Racial Equity in Higher Education: the Lingering under Representation of Students of Color in Graduate Programs

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Abstract

Many U.S.-born white college students have been replaced by underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities in urban areas, including New York, due to changing demographics and immigration patterns. In spite of these changes, students of color are underrepresented in graduate programs; hence, the purpose of this study was to explore what factors facilitate or impede this phenomenon. A series of four focus groups were conducted among 23 non-traditional immigrant students of color. Findings were categorized according to the predisposing, enabling, and need factors of Andersen's (1995) behavior model. Policy and practice implications were discussed urging attention to cultural competency and racial equity.

Key words: Racial Equity; predisposing, enabling and need factors; immigrant students of color; barriers to learning.

1. Introduction

Changing demographics and emerging immigration patterns are affecting populations in urban areas, including New York City (NYC), which have diminished the number of U.S.–born White, traditional, middle-class students who enroll in undergraduate and graduate colleges in such cities. Many of the traditionally white college students have been replaced by underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities. This trend is expected to continue to increase with the November 20, 2014 Executive Order on immigration issued by President Obama and the President's initiative to make community college free for all high school graduates.

These proposed changes are likely to present mounting academic challenges for traditional non-elite colleges and universities. As such, for the students' academic success and for the sustainability of these colleges, it is imperative that faculty and administrators of such institutions understand the background, needs, and environments of the emerging student body in order to achieve desired learning outcomes. This is even more salient because of the cultural shift from the melting-pot model to multiculturalism. In the melting pot model, uniformity was not only expected, but also facilitated and encouraged. Uniformity seemed to be the guarantor of academic and economic success contends Berger and Fisher (2013) in a study of the Economic Policy Institute.

That is no longer the case; therefore, it is only reasonable to anticipate change in the thinking and execution of missions guiding higher educational institutions. One may argue that terms like cultural competence and cultural sensitivity introduced decades ago are becoming common if not on the verge of becoming clichés. However, the real concern is what are we doing differently in our classrooms to accommodate, reflect, and value diversity beyond talking about it?

Could the slow response from undergraduate programs be responsible for underrepresentation of students of color in graduate programs? How could we promote racial equity without changing a model developed for elite, privileged white students in the 19th century? In view of concerns at the undergraduate level, the purpose of this paper is to explore some of the reasons why students of color are generally not fully represented in graduate programs and to ascertain what factors facilitate or impede their ability to graduate from master's degree programs. The paper builds on qualitative data gathered through focus group sessions among immigrant graduate students of color, some of whom completed their K-12 education in the United States. In the following section, we provide background information, a description of our methods, the themes around which we organize our findings, and conclusion and implications.

2. Background

The fact that K-12 is failing students of color has become common knowledge and received tremendous national attention. This situation is exacerbated further by the changing patterns of immigration. Historically, many immigrants of color to the United States completed, at minimum, K-12 schooling and a majority of them possessed very marketable desirable job skills; hence, the success of their children in terms of attending college was unquestionable. The immigration reforms of the 1980s were more liberal in granting access to families with a broader range of needs and qualifications. Unlike European immigrants, today's immigrants of color from the Caribbean, South America, and continental Africa are not accorded the same support and resources when they arrive in the U.S. Therefore, many newcomers of color with less education and less sought-after job skills that arrive in the U.S. during a period of economic woes, find themselves living in distressed neighborhoods with poor performing, underfunded public schools. As a result, children of racial/ethnic minority immigrants settling in such environments have started to lag behind not unlike American-born students of color.

