

# **A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Black Students Attending a Canadian University**

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*In-depth interviews were conducted with Black students attending a Canadian university. This study considered Canadian Black students' experiences and comparisons were made with African American students' experiences on predominantly white campuses in the United States. Common themes provide the impetus for further research and recommendations to Canadian universities.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

As with most public colleges and universities in the United States, Canadian higher education institutions now are considering how shifting societal demographics will change the racial and ethnic composition of students on campuses. The purpose of this study was to develop information about how Black students viewed their experiences in predominantly White Canadian higher education institutions in order to expand the knowledge base pertaining to students of color in Canada. The results and recommendations from this study may prompt many other questions about Canadian campuses, the experiences of Black students, as well as other students of color, and how to manage anticipated changes in college student demographics. Finally, by describing the perceptions of some Black Canadian students, guidance will be offered on the applicability in Canada of the substantial research and programming experience based upon serving students of color in colleges and universities in the United States.

## **RACIAL DIVERSITY IN CANADA**

The population of Canada has been changing in ways very similar to that of the United States. By the year 2001, the projected percentage of people of color (persons who trace their origins to Africa or the Middle East, Asia or the Pacific, or Central or South America) in major Canadian cities will be anywhere from 11-45% (Samuel, 1992). Black Canadian citizens or permanent residents were 19% of all people of color in 1986 and increased to 22% by 1996. The prediction is that Canadian people of color will increase 3.5 times from 1986 to 2001, or from 6.3% of the population in 1986 to 17.7 % in 2001. By comparison, in 2001, between 23 and 28% of the United States will be people of color, and in California, people of color will make up 43 to 60% of the population (Bouvier & Davis, as cited in Samuel, 1992).

At the time of this study, there was little, if any, record of the experiences of students of color on Canadian college and university campuses. In fact, there is not even a record of the numbers of students of different ethnic backgrounds participating in higher education in Canada. "The extent to which Canadian universities have or have not reflected the growth of racialized social groups proportionate to the population as a whole is completely unknown" (Richer and Wier, 1995). It is extremely difficult then, to gather and analyze statistical information about Black students attending institutions of higher education in Canada including the number of applicants, admissions, and graduation rates, along with any assessment of their experiences while they attend college.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

In the United States, studies have shown that 70% of all Black students who enroll in four-year colleges drop out at some point, as compared to 45% of White students (Steele, 1992). This is one example from a large body of research showing that Black students experience college differently than White students. Fleming's (1985) work,

*Blacks in College*, outlined the major issues in the education of Black students as a social adjustment "crisis," racial mistrust, isolation, and financial difficulties. Fleming was concerned with both the intellectual and social lives of individual Black students, though she determined that the two were inseparable.

The stress of racial tension and inadequate social lives borne by Black students in White schools generates feelings of alienation that often lead to serious adjustment problems. These stresses lead to psychological withdrawal that impairs academic functioning. The factors that provide a positive climate at predominantly Black colleges are largely absent or unavailable to Black students in White schools. Consequently, Black students perform below ability levels. (Fleming, 1985, p. 3)

Allen, Epps, and Haniff (1991) determined that Black students had higher attrition rates, weaker educational backgrounds, less satisfactory relationships with faculty, lower grade point averages, and lower enrollments in post-graduate programs. These factors were attributed to the fact that "Black students experience considerable difficulty making adjustments to an environment which is culturally different, academically demanding, and socially alienating" (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991, p. 96).

In *Racism in American Education*, Sedlacek and Brooks (1976) outlined how institutional racism manifests itself in higher education, and described student characteristics that were determined to be helpful in overcoming these institutional barriers. These six "non-cognitive variables," which assist students in overcoming barriers and racism in the institution include: having a positive self-concept, the ability to deal with racism, a recognition of personal strengths and weaknesses, long range goal development, a strong support system, and previous leadership and/or community involvement experiences (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976; Sedlacek, 1987).

