

The Black MSW Experience with Cross Campus Comparison

By Karon Hicks, Rose Montgomery, Zoe Jaminson, Jessica Borelli, & Mia Ocean

West Chester University (WCU) is a comprehensive, public institution and a leader within the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE). WCU has earned the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification endorsement and hosts multiple locations to provide access to high-quality, educational opportunities in southeastern Pennsylvania. Multi-site universities face additional complexities and require thoughtful planning to provide support and access to services for all students (Groenwald, 2018). WCU's master's in social work (MSW) program is one of its largest programs at its Philadelphia location and has increased enrollment of Black students at WCU. Across its locations, WCU endorses diversity and inclusion in its mission, values, vision, and goals. Unfortunately, research continues to document an educational gap between Black and White students, and Black students perceive higher education professionals as committed to inclusion in words alone without adequate policy or structural change (Jones & Reddick, 2017; Martin, Spenner, & Mustillo, 2016).

Research Questions

To investigate WCU's success in creating a diverse and inclusive learning environment, we investigated the following research questions:

- What are Black graduate social work students' perceptions of racism and inclusion within their institution?
- What are the differences in Black graduate social work students' experiences at a suburban, main campus and an urban, satellite location?
- What are implications for policy and practice at the research site and beyond?

Methods

To answer our research questions, we formed a research team consisting of one faculty member, two MSW alumni, and two current MSW students (alumni as of May 2020). We followed a participatory action research assistantship program methodology (Ocean, Tigertail, Keller, & Woods, 2018) and recruited participants during the 2018-2019 academic year. We interviewed 18 current students and recent alumni from the MSW program who identified as Black. Interviews were conducted in-person, on the phone, or via Zoom and each lasted approximately 60 minutes. We audio recorded the interviews using a digital voice recorder and subsequently transcribed the audio files removing any identifying information. We developed a codebook guided by Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995) and employed Dedoose software to code the data. Lastly, we worked as a team to conduct a thematic analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and develop these materials.

Recommendations

Due to the expansion of the Philadelphia campus, more Black students are enrolling at WCU. As WCU's student population begins to shift, WCU needs to review their policies and practices to ensure they are serving their student populations effectively and equitably. WCU should take proactive steps to become educated about Black student experiences and to investigate how actions and policies can more effectively ameliorate social inequities.

Conclusion

Across America, colleges and universities have appropriated the language of diversity as a way of signaling their commitment to faculty and students of color. Efforts to enhance inclusion and diversity are certain to fail unless there is a clear and well informed institutional plan to incorporate effective strategies into research, teaching, and service. We need to welcome all stakeholders to become active participants in supporting change.

Strengths	Needs	Recommendations
<p>The satellite campus in Philadelphia is a great addition to WCU's movement towards diversity and inclusion.</p>	<p>Students do not have access to equitable resources across campuses.</p> <p>It could appear that WCU is taking money from the predominantly Black inner-city community and distributing it to predominantly White suburban students and locations.</p>	<p>Create cohesion between campuses by providing equitable activities, resources (e.g. food pantry), and access to funding (e.g. HR, GA, work study) based on student-indicated needs.</p> <p>Partner with the Philadelphia community and local organizations to fulfill Carnegie Community Engagement Classification at all WCU sites.</p>
<p>WCU was identified as a supportive environment where students felt heard, validated, and understood by White professors.</p>	<p>Faculty do not reflect the diversity of students and do not consistently enhance the diversity of the WCU community.</p>	<p>Hire racially diverse faculty</p> <p>Hire faculty that represent diversity in terms of sexual identity, gender, experience, etc.</p>
<p>WCU is recruiting more students of color and forward-thinking students.</p>	<p>The focus is on superficial and numeric change (e.g. tracking student demographics, requesting feedback but not adjusting practice).</p> <p>At times, White students, employees and community members are committing implicit and explicit acts of prejudice/racism against Black students.</p>	<p>Create a racially conscious culture by continuing to admit diverse students.</p> <p>Assess all prospective students and employees on how they handle diversity and inclusion so WCU can admit the best forward-thinking candidates.</p> <p>Value and adequately fund training opportunities on how to facilitate safe and productive classroom, campus, and community spaces.</p> <p>Create mechanisms to hold the WCU community accountable for combating systemic racism.</p>
<p>Students feel that WCU is making small steps to address issues of inclusion/diversity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Office for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Population specific centers and policies Activity groups, honor societies, National Pan-Hellenic Council, and Kente Ceremony 	<p>Practice is reactive rather than proactive.</p>	<p>Be aware and meet the needs of Black and post-traditional students.</p> <p>Initiate supportive programming to meet the needs of Black and post-traditional students.</p>
<p>WCU offers coursework that provides students with an overview of diverse intersections (e.g. SWG 511 The Dialectic of Oppression and Liberation).</p>	<p>Coursework needs to be expanded to explore deeper themes of systemic racism and to advance diversity and inclusion practices in higher-education.</p>	<p>Evaluate and enrich coursework to provide inexperienced (White) students with opportunities to challenge their unproductive thinking and more meaningfully explore race relations.</p> <p>Visibly include student voices and perspectives in curriculum development, diversity practices, and faculty hiring on both campuses.</p>