Further, because of their distinctive phenotype, Blacks regardless of their origins are usually perceived as a monolithic group and are thought to be devoid of cultural values and aspirations. Speaking to this point, Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (1991) wrote:

> it is not religion that is competing with the forces of class assimilation but a highly visible racial identification that has been burdened with the unique confluence of slavery, segregation, and negative racial stereotyping, making the situation of blacks qualitatively different from that of any other ethnic, religious, or racial group in America (p. 10)

Another dimension to the problem came earlier in the wake of the release of The Negro Family: The Case for National Action in 1965, now known as the Moynihan Report, published by the assistant secretary of labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan. This Report ignited a national controversy and served as a foundation for many social studies for decades. Regardless of the driving forces of the controversy and national tension, the central thesis of the report was that racial inequality with the breakdown of the Black family was creating a new crisis in race relations" wrote Harvard professor William Julius Wilson (2010, p. 95). The implication back then and now is that family fragmentation is responsible for lack of education and consequently concentrated poverty in inner city neighborhoods. Wilson added

> The Moynihan report is a particularly pertinent subject for discussion of the black family because it not only anticipated later developments in black family fragmentation, but the controversy it generated clearly made the [Black] family the central focus of the structure-versus-culture debate. (p. 96)

It is not uncommon to encounter arguments—from both conservative and progressive camps—suggesting that the Black family structure is partially responsible for the poor performance of African American students in K-12. Such tendencies are widely circulated among advocates of education reforms in the past two decades (Payne, 2008). If the problem lies in the family structure, as some have argued, then higher education institutions can be deemed doing fine, but that is not the whole story, for ignoring the historic forces that put some groups at a disadvantage is nothing less of endorsing the status quo. Some of these historic forces, or structural impediments as referred to by some social scientists; do affect the progress of minorities in terms of pursuing graduate studies and accomplishing social mobility. In spite of such impediments, recent data have shown some positive signs as the number of Black students' enrollment in graduate programs hold steady for 2012 and 2103 at 11.3 percent of the total graduate enrollments in both years respectively. In the fall of 2013, there were 329,196 Black students enrolled in U.S. graduate school degree programs (Ginder, Kelly-Reid and Mann, 2014).

While these numbers are encouraging, African American and Hispanics are still underrepresented in graduate programs. Unfortunately, the steady trend of enrollment is unlikely to hold in the future because in 2013 there were 176,208 fewer Black students enrolled in all levels of higher education than was the case in 2011 (Ginder et al). While, there isn't conclusive evidence as to why enrollment numbers are declining, some experts point to the slow disappearance of equity-based admission programs initiated in the 1960s as a vehicle for achieving racial equity in higher education. In April 2014, The Supreme Court upheld a Michigan policy banning the use of racial background in college admissions, marking an end of an era characterized by designed interventions to bring about racial equity in colleges. Ironically, City University of New York (CUNY), which was established to serve disadvantaged groups, raised the academic admission standards in early 2000. The result, as reported by the New York Times (2012, May 22), is that:

> At the university's five most competitive four-year colleges — Baruch, Brooklyn, City, Hunter and Queens — nearly 12 percent of freshmen entering in 2001 had SAT scores of 1,200 or more. In 2007, for the last prerecession class, the figure was up to 16 percent, and by last fall, it had jumped to 26 percent.

It has been well-documented that students of color tend to perform poorly on standardized tests compared to their middle-class Caucasian counterparts. Indeed, the cost for SAT course preparation could range from $1,100 to $10,000, which is beyond the financial means of poorer inner city African American families (Jones, 2015, ABC March 22), not to mention the fact that the quality of their K-12 education tends to be substandard. Unsurprisingly, the New York Times (2012, May 22) reported that "At the same time, Black representation among first-time freshmen at those colleges dropped, to 10 percent last fall from 17 percent in 2001". According to David Jones (2015), income inequality is influenced by educational access issues. In fact, Jones has pointed to a precipitous decline in the rates of admission to CUNY colleges; a trend that he deems "scary." For example, 11% of students admitted to Harvard University were African Americans at the same time only 8.5% of students admitted to one of CUNY's four-year colleges were African Americans. Harvard, an elite private university, considered other factors than SAT scores among its admission criteria.

