduate male participants seemed a bit more connected to the campus. Peter, a junior, claimed that this connection was related to his attachment to the women's athletic program: "Well, with me being involved with the women's program, I guess that's somewhat of a tie that I have." Marshall, a junior indicated that since students in the program had similar interests, he felt connected:

I really enjoy and love sports, and basically everybody within [our] major has that same common, I guess interest, so that makes it a lot easier to, you know, blend in and fit in with others.

### **Theme 3: Relationships with Faculty**

The participants in this study indicated that they did not have close relationships with most of the faculty in their program. Jane mentioned that the students and the faculty did not seem to interact with each other outside of the classroom: "I don't really see the interaction of professors and students, other than them talking to them before or after class." She described her relationship with faculty as "not so much as a mentorship; more as professional. They're just my teacher." Sarah commented that she actually felt awkward talking to her professors: "When I have to go talk to a teacher, I feel so weird, because I don't even know them."

**Sub-theme 1: Diverse faculty.** Both undergraduate and graduate participants made reference to the lack of racial diversity in the department. Barbara discussed searching other departments that typically have racial minority faculty,

When I first got here, walking through the African American Studies department, putting my head into people's office, thinking I have to meet African American faculty, you know, it's very hard to see a presence of African American faculty on this campus.

Samuel, a senior underscored the importance of having diverse faculty in the department. He stated,

We need to expand our diversity, like in our department, and I think having ethnic minority staff, like would bring more individuals in with different diversity, because we're sending a message, like, we want to teach and have proper education and diversity. It's so important to us that we have a diverse faculty. And it's just important because it sends a message.

Another student named Sally student discussed the implication of not having diverse faculty in the department:

Every one of the professors that I've seen in sport management have been White. And there's only a couple of females. So, if I'm coming in, and I'm a minority student, you know, why am I going to come to [this university] where even, you know, the higher-ups in the department, the professors, don't look like me?

Next, she explains why she has concerns about the lack of diverse faculty, "They're not going to understand where I'm coming from, any of my life experiences, any of my values." Her deeply felt emotions began to surface when she proposed a solution to the overall problem of feeling disconnected:

I didn't really think about it earlier in the discussion but I really think we need to hire some faculty because you just ... I refuse to accept that the only people who are qualified to teach my classes are White men. I just refuse to accept it. I don't buy it.

**Sub-theme 2: Importance of minority faculty.** The graduate student participants in this study specifically discussed how racial minority faculty members helped them. Daisy highlighted the importance of having faculty with research interests that involved race. She noted,

When we were going around talking about our research interests, like everyone's had to do with race. I mean you might have probably more in common with [a racial minority faculty member] or they might find that more of interest, in terms of like research areas than maybe non-minority member.

This student then added that having a racial minority faculty member as a mentor was “really a large reason why I’m here, and I mean it’s tremendous.” She also shared how she was “able to talk to him about, you know, stuff and joke about things.”

Sarah explained how faculty diversity impacted her selection process of doctoral programs, “When I was looking for programs and I looked at people’s website, if there were no men or women of color in their program, I automatically ‘x-ed’ them off my list for schools that I would consider for a Ph.D. program.” She added that race was an important component for her in terms of research perspective,

A lot of times what’s left out of the research is [the African American ] perspective, is breaking down demographics so then your research becomes focused on that, and then you need a faculty that can support that type of research, so that’s very important.

Overall, the focus group participants did not feel socially connected to the academic program nor the campus. Additionally, these particular students did not have a strong sense of belonging, as demonstrated by supportive relationships with faculty. The participants also voiced their concern over the lack of racial diversity amongst the faculty, and the importance of having diverse faculty in the program.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the degree to which African American students in a recreation and leisure studies program in the southeastern U. S. were connected to their academic program. Tinto (1998), one of the most prominent researchers in the area of college student retention, posits that social integration significantly influences student persistence, which subsequently increases retention and matriculation. The more socially connected students are to their academic programs, and the college or university, the more likely the student is to matriculate to graduation. Being socially connected and feeling a sense of belonging is particularly important for racial minority students on predominantly White campuses. The participants’ comments in this study suggest that racial minority students in this recreation and leisure studies program do not feel socially connected to their academic program or the University. This finding is consistent with the position of Lee and Robinson (1998) who posit that social connectedness will influence the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of students positively or negatively. These students did not have a strong sense of community, as evidenced by their comments that they did not really know their fellow classmates. Additionally, the graduate students in this study did not feel connected to the campus community. One student commented that these students discussed how African American faculty not only serve as professional mentors, but also fill a social role as well (Austin, 2002). To further buttress the previous point, it should be noted that one participant mentioned that she had created a social network within the community, but did not feel particularly connected to the University at large.