Participatory Action Research: Exploring Black Graduate Student Experiences across WCU Campuses

West Chester University

Contributors: Karon Hicks, MSW

Rose Montgomery, MSW

Zoe Jamison, MSW

Jessica Borelli, MSW

Mia Ocean, MSW, Ph.D.

Overview of Literature

- ◆ National research documents an educational/opportunity gap between Black and White students in U.S. higher education (Martin, Spenner, & Mustillo, 2016).
- ◆ Further, Black postsecondary students perceive higher education professionals as verbally committed to diversity and inclusion, yet they do not perceive the professionals as initiating structural or policy changes towards their principles (Jones & Reddick, 2017).
- ◆ Multi-site universities face additional complexities and require thoughtful planning to provide support and access to services for all students (Groenwald, 2018).
- ◆ Social work, a profession that purports to be anti-racist, continues to reinforce and reproduce racial inequities within their educational programs as well (Banks, Hopps, & Briggs, 2018; Bowie, Hall, & Johnson, 2011).

Research Questions

- ◆ Our research specifically investigated the following research questions:
 - ◆ What are Black graduate social work students' perceptions of racism and inclusion within their institution?
 - ◆ What are the differences in Black graduate social work students' experiences at a suburban, main campus and an urban, satellite location?

Methods

◆ Site:

- ◆ WCU hosts a graduate social work program at their suburban and urban campuses
- ◆ Predominantly white institution (PWI) overall and a historically white institution
 - ◆ White majority student body at their suburban, main campus
 - ◆ Black majority student body at their urban, satellite campus

◆ Team:

- ◆ Graduate social work students, alumni, and faculty conducted a participatory (action) research study (Ocean et al., 2018)
- ◆ Students and alumni were financially compensated for their work

