

The Students of Color Network: Past, Present, & Future

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Abstract

The Students of Color Network (SOCN) was established in 2001 as a support network for graduate students of color who matriculate into the Student Affairs in Higher Education (SAHE) program at Colorado State University (CSU). This article provides the history behind the development of the SOCN and its current role in the SAHE program. The creation and implementation of the SOCN is examined through both developmental and transitional theories. In addition, quotes and stories from individuals historically involved in the SOCN provide perspective on the support network. Finally, suggestions for the future of the SOCN are made.

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The Students of Color Network (SOCN) was formally established in Spring 2001 to provide a support network for graduate students of color in the Student Affairs in Higher Education (SAHE) graduate program at Colorado State University (CSU). Currently, there are several objectives that the SOCN strives to accomplish: (a) identify issues and concerns specific to graduate students of color in the SAHE graduate program and discuss them as a group, (b) promote the infusion of diversity and multiculturalism into the SAHE course curriculum, (c) develop and implement strategies to recruit and retain students of color in the graduate program, (d) provide a social as well as professional support network to those who participate in SOCN, (e) network with past members of the SOCN and connect with professional organizations to assist with job searches in the field of student affairs and discuss any job search related issues, and (f) provide an opportunity for students of color in the graduate program to celebrate their cultures and customs.

The SOCN has grown dramatically since its establishment in 2001. In order to better understand the network, this article will review theories that demonstrate the necessity of support organizations such as the SOCN. A historical perspective of why the SOCN was created is explored to explain its origins. This article shares personal insight from past and current students involved with the SOCN and illustrates the impact the organization has made in their lives. Finally, current and future challenges and goals facing the SOCN are addressed.

The Theories Behind the Practice

A SOCN member (2001) observed, “When I heard from a classmate that the SOCN is a group that chooses to segregate themselves from their classmates, my heart sank.” This belief that the members of the SOCN separate themselves from their cohort displays a lack of understanding as to why the SOCN was initially created. Many SAHE students who question the existence of the SOCN do not understand how significant a role it plays in the understanding, development, and support of the SAHE students of color. In reality, the SOCN is no different from other organizations that choose to come together over common cultural, racial, and ethnic similarities. In *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997) states, “Racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental stressor, racism. Joining with one's peers for support in the face of stress is a positive coping strategy” (p. 53). In fact, Tatum argues that students of color who seek out each other in an educational setting are exhibiting a healthy part of psychological development in their process to self identity.

The developmental need to explore one's identity with others who are engaged in a similar process is seen throughout colleges and universities across the nation. Researchers acknowledge that people of color share common experiences related to their racial and ethnic identity development because of their shared experiences in regards to discrimination and racism (McEwen, 1996). The minority identity development model (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1993) is a five stage theory that describes one's collective identity based on the perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group. According to Atkinson, Morten, and Sue, these five stages are the *Conformity* stage, *Dissonance* stage, *Resistance and Emerging* stage, *Introspection* stage, and *Synergistic Articulation and Awareness* stage.

In the *Conformity* stage, minorities value the dominant culture more than their own. Minorities in the *Conformity* stage have greater positive feelings toward the dominant culture and devalue their own culture. In the *Dissonance* stage, minorities gain insight that causes them to question their conforming attitudes toward the dominant culture, resulting in confusion and conflict in identity. They become more aware of racism and oppression. In the *Resistance and Immersion* stage, minority individuals reject the dominant culture and fully embrace their ethnic group and culture. Those in this stage are highly motivated to combat oppression, racism, and prejudice expressed through activist behaviors as an outlet. In the *Introspection* stage, minorities struggle to find an understanding of their total rejection of the dominant culture and total acceptance of their own ethnic cultural group. There is identity confusion regarding loyalty to their ethnic group and personal autonomy. Finally, in the *Synergistic Articulation and Awareness* stage, minorities have gained an appreciation of their own cultural group, which enables them to value and respect the values of other people. The minority person has resolved many of the previously experienced conflicts, resulting in acceptance of their cultural identity (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1993).

In each of these stages, Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1993) suggest that the minority identity development model is a continual process in which stages intermingle with one another, and the boundaries between stages are not clearly defined. Understanding this process is extremely important because the invisible boundaries between the stages make it difficult to determine exactly where certain individuals lie in relation to the model and their understanding of their own self identity (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1993). In relation to the SOCN, students of color who enter the program are at different stages of understanding their self identity, therefore placing them in different stages of the model. For example, some students of color do not

understand the value of the SOCN, while others may view the network as a threat to the dominant culture to which they have become accustomed. Other students of color acknowledge the SOCN as a needed support network for their survival in an environment dominated by the White majority culture. Whether or not a student of color wants to actively participate in the SOCN is a personal decision. The network does not make the assumption that every person of color needs to participate or associate with the SOCN.