This study’s participants also seemed to lack a sense of belonging. These students did not have close relationships with faculty in the program. One student mentioned that she saw little interaction between faculty and students outside the classroom. Additionally,

another student discussed feeling uncomfortable talking with faculty members, because she simply did not know them. These findings support the work of Hausman, et al. (2007) who argued that the sense of belonging is evidenced by the student's relationships with peers and faculty.

Diversity appeared to play a role in the participants' sense of belonging. Graduate students in particular discussed the important role racial minority faculty play in how comfortable students felt in the program. One student even commented that she felt "weird," when she had to approach a faculty member and ask a question. Another student asked, "Why would you come to this school if you're a minority?" For these students, the lack of faculty who looked like them hindered their relationships with faculty, which subsequently seemed to negatively impact how socially integrated they felt in their program (Hoffman et al., 2002). The graduate student participants also highlighted how African American faculty were more likely to be interested in research areas related to race, and would bring their unique perspective to research projects. Additionally, these students discussed how African American faculty not only serve as professional mentors, but also fill a social role within departments and the university.

This lack of connectedness and sense of belonging reflected in the participant comments could possibly explain the recreation and leisure studies program's current challenges with retaining racial minority students. At the conclusion of data collection in 2008, three undergraduate African American students exited the program citing reasons such as "not seeing the major as viable," "frustration with completing the internship requirements," and "found a better major" [Africana Studies]. This illustrates the potential negative impact of not having diverse faculty with whom racial minority students can bond with. Since the completion of the study the program has been merged with sport management, strengthening the pool of available courses, and realigning internship criteria. Additionally, the number of African American students and faculty has increased under the new structure.

### **Limitations**

The findings of this study should be interpreted through the limitations imposed by the methodology utilized. First, participants in the focus groups were not randomly selected. Second, in focus group-based research, results should not be generalized without further quantitative research. Perhaps a mixed-methods research design may have allowed for generalization to similar subjects within Recreation and Leisure Studies programs at comparable institutions. Third, a small number of focus groups were conducted. Withstanding the diminutive number of African American students in the department the number was appropriate. A larger population of African American students may have increased the number of focus groups and potentially revealed "richer" data and possibly different findings.

### **Directions for Future Research**

In light of the "lessons learned" from the present study, three areas of interest surface for a continued line of scholarly inquiry. First, a comparative study would highlight the experiential differences of both groups and allow for the analysis of retention rates. This effort would create a holistic picture of the overarching student experience within

the program. Second, including other racial and ethnic groups as a part of the study would allow for a more comprehensive examination of students of color with similar institutions. Finally, the study was limited to one university in the southeast. Expanding the study to include similar institutions in other geographic areas of the country may yield different results.

## Conclusion

Shinew and Hibbler (2002) make an important point when they reiterate that the leisure services industry is depending on colleges and universities to produce a qualified pipeline of applicants, including people of color. Keeping racial minority students socially connected to the program, faculty, and other students is crucial to retention efforts. The creation of a “welcoming” and supportive environment is vital. This environment must include ethnically diverse faculty who are approachable and helpful at the program, department and university levels. Effective faculty mentors are invaluable to the retention of minority students (Bedini, Stone, & Phoenix, 2000). The effective mentoring of racial and ethnic minority students is a critical. In order to improve diversity with the recreation, parks and leisure services profession, it is imperative that systems are developed to support the matriculation and training of racial and ethnic minority students who will inevitably become the professionals of tomorrow.