This problem is not new and neither are some of the attempted solutions. What is new is that the socioeconomic changes rendered college education, and to a great extent graduate degrees, essential to obtaining decent living standards (Nelson & Mapunda, 2015; Gongloff, 2013). That said, it is true that colleges and universities do not have a magic bullet to solve all social ills affecting minorities, but it is fair to inquire about what they are doing differently to respond to the demographic changes and uneven playing field. This situation becomes even more complex because immigrant students of color are likely to fall prey to proprietary colleges that recruit very heavily in poor communities promising underprepared students successful completion of an undergraduate degree program followed by job placements. Some of these colleges are tantamount to diploma mills because they offer bachelor degrees in less than four years. In some instances, students can graduate in 15 months. When students graduate and enter the job market, they realize that they were not only unprepared but also their employment options are lower-paying clerical jobs that do not elevate one from poverty or facilitate social mobility. The same will hold true for immigrants who will soon receive legal status as a result of the President's Executive Order. All these trends present continuous and fluid challenges to learning.

Discovering the reasons for pursuing a master's degree among some immigrant students of color in our graduate program will help the program, the administration—and perhaps programs serving comparable constituents—in finding ways to better convey the fundamentals of a good education, which will elevate them from their current circumstances. In addition to students of color with immigrant backgrounds, lately, we have been receiving an increasing number of applications from students of color who are still living in their countries of birth; several of such students have applied, accepted, and subsequently enrolled in our program. Indeed, we believe that all other stakeholders will benefit from any accommodating arrangements that will not compromise quality but rather ensure that all students are able to complete the program; particularly since placements, tests are not mandatory.

3. Methodology

This section covers study design, selection of participants, description of participants, data gathering plan and data processing. We begin with brief explanation of the study's overall framework.

3.1 Study design

A qualitative descriptive research method (involving focus groups) was used for this study because it is appropriate for exploring participants' perceptions of, and behaviors within, our master's degree program (Patton, 2002; Kitzinger, 1995; Krueger, 1994). Focus groups are cost-effective/time-efficient group-interviews that stimulate conversations among participants thereby generating useful information. This data collection tool has some benefits that other methods do not. Since participants provide their responses in a group, they can build upon each other's responses, and hold each other accountable for the accuracy of the occurrences described. Additionally, evaluators are able to garner a considerable amount of data in a short period of time (Linville, Lambert-Shute, Fruhauf & Percy, 2003). This process of encouraging participants to engage in discussions about our program facilitated self-disclosure; revealing their behaviors, awareness, and experiences. This technique has been used in studies with graduate students in order to give them the opportunity to identify strengths, challenges and miscellaneous issues that faculty and administrators can address (Patton, 2002).

3.2 Recruitment strategies and instruments

We solicited participants through flyers distributed in classes and posted on our electronic blackboard. Prior to the sessions, the Principal Investigator (PI) prepared study materials including an anonymous questionnaire to gather demographic data; a moderator guide, and a consent form, all of which were submitted to and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB ensures protection of individual rights, privacy, confidentiality, and the welfare of all study participants. The key topics that guided the discussion were informed by the literature and the theoretical framework centered on the forces that drive people to want to accomplish difficult challenge.

3.3 Description of the participants

Demographic data gathered through the anonymous questionnaire showed that the participants (N = 23) were immigrant students of color (i.e. non-Hispanic Blacks born in the Caribbean, Continental [west] Africa and in the U.S; Hispanics born overseas and in the U.S.) enrolled in our Master of Public Administration (MPA) program in this urban private university located in New York City. These students were in different stages of completing the program. As was expected, 83% of the participants are women; participants' median age is 31 years of age; 43% are First Generation College graduates, while 52% are First Generation Americans. A majority of the participants are non-traditional students. For example, some are returning veterans, some have been in the workplace for a few years (mid-career), and some have not been in an academic setting for as many as 10+ years, while others are single parents balancing work, school, and family life.

3.4 Data collection

In March 2014, we conducted four focus group sessions, each with varying numbers of students based on their availability. At the outset, the PI and moderator briefed the students using a written protocol that explained the purpose of the study; the focus group process; how the information would be used and the session's ground rules. Two mini-cassette tape recorders were placed on the conference room table, one at each end. We told the students that their conversations would be audio taped and that they would be asked to complete a short anonymous questionnaire. To encourage honest and open discussions, we assured the students that anonymity and confidentiality would be protected and that they too needed to respect the anonymity and confidentiality of their participating peers. We further advised them that any and all sensitive information would be protected if such is traceable to the reporter. The PI used the briefing process as a teachable moment to introduce students to a focus group research format and to emphasize the importance of primary studies, which are quite different from the secondary analyses with which they are most familiar. The consent form was then reviewed with students and they were advised that they were free to decline to participate in the study without penalty; and that if they chose to participate, they would be required to sign the consent form and to acknowledge their agreement to be audio taped. Every student gathered in each session signed the consent form and participated in the study.