Many published studies exist on the topic of African American students at predominantly White institutions in the United States (Allen, 1985 and 1992; Kraft, 1991; Love, 1993; and Nottingham, Rosen, & Parks, 1992). In Kraft's qualitative study, Black students at predominantly White institutions were interviewed to report on how students perceived their academic experience. Kraft found "that students attributed their academic success or failure to a combination of two or more factors" (Kraft, 1991, p. 431). Factors included discipline (organized effort), ability, ambition, effort (hard work), high school preparation, interest, self-confidence, supportive faculty, support of fellow students and parents, and not being intimidated by White faculty and students. Kraft pinpointed interaction with faculty, advisement, and interaction with White students as troublesome issues for Black students. Nottingham, Rosen, and Parks' (1992) study determined that most Black students attending predominantly White institutions experience more difficulty adjusting academically and socially to campus life than White students. Another study presented a list of factors that seem to predict or improve academic success for students of color. According to Love (1993), the factors that contribute to attrition include White racism, lack of institutional leadership by students and/or faculty of color, lack of social integration, finances, cultural dissonance, and environmental incongruence. Love concluded, "the research has consistently shown that the experience of Black students in White institutions is substantively and qualitatively different than the experience of White students in White institutions" (1993, p. 34).

Research also has shown that the expectations, as well as the experiences of American students of color vary (Malaney & Shively, 1995). Malaney and Shively measured the difference between students' initial expectations upon entering college, and subsequent perceptions after one academic year. This study showed a significant decrease for Black students in feeling like they belonged to the community (-11.3%) and feeling like the institution was making an effort to make them feel comfortable (-12.7%). The decrease was more significant for Black students than for Asian, White, or Latino students. African-American students also had the largest increase (+24%) in participation in extracurricular activities (Malaney & Shively, 1995, p. 13).

Although several researchers have investigated the Black college student experience in the United States, very few studies in Canada have focused on institutions and issues related to students of color. One study was conducted to determine differences in retention based on race at a large public institution in Toronto, Ontario. Few differences were found in the retention rates of students of diverse racial backgrounds (Grayson, 1995). While the study did support the hypothesis that first year students of different races experience college differently, the results of Grayson's study did "not support the conclusion that the experiences of non-European origin are uniform and necessarily negative, while those of European background are positive" (1995, p. 2).

## METHODOLOGY

The use of qualitative research has become widely used in student affairs to understand the meaning students attribute to their experiences. In-depth interviewing, or "a conversation with a purpose" was the methodology utilized for this study. The fundamental idea of qualitative research is that the participant's perspective on the phenomenon should unfold as the participant views it and not as viewed by the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

### Procedure

Approval was requested and granted from the Human Subjects Committee at Colorado State University. The Office of Research at the host university gave the required approval for contacting students on the campus. Students were contacted by placing several advertisements in the campus newspaper requesting volunteer participants to contact the researcher at an email address or by telephone. Because initial response was very low, letters and advertisements soliciting volunteers for the study were targeted to several on-campus student clubs and organizations. University offices that had greater contact with Black students also were contacted. Clubs and student

organizations contacted included culturally or ethnically focused clubs, the women's center, the campus radio station, the student-run human rights office, and the main student governing office.

## **Participants**

A total of nine students were interviewed for this study (three men and six women). All of the participants were Canadian citizens. There was difficulty in finding a homogeneous group of students with similar ages or at similar points in the completion of their degree. Some of the participants were not born in Canada, but had lived in Canada for most of their lives, attended and completed high school in Canada, and were enrolled in or had recently completed bachelor's degree programs at the Canadian university in this study.

The participants ranged in age from 20 to 35. Seven of the participants were undergraduate students at the time of the study and two of the nine students just had recently completed their undergraduate degree. All participants were African Canadian, or Canadian of West Indian origin. For the most part, they had lived and attended high school in large cities in Canada, namely Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa, and one student was from the city of Guelph.