Understanding the minority identity development theory can help others comprehend the experiences of students of color in colleges and universities. Likewise, for students of color who enter the SAHE graduate program at CSU, the SOCN provides an open place for students to find a cultural support network in order to succeed in a predominantly White college community. Tatum (2003) argues that if college administrators want genuine and productive dialogue between groups, they need to recognize the psychological struggle students of color face in an environment they identify as hostile. In addition, Tatum states that feeling connected to one's cultural community and having access to a rejuvenating space increases an individual's academic success and can also improve the cross-group dialogue that many colleges encourage.

A Historical Perspective

The first gathering of the SOCN occurred in 1998 with four SAHE students of color. At this social gathering, they decided to meet regularly to discuss the prejudice they experienced in classroom discussions and the Fort Collins community. During these informal social gatherings, three common themes emerged:

1. The struggle the SAHE students of color had in finding a community who understood what they experienced.

2. The need to actively recruit and retain more graduate students of color into the SAHE classroom, thus providing diverse perspectives for future cohorts.
3. The dilemma of how to attract more graduate students of color to the SAHE program who possess a strong understanding of racial, ethnic, and diversity issues.

By early spring of 1999, the informal group increased to 10 SAHE students of color.

The group met for monthly potlucks and discussed daily experiences of being a person of color at CSU. Being in an environment with others who shared similar experiences, participants felt safe to have open and honest discussions. "I would never say what I said in those gatherings in front of my White friends. I am afraid of how they would perceive me afterwards," stated one former SOCN member. "It felt good to just say it out loud and not having to worry about censoring it and explaining what I meant. We just understood."

The group felt that in order to increase perspectives regarding diversity issues in the SAHE program, the SOCN needed to increase efforts to recruit student affairs professionals of color who understood multicultural education and would be willing to come to work at a predominantly White university and teach in the program. In addition, discussions began to focus on strategies to connect current SOCN members with potential SAHE graduate students of color who were interviewed for the program. The group contacted the Director of the SAHE program, who helped the SOCN by providing a list of self-identified prospective students of color prior to their arrival at CSU.

Utilizing this information, the SOCN contacted potential students to provide additional information and answer any questions. The SOCN also attempted to determine if the racial demographics of CSU were a factor for them in their graduate program decision-making process. The group discovered that each prospective SAHE student of color felt differently when making

their decision to attend CSU. Some potential graduate students of color did not consider the demographics to be a major factor, while for others it was extremely important to their decision-making process. The discovered attitudes aligned with the various stages in the minority identity development model.

One biracial Korean-Chinese American female who declined the offer to attend the SAHE program at Colorado State University in 2000 stated,

Colorado State University seemed pretty chilly towards students of color. I didn't see a lot of institutional support, and it had a small network of current SAHE students of color. It would have been a good challenge going to CSU and into a situation that could be isolating, but I had to decide at that point in my life if I had the energy to invest in sustaining my cultural needs.

A Chicana/Latina student who also declined the offer to attend the SAHE program at Colorado State University in 1999 stated,

Colorado State University was my first choice. I came from California and wanted to be close to home. I went to a high school that served predominantly Latino students, a community college that served Latino students, and a California state school with a high population of Latinos. I heard CSU had a large Latino population. I was wrong. As a first generation student, I wasn't ready to exert the energy needed to find a community that would understand me.

The attempt to recruit students of color to the SAHE program at CSU was difficult. The group felt that in order to effectively recruit graduate students of color who possessed a commitment to diversity, the group needed to formalize and seek the guidance and support from the administrators and practitioners in the SAHE program. In 2000, the SOCN designated a first-

year SAHE student to lead the SOCN in this process. This student chose CSU after an in-depth conversation with a member of the SOCN prior to making her decision to attend. The demographics of Colorado were a concern for her, but the network had a positive impact on her decision to come to CSU. With the support of the SOCN, she worked with administrators to officially formalize and lead the group.

In Spring 2001, the SAHE program officially recognized the SOCN. An important component of the group's formation was formal recognition of the network by SAHE faculty and staff, who acknowledged the role that the network could play within the program. For example, the SOCN gave feedback on class experiences and perceptions of inclusiveness. The network also gained a greater role in the graduate program selection process by having a member serve on the selection committee. The SOCN contacted prospective self-identified students of color and acted as a resource for those seeking additional perspectives. In addition, the network met with the Director of SAHE and faculty to discuss issues of curriculum, programming, and support. The formalization ensured the future of the SOCN in the SAHE program as a fully recognized support network.