The sessions were facilitated by a moderator, who was a graduate assistant (G.A.) at the time, and supervised by the P.I., an experienced, long-standing full professor in the master's program. Although the study protocol and moderator guide were identical for each focus group session, the dynamics of the sessions varied because of the makeup of the group. Some participants tried to monopolize the sessions, while others tended to maintain their reserve.

Each focus group session was expected to last 90 minutes; however, one session went for 120 minutes because the participants were very profuse with what they had to say, and group members asked several questions of the PI, who responded at the end of the formal focus group session. During the sessions, the P.I. wrote notes for concordance with the taped recordings in the event any of the statements were unintelligible. The tapes were subsequently transcribed and used in the current analysis. At the end of each session, each participant received a book store gift card as a bonus incentive.

3.5 Data processing

We processed the data in four steps. First, we entered the responses from the anonymous questionnaires into Excel spreadsheets in order to compute descriptive statistics, used in describing the characteristics of the participants. Second, the contents of the audiotapes were transcribed verbatim. Third, the PI removed any and all names of students and faculty reported in the transcripts. Fourth, the PI and a team of five students, who were not focus group participants, reviewed the contents of the anonymous transcripts to determine if there were any discernable themes. Using an iterative process, the research team noticed the emergence of social equity and cultural competence concepts associated with educating vulnerable populations identified in the literature. These concepts are similar to factors—predisposing, enabling and need—identified in the last phase of a behavioral model of health services utilization by Andersen (1995). For expediency, these factors will be described in detail later along with supporting quotes in our findings.

4. Findings

The findings are analyzed and categorized according to themes reflecting the predisposing, enabling, and need factors of Andersen's (1995) behavior model. We describe each factor of Andersen's model accompanied by the associated study findings. Predisposing factors as described by Andersen (1995) are antecedent, individual and biological determinants such as age and gender; the social qualities of the person—education, occupation, ethnicity; social relationships—supports or obstacles to pursuing higher education, mental factors such as education beliefs—attitudes, values, and knowledge that people have towards the educational system as well as the perception of the benefits of an advanced degree. Background elements that predispose individuals to pursuing higher education include demographic and social composition of communities, collective and organizational values, cultural norms, and political perspectives (Andersen & Davidson, 2001).

The analysis identified several important inter-related characteristics of the participants relative to predisposing factors. In addition to demographic characteristics reported in the methods section, other characteristics of the participants reflect that they were unlike the traditional, mainstream graduate students who attend elite private colleges. Rather, some were single parents, some graduated from for-profit proprietary colleges, some earned a bachelor's degree in as few as two or three years, while most graduated in five to eight years; one person reporting graduating after 13 years. Some participants have been out of school for as many as 10 years and had mid-career level jobs; a majority of the more recent graduates who are employed on a full time basis are working in entry level administrative jobs. Participants reported that they were pursuing a master's degree because of career and economic aspirations.

They believe that a good education will never decay and that higher education is the best method through which to acquire the skills and competencies necessary to climb the career ladder in American Society. In fact, they emphasized that education is a great equalizer and aids in establishing an entrée to a better quality of life. Some participants pointed out that they had colleagues, friends, and relatives who graduated from our program and who have since been promoted to higher level positions and/or took advantage of new opportunities with better compensation. For example, one female said that "I decided to enroll in this program because many of my colleagues graduated from here and are in leadership positions in the [Health Care industry in which] I work. A second female added "I came to the program because my best friend graduated from the program and has since been promoted to a higher level position." Others stated that they had relatives who worked for the university, who coached them on ways to navigate the system. Speaking to this point, a female participant stated that "I was actually encouraged to enroll in this program by my dad, who graduated from here; [therefore], he was influential in my coming here." All participants were confident that they too will enjoy similar positive experiences that will bring them prestige. Unlike their fellow Caucasians, higher education for persons of color is one of very few tools for obtaining higher salaries and the ability to improve their standards of living in more affluent neighborhoods with better schools for their children.