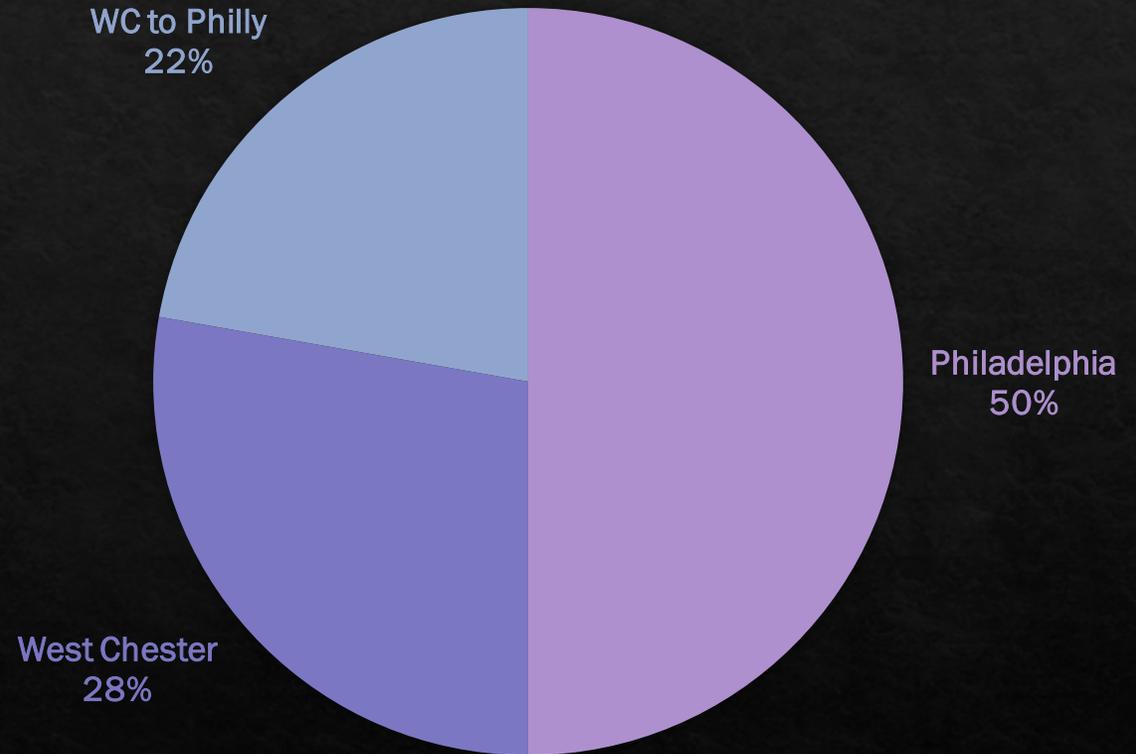
◆ Interviews

- ◆ Conducted during Fall 2018-Spring 2019
- ◆ Semi-structured interview guide
- ◆ In-person or virtual
- ◆ Audio recorded
- ◆ Transcribed, verified, and de-identified

Participants

- ◇ 18 participants were interviewed.
- ◇ Current students or alumni within the past 3 years

% OF STUDENTS REPRESENTED FROM EACH CAMPUS



Analysis & Limitations

◇ Analysis

- ◇ Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw et al., 1995) and empowerment theory (Gutiérrez & Lewis 1999) guided codebook and analysis
- ◇ Conducted team thematic analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
 - ◇ Deconstructed data (coding)
 - ◇ Dedoose software to code
 - ◇ Intercoder reliability
 - ◇ Created tables, indexes, categories, subcategories (Lichtman, 2010; Saldaña, 2013)
 - ◇ Reconstructed data (theming)

◇ Limitations

- ◇ Likely those willing to participate had different experiences than those not willing to participate

Findings

Strengths & Opportunities for Growth

The Philadelphia satellite campus was a great addition to WCU's movement towards diversity and inclusion.

However, cohesion needs to be created between campuses by providing equitable activities, resources, and access based on student and community indicated needs.

- ◇ Dawn: So, I think it's pretty- at least on [satellite campus] - 'cause were also like I said, in an inner-city. So, it would be- because, if it wasn't for that I think there'd be not that many Black people in the program, and it would be dominated by predominately White.
- ◇ Samantha: Well I feel like we need to have a Starbucks (laughs). We got a Dunkin Donuts, we need to have that. And I feel like our library is not as- even though that's main campus, but at least have an equivalent of what the library is offered over there. 'Cause that was kinda the reasons why I kept going to main campus, it would be like, "Oh instead of me waitin' for this book, that [campus administrator] said that's gonna come over, let me just drive up there randomly (laughs) and go to the campus. And oh, there's a Starbucks here, cool beans! Wait, students are in the actual library, what?! When this start happening?"
- ◇ No access to Human Resources for students at Philadelphia campus
- ◇ Carnegie Community Engagement Classification

WCU was identified as a supportive environment where Black students felt heard, validated, and understood by White professors.

WCU should continue to hire diverse faculty in terms of race, sexual identity, gender and experience.