## **Setting**

The institution chosen for the study is a mid-sized, undergraduate and graduate degree granting university in southern Ontario. The institution has no records describing the number of Black students on campus; however, it is estimated that students of color comprise approximately 10% of the campus population.

Many students are involved in campus clubs, athletics, student government, or other extra-curricular activities. Student-driven initiatives exist to address the issue of race relations, or attempt to address the needs of students of color on the campus. Clubs and associations that are primarily identifiable by their ethnic or national affiliation are examples of informal initiatives to support students of color. A student-run and maintained "race relations" office assisted in the development of a race relations policy. A collective group of students operate a center particularly for students of color, which provides resources, support, and a "safe space" for non-White students. The main student governing body appoints and pays two student human rights officers who serve as advocates for students of color and who do programming around current issues. These are examples of significant involvement by students in the creation of a positive campus environment.

## **Instrument**

The researcher was a White female in her mid-twenties and an alumna of the university used in the study. In-depth individual interviews were conducted with each participant. Each interview was tape recorded, and lasted an average of one hour. Participants signed a consent form; names, places, and any other identifying information revealed in the interview were kept confidential in reporting results.

Five questions were designed by the researcher to allow students to share their experiences as university students. The questions were general, open-ended, and intentionally broad so as to allow students to describe their own feelings on important issues, rather than the researcher trying to focus the interview on particular topics or attempting to obtain certain kinds of responses from participants. The questions asked of all participants were:

- Can you describe your experience as a university student in general?

- In what ways has your experience been different as a student of color, than perhaps a White student on this campus?
- In what ways has your experience been negative or frustrating?
- Can you describe the most positive aspect of being a student of color on this campus?
- What kind of visible support, either formal or informal, have you experienced as a student?

Students were given the opportunity to ask the researcher questions in order to clarify their answers or to expand on their comments.

### **Data Analysis**

An inductive analysis of the data was conducted by first transcribing all nine interviews from tape. The data was organized and themes and categories of data were generated. Analysis of data was supported by descriptions (verbatim quotations provided by participants). Themes and categories then were compared to the literature on African American college students in the United States and explanations were developed by analyzing themes and descriptions.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The results of this research provided rich and descriptive information, which will be very useful for further research and consideration for staff and faculty on Canadian campuses. However, there are a few limitations that should be mentioned.

The impact of the researcher's race on the responses of participants is unknown. All participants seemed open and comfortable in the interview setting. However, one potential participant declined involvement in the study because of her uncertainty about the motives of the researcher. This poses an interesting situation for qualitative research and brings into question the ability of researchers to fully understand the perspectives of participants in a study and how participants may answer questions based on their perceptions of the researcher.

The second limitation is that nine students, six women and three men, were interviewed. It would be very difficult to make sweeping generalizations about Black college students in Canada with a small sample, however the purpose of qualitative research is not to generalize about a population. There was redundancy and themes that recurred in the responses from participants, which leads to the belief that interviewing more students would not produce any additional information. The door is left open for continued, repeated, and further studies.

## FINDINGS

Participants' responses to questions generated four overall themes. Respondents seemed to have had an overall positive college experience, they had maintained or developed a positive sense of self within the context of their own ethnic group, they recognized that the existence of a strong Black community was an important factor, and, they identified strongly with being a "new" or immigrant Canadian.

Although the respondents had experienced personal difficulties, identity crises, feelings of isolation, and encounters with racism, all but two seemed to have a general feeling of satisfaction with their college experience. Participants' experiences were positively affected by relationships with professors, involvement in a club or student organization, or living in a residence hall.