The participants expressed interest in developing careers in public and nonprofit organizations, including healthcare, because they believe that the career opportunities and upward mobility are greater since they perceive that equal opportunity employment policies are better enforced in those types of organizations compared to others.

Enabling factors include financial and organizational characteristics that can facilitate or impede a person's aspiration to pursue a master's degree. Such factors include individual/family—financial means and know-how to access [graduate programs], income, [financial aid] extent and quality of social relationships. Community—access to transportation; location of institution; class hours; outreach; education and program choices (Andersen, 1995). The analyzed data reveal that there are several reasons why participants chose to attend this program. We highlight four enabling factors reflected in the discussions: 1) recruitment ads, the program's reputation/and accreditation status; 2) GRE/GMAT scores not required; 3) financial resources; and 4) convenience with respect to location and time of course offerings. These reasons will be further explained and supported by direct quotes from participants.

First, participants are fascinated by the advertising slogans posted on buses and in subway cars inviting students to challenge themselves by pursuing their education at our university. Together with the university's motto access and excellence the fact that the program is accredited, has a good reputation, and has been recommended by friends and family influence participants' confidence that they could attend this university to further their education with good results. A female participant stated that "I decided to come to this program because when I searched the internet, this program was listed as being accredited." Two other females shared these sentiments; one commented "I came here because I heard a lot of positive reviews about this program." In addition, the other added "I heard that accredited programs are recognized nationally and internationally."

Second, our program recommends but does not require standardized tests scores for admission. Participants stated that they believe they have multiple options to enroll in competing master's degree program in neighboring public institutions with less graduate credit requirements at a fraction of the tuition. However, those institutions require standardized test scores, which they felt was unattainable. A male participant said that "I have finished my undergraduate degree over 10 years ago; there is no way that I would even attempt to take the GRE in order to pursue a master's degree." Other participants resoundingly echoed this sentiment, which the following statement fittingly summarizes: "[We] would rather take out loans to pay a higher tuition than to take the GRE or the GMAT to enter graduate schools."

Third, participants are not from affluent families, are not independently well-off, and have no current financial means of paying tuition. Some preferred private colleges, some of which are more expensive than ours; others have to rely on available loans to which they have access through the university. One female participant indicated that her mother works at the university stating that:

> My choice in a program had to do with a financial commitment, I couldn't afford to go to some of the private schools with similar accredited programs that I wanted to attend, so I had to stay here and go where I didn't have to pay.

Another female student went on to add: "The decision to come here for my undergrad was because my parents worked here, and it was [financially feasible]. I applied to other universities and [was accepted, but this was the best way [financially]". Two students who spent time in the military stated that, at our university, they have access to an attractive veterans' compensation packet, without which they could/would not have pursued a master's degree.

Fourth, our convenient location is accessible through various forms of public transportation. In addition, all classes are offered during the evening hours and on Saturdays, which is quite suitable. According to some participants, given competing responsibilities, commitments and time constraints, convenience is an invaluable commodity. Participants also stated that the time allotment required for attending school and for doing assignments is rather extensive; hence, they were not willing to invest extra time for traveling back and forth to classes. Further, they considered other aspects of the program. To this end, one female student said that:

> I decided on this program, one for convenience—it's not too far from my job; and, two, I heard a lot about the program. I actually came and sat in on one of the classes before applying to the program and I really liked the student and teacher interactions.

Other students also shared these opinions and affirmed this by the following statements:

> I decided to come to this program because of the convenience; it is close to where I am.…I received my undergrad degree at this university; so I decided to continue with my master's here, because it is convenient for me.…I like the fact that the classes are offered during the evenings and on Saturdays so that I can continue to work while I go to school.