- ◆ Lola: I would tell them that it is primarily white, but I've felt comfortable and even nurtured, at times, by my professors.
- ◆ Camille: (thinking)... Um the staff could definitely like I said, could be more diverse um, but what I will- will say for my professors that I had that weren't of color, um there was a level of awareness... um in how they managed the class and how they handled like some of those topics around race. So I definitely think that many of them had like that sensitivity um and understanding um when they were teaching lessons um- um so that felt good
- ◆ Darrell: ...I just think about not enough diversity with the teachers it's like all my teachers, all my professors are kinda the same (voice goes up). Like not saying as in like White but like they all have the same similar, they're not unique.
- ◆ Nicole: ...make sure they get qualified applicants who kind of um mirror the student population.

WCU is recruiting more students of color and forward-thinking students.

WCU should create awareness and provide training on how to facilitate safe and productive classroom, campus, and community spaces.

- ◇ Jay: ...I think there was times when students had said racially charged things um...I remember one time...we were in a class and they were showing, "When the Levees Broke," ...I remember students saying...something about you know those people using that term, "those people," and I was the only...Black person in the class, um that happens a lot on main campus, but I remember me saying, "you cannot use those people-these people," and I knew that...he wasn't saying that intentionally or something but I was trying to explain to him...how that could be triggering.
- ◇ Amanda: I think there was something with one of the like diversity centers or something where like they changed like the name...a staff member made um a comment...I think it might have been like something about like Latinos or something and she might have said like, "What are they gonna call it now?!? Like the something for the spics" or something like that...
- ◇ Carmen: I know one of my classmates...he had talked to us about how he had gotten a slice of pizza, like really close to campus at one of the pizza places and how like cops had come up to him and they were like, "Oh what are you doing here?" ...and he was just in his car like literally eating pizza and he had this weird reaction. When I heard that, I immediately kind of didn't feel safe...And that doesn't have anything to do with [state university], but it just kind of shows like the climate around there...They asked whose car was it. Like it's just- yeah, it's just really disappointing and so it's scary.

Students feel that WCU is making small steps to address issues of inclusion/diversity.

WCU should also be aware of the needs of Black and post-traditional students incorporating their perspectives into proactive decision making.

- ◆ Cole: ...well this study is a start, but just understanding you know the African American students, um then the adult students from a different perspective...
- ◆ Amber: ...because if we don't ask the question, we create a single story. So instead of creating single stories about people, just ask.
- ◆ [MSW 2019 Cohort Scholarship](#)

WCU offers coursework that provides students with an overview of diverse intersections (e.g. SWG 511 The Dialectic of Oppression and Liberation).

WCU evaluate and enrich coursework to provide inexperienced students with opportunities to challenge their unproductive thinking and more meaningfully explore race relations.

- ◇ Tasha: Increasing cultural competency. And not so much- I'm not gonna speak on MSW because MSW do provide because we work with diverse clientele um we wanna have those courses that are cultural competency, but we're just one demographic. What about as a whole? So English department, they definitely should because you writing English don't mean you shouldn't know about cultural competency 'cause you literally probably gonna write about it, or communications you gonna speak about it. So I feel like cultural competency should not just been one MSW program. It should be for all.

Final Thoughts

Successes, Barriers, & Next Steps

◆ Successes

- ◆ Financial support through the Provost Research Grant – thank you Dr. Bennett!
- ◆ Able to engage students and alumni as participants and researchers

◆ Barriers

- ◆ Accessing the awarded financial support
- ◆ COVID-19
- ◆ Have not been able to present to the WCU President's Cabinet yet

◆ Next steps

- ◆ Per participatory action research – working on implementing institutional change
- ◆ Other departments could replicate this study to see if the results extend beyond graduate social work
 - ◆ Hire Karon and others from our team as research consultants to assist with your project

Conclusions

- ◆ Urban satellite sites can increase Black student enrollment and positive educational experiences
- ◆ Without adequate strategic planning, inequities will remain
- ◆ White students, employees and community members can co-create inclusive and welcoming educational environments, but they can also harm Black students through implicit and explicit acts of racism
- ◆ PWIs need to continue to increase Black student enrollment, hire more Black and diverse employees, and cultivate a culture where inclusion and expansion are valued

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Thank you!

Questions & Comments