I can't really think of anything [negative]. I would say I have had it really good. I know my profs, there is a really nice interaction. It is what I imagined university life to be like.  
(participant two)

I don't regret this experience, it is great. I lived in residence for three years. I really enjoyed my experience in residence. (participant six)

It is a great university, I like the atmosphere, we help each other through our homework, there is always somebody there to help you. It is like a family, [you] live, work, do

homework, and eat together. (participant five)

Since participants were at different stages in the completion of their degrees, the intensity of how positively or negatively they viewed their university experience varied. Two participants seemed to have an indifferent or overall negative feeling towards their university experience. For one student, the feeling seemed to be centered around her disinterest with her major.

It is kind of weird, I didn't really want to be here, I still don't. I am in physical sciences, it is okay, I don't really know that much about it...Negative or frustrating? My marks, and the fact that I just don't want to be here. Should I be doing something else? But I don't know what, I would probably be playing the piano, but I know I can't do that 24 hours a day. (participant one)

Another student had some negative encounters with students, professors, and teaching assistants based on race.

In general, being a Black person on this campus at times is good and also a bad experience. In high school, I ended up being friends with mostly immigrants, I got along better with them than I did [White] Canadians. I thought university was going to be different. It was very difficult. (participant seven)

Throughout her interview, this respondent also remarked on the curriculum, how difficult it was, and how it did not relate to her own experience.

I don't know why in the educational system, they ignore a lot of things in this country, they just focus on Western culture. (participant seven)

During the course of their studies, all but one of the research participants had developed a positive sense of self, a concern for self-definition, questions about their relationships with White students, and perspectives about the importance of racial group

membership. Almost all of the participants spoke of the importance of being able to relate to other Black students as well as being able to define their own goals and values.

To sum up my ideas I would like to reiterate are the things that I believe in and the experiences that I have had are very different from the majority of Black females on this campus. I was cultured, but I was able to maintain my Black identity. I am still trying to fit in. I haven't completely yet. I look at the students who listen to rap and hip/hop, how they dress. Then corporate America, you have to dress conservatively, no braids and what not. If I don't then I am pretending to be something that I am not. I haven't evolved completely to the person that I want to become. (participant four)

The third major theme that emerged for some participants was the importance of a strong community of students of color. The participants' overall experiences were improved by the support network developed among and between other Black students and students of West Indian origin on the campus. The level of involvement and trust within this community varied. For those students who did not remark on the importance of a community of other Black students (three participants), perhaps their experience would be improved by increased participation in the Black community on campus.

I was a member of [the West Indian student club]. I could meet people from Trinidad, and we could chat in our native dialect, and I needed that. It was part of finding myself. Going back home in a way. I needed that balance. I needed to meet people who understand me and my culture. (participant three)

Our club has always been so active in the general community. People are shocked at how many Whites there are [in the West Indian club]. My experience has been great for that, but I am not sure what other students will tell you! (participant eight)

For two participants, the level of support from the Black student community diminished as they became more involved outside of that community.

A final theme which emerged was the recognition for many of the respondents that they were relatively "new" Canadians, meaning that they were not born in Canada or had not lived their whole lives in Canada. Participants could identify strongly with being an "immigrant," and their experiences could be compared to those of international students. Although all of the participants had lived in Canada for a number of years, and had attended both secondary school and university in Canada, their "newness" played itself out in different ways. One issue was the prevalence of students having an accent when they spoke. Participants remarked that this was something that made them "stand out" or feel apart from other students. Participants viewed this "difference" or "otherness" as both positive and negative.

I felt that I was separated because I was from a different culture. I spoke differently, they couldn't understand me. My accent was much stronger. I detested that. (participant nine)

How my accent draws people to my attention, and they come and speak to me, and even on campus, people smile at you, when people think you are from the Caribbean. They tend to want to get to know you and find out what it is like there. People are interested. (participant eight)

These reminders of their "home" culture made it difficult for students to feel that they were truly "Canadian." Students felt that it was not only the fact that they were Black that made them feel separate from the majority of students, but the fact that they had "missed out" on something by not having lived in Canada their whole life.