Some participants, specifically recent immigrants spoke very little. When pressed for comments, one U.S.-born student of immigrant ancestry commented on behalf of recent immigrant students suggesting that in the formal classroom setting, it is difficult to determine what is appropriate behavior i.e. what is polite! What are the boundaries for students!

Need Factors: For our study, we refer to these as Goals, representing the most proximate desire for wanting a master's degree. According to the Andersen's (1995) model, there are two types of needs: 1) Perceived need, which explains the person's reasons for pursuing his/her goal and willingness to devote time and effort to successfully complete the degree requirements; 2) Evaluated need is related to the faculty and the institution's belief in the students and their willingness to apply social justice and cultural competence to facilitate students' success (Andersen, 1995). As such, need factors tend to induce types of behavior that are supportive of meeting the desired goals?

Furthermore, the analyzed data reveal some of the driving forces behind participants' return to school and remaining in the program. With respect to perceived needs, participants felt that in order to achieve their existing greatest needs (analogous to Maslow's self-actualization need), they were willing to take on the fearful challenges. Some participants stated that they have learned from their predecessors and through their own personal experience that our program is student-centered and that our teachers are dedicated to ensuring successful learning outcomes that foster the students' educational well-being. One male participant put it this way:

> There are two types of learning that I really, really love; I like when the professors bring in outside scenarios into the classroom setting. It builds on our knowledge and reminds us of familiar workplace scenarios…I don't really like straight textbook learning. I also enjoy the use of the Electronic Hallways. When I'm writing for [these professors] I'm writing not only from a textbook knowledge[but] beyond, and to me it is very fruitful [because it informs my writing] it involves a broader learning process for students to follow.

All students are satisfied with skills-building workshops, particularly the writing workshop—offered to all entering students in fall and spring semesters—(Lyons & Elmedni 2015) because since joining the program their writing skills have improved. In fact, some students asserted that their writing skills were inadequate because of the nature of their undergraduate degree; they think that they would benefit by additional time spent in such workshops as well as others. Two female students stated that:

> Coming from undergrad (which was eight years ago) to this graduate program not really knowing what writing quality the professors expected…I [feel as if I] am learning to write for the first time all over again; I have had to go to the writing center for tutoring sessions.

> It has been almost ten years since I actually picked up a book with some substance [that requires me] to give…some thought to [the content of] what I was reading. So wrapping my brain around [the readings] became a challenge at first. The volume of readings also compounded the writing [challenges]…For me these were the most difficult parts.

Students who completed their bachelor's degree overseas felt challenged by the program's requirements. In essence, the participants are saying that they were academically underprepared for some aspects of graduate school and that they appreciate the help that they have received, even though some of them were reluctant when they were invited to participate in the writing workshops. In addition to writing skills, many underprepared participants are happy that they are allowed to discuss their views on a variety of issues presented in class. They believe that they are beginning to develop their own voices without being judged. Some courses require regular oral presentations, which some participants detest; but with coaching, mentoring and practicing a considerable amount of trepidation has disappeared. One female participant attested to this point by stating that: "I completed my B.A. in accounting in my country; therefore, I did not have to do too much writing and public speaking (…) this program has forced me to engage in these activities, which have enhanced my current job skills."

Another male student asked: "Is it at all possible that the writing workshop could be expanded? Other skill-builders would be appreciated as well. Yet, other participants echoed "[We] hope that the program will consider our colleague's request since [we] sometimes feel that we lack some skills-sets."

With respect to evaluated needs, some participants stated that they found the expectations of a few professors very demanding. Such professors expected them to read the text before coming to class and to complete tough assignments. Participants said that they were paying tuition and expected to be spoon-fed. One female participant put it this way:

> I had a professor whose approach basically was, 'I'm not going to stand up here and regurgitate the text. I expect you read the text and show that you understand the contents of the lesson. At first, I was reflecting…What do you mean you're not going to teach me? I'm paying all this money to come here.