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**Appendix A**  
**Focus Group Participants Pseudonyms**

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<b>Name</b>	<b>Class Standing</b>
Sally	Female Graduate Student
Barbara	Female Graduate Student
Jane	Female Graduate Student
Sarah	Female Graduate Student
Haley	Female Graduate Student
Heather	Female Graduate Student
Daisy	Female Graduate Student
Samuel	Male Undergraduate Student
Mark	Male Undergraduate Student
Peter	Male Undergraduate Student
Marshall	Male Undergraduate Student

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## **Appendix B**

### **Focus Group Interview Schedule**

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#### **Sociocultural alienation**

1. To what extent do the values at UT reflect your own values?  
A lot? A little? Not at all?  
If response is "a little" or "not at all":  
Why do you believe that UT's goals and your goals are not the same?
2. How often do you feel "left out," or not included in social events taking place on campus?
3. To what extent do you feel connected to the UT community? To the college? To the department?  
A lot? A little? Not at all?  
If response is "a little" or "not at all": Why do you feel disconnected?
4. Do you feel/think that there are enough ethnic social and cultural events focused on campus?  
If no: Why not? What types of ethnic social and cultural events would you like to see on campus?

#### **Academic challenges**

5. Do you think you were prepared for the degree of academic rigor at UT?  
If no: Why not? How do you deal with academic challenges?
6. If you have a problem understanding something in class, do you go to office hours?  
If no: Why not?
7. Have you ever thought of dropping out?  
If yes: Why? What makes you stay?

#### **Relationship with faculty**

8. In general, how approachable do you feel/think your professors are?  
If not very approachable: Why?
9. How often are you or your contributions acknowledged by faculty in your major? In your department? In the college? In the university overall?  
If not often: Why do you think you're not recognized?
10. How would you describe your relationships with the faculty you're taking classes with right now?
11. How comfortable are you about talking or sharing your thoughts and ideas in class?  
If not very comfortable: Why?
12. Do you think faculty in your major treat all students the same? In your department? In the college? In the university overall?  
If no: Why not? Can you give us an example of something that happened that makes you believe all students are not treated equally?
13. How important is it to have ethnic minority faculty in your major? In your department? In the college? In the university overall?  
If important or very important: Why?  
If unimportant: Why?
14. Overall, are you satisfied with how you're treated by faculty in your major? In your department? In the college? In the university overall?  
If no: Why not?

## Appendix B (cont.)

### Department operations

15. Why did you choose your major?
16. Would you recommend your major to your friends? Another major in your department? A major in the college?  
If yes: Why?  
If no: Why not?
17. Which courses do you think/feel were most helpful in preparing you for your future position in the industry?  
What was it about these courses that was valuable or helpful?
18. Where there any courses you thought/felt were useless or of little value in preparing you for your future position in the industry?  
What was it about these courses that made them useless?
19. Are there courses you think/feel should be added to the curriculum?  
If yes: Which courses/topics? Why?
20. How do you find out about information related to your program? For example, funding opportunities (scholarships & grants), career opportunities after graduation, research opportunities?
21. Did you receive any assistance from the department (faculty or staff members) in getting your internship?  
If yes: From whom? Was this helpful?  
If no: Could you have used some help? How did this make you feel?
22. Do you think you possess (or will possess) the skills, knowledge, and abilities to obtain an entry-level management job in your industry?  
If yes: What prepared you?  
If no: Why not? What could the department do to better prepare you for an entry-level management position?

### University support/environment

23. Have you found it easy to make friends on campus?  
If yes: What has helped you make new friends?  
If no: Why not? What gets in your way of making friends?
24. Do you think/feel UT is accepting of diversity?  
If yes: What makes you think/feel this way? Ask for specific examples.  
If no: Why not? Ask for specific examples.
25. In general, do you think/feel that UT is supportive of ethnic minority students on this campus?  
If yes: What does UT do that makes you feel supported?  
If no: Why not?
26. Have you ever had any issues related to your race or ethnicity on campus?  
If yes: Could you share what happened? What did you do?  
Did you tell a faculty member or staff person?  
If yes: What happened?  
If no: Why not?