Sometimes I wonder if it is because I was not born here, if that is a factor. If I was born here things would be different, at least I would have something to talk about, you know the Blue Jay game or this and that. (participant seven)

One student who was born in Canada but had spent his childhood in the Caribbean and later moved back to Canada in adolescence described his perspective towards being a

Canadian:

I am Canadian, I was born here, but I still feel Caribbean. I don't feel Canadian, I am not Trinidadian [in terms of citizenship], but I would never say I am Canadian. I want to go back to Trinidad. (participant nine)

On the other hand, a participant who was a first generation Canadian (she was born and lived her whole life in Canada) remarked that there were differences between newer Canadians and Black Canadians who had lived in Canada for a generation or more.

For me personally, I would identify my experiences more with the White students than the Black students on this campus. I think that has a lot to do with how I grew up. I lived in a predominantly White neighborhood, I went to a predominantly White school. I was in "Girl Guides." I went to the ballet, to Europe. I feel like I have always been on the outside looking in because of the fact that I am also first generation Canadian. I joined the [West Indian Student Club], but the students were from the West Indies. They have been there, lived there or were born there. They have had experiences that I have never had. I am like 'what is a guava?!'. So I connected based on color, but not based on common experience. (participant four)

Another student who had lived her whole life in Canada remarked that there is a lot of ignorance around the issue of Canadians not having any idea of who fellow Canadians are, and how people automatically assume you were not born in Canada if you are a person of color.

I told [my physician] that I was working at a Jamaican vegetarian bakery. He said 'Oh, I didn't know you were Jamaican', I said I am not, and there was this look of confusion accompanied by a long pause. Finally, I said 'I am not vegetarian either'. There is always the assumption that you are from the Caribbean. People are always asking you what island you are from. They always look surprised when I say 'Montreal!'. (participant

two)

## DISCUSSION

For the participants in the study, just as with African American students in the United States, racism was part of their university experience. The relatively few numbers of other Black students on campus led to these students feeling some social isolation; the curriculum was not inclusive and professors often were distant; and, the presence of a small Black community was supportive as well as oppressive. While it is difficult to make generalizations about all Black students in Canada, what these nine students at one mid-sized institution, in one province experienced was not as socially or academically adverse as studies have indicated is true for African American students in the United States.

Speculation about why this might be is made even more difficult by the dearth of information about Black and other students of color in Canada. The nine study participants did give some suggestions for interesting future research. For instance, does the Canadian tradition of student involvement differ substantially from the social and cultural organizations, fraternities and sororities, and other opportunities for involvement prevalent on American campuses? In Canada, at least at the institution chosen for the study, there are very few if any formal, organized "support services" designed for or accessed by Black students. Because many changes to the campus environment or ways to assist students to cope are brought about primarily by the students themselves, perhaps the leadership development experienced and the sense of empowerment contributes to students addressing the adversities of the environment.

Another interesting direction for future discussion is to explore the importance of the immigrant status, even if self-bestowed. In the United States, recent immigration is offered as an explanation for the successes experienced by some students of color in higher education despite other significant disadvantages. It would be interesting to assess the differences of attitudes, perceptions, and satisfaction of Black students who

are newer to Canada, as compared to students whose families have lived in Canada for one generation or more.

One last research direction comes from the recognition that higher education in Canada still is an elitist pursuit. While some of the nine participants in the study complained about how difficult class assignments and content can be, only one expressed any lack of confidence in her or his preparation prior to enrolling in college. Is access an issue, particularly for students of color? How many students are discouraged from pursuing a higher education? And, what is the cost of this for Canadian society?

Finally, it seems clear that Canadian educators can learn a great deal from the research that has taken place in the United States about students of color attending institutions of higher education. Not so much from the conclusions reached or the programming or service recommendations made, but from the questions asked. The time has come for Canadian educators and institutions of higher education to systematically collect more information about students in Canada and to begin to ask questions about the experiences of these students for themselves.

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