However, it became very clear that such teachers' grading policies were based on considerable student effort, time management, and excellent quality work. The students stated that they respected such teachers and stepped up to the plate for their own self-improvement. The participants appreciated the tough-love approach and have learned from such experiences. Speaking to time management, one student commented: "the hardest thing for me was [completing] regular assignments, turning them in on time… I had to reschedule everything and try to fit them in." Another student confessed that:

> it's helpful to do the reading [before class], but I also think that at times when the reading is assigned late, I read it, but I don't read the whole thing, because I'm just trying to get it done for class. I don't want to admit that, but it happens, especially when I am given three journal articles to read for class by the next class [one week later]. So I may read one article, and skim through the others.

Some participants also expressed satisfaction and that they are able to establish reciprocal relationships with their peers, by sharing and developing skills where some are more proficient than others are. This type of peer-support system had facilitated camaraderie and confidence. Team work was a little more challenging. Students also struggle with behavioral adjustments that are necessary to successfully complete a graduate degree. One specific area that challenges non-traditional students is team work. As one student suggested:

> Working in teams is a challenge…. I guess you just have to mesh well because we can meet or miss deadlines; but I think that it is very hard to develop a chemistry in two or three weeks with a group of students with whom you are barely acquainted. Most times, you don't have a choice in which your team members are, so that is a bit daunting too.

Another participant added:

> You have to push yourself to meet the challenges! At one point at first, I felt that it was going to be impossible for me to accomplish certain things. However, as I really took a moment, and sat back with a clear mind and not an overwhelmed self, and just looked at things that were in front of me, [I thought] what am I doing? What am I really doing? I'm going to try to balance everything in life. I really looked at my professors' style of teaching which was actually great for me, and worked well with me, and I do appreciate and like some of my professors.

Participants indicated that responsibility was a major factor for them in realizing the need to face the challenges of the program. Most of the participants in the study have since graduated, and some have already changed jobs; the few participants remaining in the program are on track to graduate very soon. So far, we have provided an explanation of the factors described in Andersen's (1995) service utilization model, provided quotes relative to our findings as they relate to predisposing, enabling and need factors. In the following section, we turn to the larger implications of these finding.

5. Discussions

The purpose of this study was to explore some reasons why students of color are generally not fully represented in graduate programs and to ascertain what factors facilitate or impede the existing students' ability to graduate. We targeted immigrant students of color, since they represent the majority of our student body, some of whom completed their K-12 education in the U.S. Indeed, the goal of this publication is to report what graduate programs can do differently to promote social equity based on what we learned from participants in our program.

However, some ethical issues arose during our analysis of the transcripts, which deserve attention before we conclude. In attempting to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity, we promised participants that we would not include student concerns that included personal examples directed at specific professors and the courses that they teach. Since our intentions are to gain knowledge to improve our program, and participants felt the issues were important enough to rise during the focus group sessions, we considered all complaints seriously. Several complaints reported were supported by multiple participants; hence, we did not have to disguise or whitewash the issues in our report to the program.

In addition to the afore-mentioned ethical issues, we identified six limitations: 1) only a few topics were addressed; a wider range of topics might have yielded responses that are more varied. 2) Due to time constraints and multiple conflicting commitments, we had only 23 participants. A larger number of participants might have yielded additional concerns. 3) Some very reserved participants might have been hesitant to share their views openly and/or might have been concerned about preserving confidentiality and anonymity. 4) Some participants might have been fearful of possible repercussions concerning any criticisms they wanted to express about the program. 5) The study participants expressed views and experiences that might have been different from their Caucasian and Asian immigrant peers. 6) The presence of the P.I. might have inhibited the responses of some of the respondents although she was unfamiliar with a majority of them.

Notwithstanding the ethical concern and limitations, from the analyzed data, we discovered that there were five major factors that influenced the participants in deciding whether the program was best suited to help them obtain their educational goals. First, the participants indicated that the program was highly recommended from members of their immediate communities. Second, participants were influenced by the very good reputation of the program along with its current accreditation status. Third, students of color chose this program because of the convenient location. Fourth, accommodating arrangements such as the time during which courses are offered. Fifth, access to financial means to pay for tuition.

Furthermore, a common theme identified among some students of color pertains to personal predisposing factors, which may influence the likelihood of a person pursuing a higher education. For some immigrant students of color, inside and outside of our program, there were major cultural adaptations to which they had to conform in order to be successful in the U.S. educational system. According to Rumano (2009), many immigrant students have a difficult time transitioning to study practices in the U.S. because they have "been raised in a different social, cultural, and school system" (p. 66). Rumano (2009) went on to add that "cultural differences place huge detours on the academic paths of the new students who struggle with identity crises and [sometimes] low self-esteem" (p. 66).

While conducting this study, we noticed that research in this area focused on the learning barriers faced by immigrant students in general, not students of color in particular. Most of these studies concluded that cultural assumptions and language barriers are the most important factors facing immigrant students regardless of their ethnicity, race, or country of origin (Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014; Eunyoung & Diaz, 2013; Ren & Hagedorn, 2012). As such, this study, despite its small sample, can still help in identifying learning barriers those immigrant students of color encounter; particularly because immigrant students of color seemed to be entering a racially demarcated socio cultural landscape. In determining the barriers facing immigrant students of color, this study identifies areas where both students and teachers can focus on to ensure that success.

Many of the barriers to learning that study participants encountered pertained to the outside factors influencing their lives. Eunyoung and Diaz (2013) contended that many barriers affect immigrant students' ability to learn and be successful while studying in U.S. colleges, including "race and ethnicity, cultural values…socioeconomic status, country of origin, and length of residence in the United States" (p. 47). Earlier studies on this subject suggested that colleges should create programs to help immigrant students improve their communication skills. Tuition is also a major barrier that immigrant students face. Most new immigrant students are not eligible for grants or loans, which force them to find a way to finance their educations. Financing one's education is a barrier for many immigrant students of color and varies according to one's immigration status. Legal immigrants are able to receive in-state tuition and if they are of a low socioeconomic status can receive federal funding. However, students who are undocumented or waiting for a visa cannot receive in-state tuition or federal funding. Such concerns were not raised in our sessions. We speculate that this is because of the sensitive nature of the topic.

Moreover, some participants came to terms with the realization that they were not as prepared at the undergraduate level as they ought to have been. Because students are not permitted to graduate from the graduate program with a G.P.A. less than 3.0, some of them had to pull on their boot straps and build on their inner strength in order to maintain the minimum required G.P.A. This point speaks to the need factor, mainly perceived needs. The desire to succeed in the program and earn a master's degree became intrinsic driving force for students to capitalize on their strength while putting in the needed efforts. In doing so, they developed new skills-sets including time-management, team work, critical thinking, good study habits, and good written and oral communication skills.

Yet, the challenge that we are left to deal with is what graduate programs, including ours, can do differently to ameliorate barriers to learning? This is especially true because efforts to address barriers to learning can be useful in promoting racial equity? A major intervention is tailoring the teaching style to meet the needs of students of color. Broadly, an effective teaching approach has to be based on cultural competency. In addition, another form of intervention can be remedial initiatives, writing skills. The status of diversity in graduate programs is likely to exacerbate even further in the current sociopolitical environment. Thus, for those who are concerned with racial equity in higher education in general and postgraduate programs in particular, they ought to pay deep attention to barriers to learning and teaching before designing any intervention.

6. Conclusion

Similar to recommendations provided by Lin and Scherz (2014), we concur that colleges seeking to meet the needs of immigrant students can do more than mandating requirements for success. One approach to resolving the language barrier is for teachers to become more aware and change the way in which information is provided; that could mean using multiple ways of explaining facts and conveying information. Another point is that teachers include other options of teaching, such as technology, diversify readings and assignments. The most salient point is that educators need to become aware of the students' culture and modify teaching methods to meet both the cultural and educational needs of students. This study can only serve to further advance our graduate program. Nonetheless, with the steady increase of immigrant students entering colleges and universities in the U.S., accommodating to the needs of immigrant students of color will only produce more effective workforce in the areas of the students' interests. This is particularly useful for programs that pool from large metropolitan communities of immigrant people of color. It could be useful to advocate for racial equity and policy directions in higher education

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