By Fall 2002, the network was well-established and worked on solidifying and expanding the work already accomplished. The first task was to present the mission and purpose of the organization at SAHE orientation. The presentation met a great deal of skepticism and opposition from individuals of the incoming class and continuing students in the program. Some individuals could not understand why the organization was necessary to provide a safe place for students of color, and others felt they could be open to dialogue and be advocates for students of color in the program. Despite the concerns from some classmates, this interaction reinforced the notion that

students of color needed a support network for each other. The network members met bi-monthly in addition to the traditional potlucks.

The Issues Faced Today

The role of the SOCN has evolved since its inception. The network continues to bring students of color together with the purpose of providing support for its members. The network also gained a more prominent role in the SAHE program; the members are formally involved in many of the annual diversity programs and retreats such as the Student of Color Retreat, the Multicultural Leadership Retreat, and the Diversity Summit on the CSU campus. In regard to these events, SOCN members participate in the standing committees and serve as facilitators. Additionally, some SOCN members have served on the planning committee and led a panel discussion for the CSU Diversity Summit, an annual professional development conference for faculty, staff, and students that address diversity issues facing higher education. SOCN members are also continually asked to speak at college classes in the Rocky Mountain region and to facilitate campus and local diversity simulations and activities. The SOCN is not only a resource for the SAHE program, but for many other groups in the local community.

Despite the positive impact the SOCN has contributed to the SAHE program, many students still question why the network exists. Chickering and Associates (1981) believe that an environment in which individuals can explore racial identity and experience racial pride away from the majority group is important. Such experiences are provided by the SOCN for many SAHE students of color. Some White students wonder why they cannot attend meetings and advocate for students of color in the SAHE program, and feel that the SOCN is unnecessary, elitist, and a form of segregation. However, this is not the intent or sentiment of the SOCN. According to Kristen Renn (2000), "On college campuses, immersion occurs in friendship

groups of others who are like oneself” (p. 401). Even though many SAHE students face transition issues by coming to Fort Collins and CSU, the students of color in the program must also contend with the fact that they are a small minority in the White majority culture. Although the number of students of color being admitted into the SAHE program continues to grow, it is still likely a student of color will be the only person who identifies with his or her specific ethnic culture. Rather than isolating oneself, the network provides an opportunity to connect with other students of color who have similar feelings and experiences. Many members feel that the SOCN becomes an extended family of support and comfort throughout their graduate experience.

The SOCN realizes the importance of having White allies within the SAHE cohort. Allies can help other White students in the program understand and appreciate the network’s existence and purpose. It is the network’s hope that its continued growth of the SOCN will help all students recognize how essential the SOCN is for the SAHE graduate program. However, each year a new SAHE cohort enters the graduate program and some questions arise regarding the purpose of the SOCN. The educational process begins again, and if the cohort does not have someone who can clearly and effectively communicate the purpose and value of the SOCN, the network struggles to obtain legitimacy with some of the students.

Finally, the network also faces challenges with how to best serve the students of color who do not identify with the network or strongly identify as a person of color. Students of color in the SAHE program are not required to participate in the SOCN. If a student chooses not to participate in the SOCN, the group still conveys they are available to the student if ever needed. One SOCN alumni recalls:

Even when we first started the program, not all students of color participated in the SOCN potlucks. It was cool though. They knew that they could join us anytime they wanted...and many of them came to our very final gathering of the year.

The network is conscious and sensitive to the fact that a student of color may not strongly identify with it. Many students of color are at different places in their identity development and may choose other support groups consistent with their comfort level. It is important for students of color to understand that the SOCN is one of several resources where they can seek support.

Today, the SOCN faces issues that act as the platform for changes in the future. The outcome of the network will be determined by the changing needs and goals of each respective group. As each year passes, the SOCN gains new members and a larger alumni base. With continued support from the faculty and allies in the SAHE program, the network will continue to be a viable resource for the current students.

A Glance into the Future

Many of the issues that the SOCN faces today lend insight on future issues. As the SOCN continues to reach out to the campus and community, many entities will rely on members of the SOCN as a resource. This process will lead to an increased reliance of members to provide intellectual and physical support.

In the future, the SOCN plans to branch out and begin mentoring undergraduate students of color interested in the field of student affairs. This idea is not new to the field of student affairs. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), one of the largest student affairs professional organizations, coordinates a mentoring program entitled the Minority Undergraduate Fellows Program (MUFPP). The MUFPP will serve as a template for a

similar program coordinated by the SOCN where undergraduate students of color can seek advice and mentorship from current members.

Another future goal includes the continued development of a SOCN alumni database as a resource for all SAHE students. The permanent establishment of a list of past SOCN members will allow current members to seek guidance and support from alumni members on a variety of issues. Several alumni of the SOCN have already provided strong support to current members by encouraging participation in national organizations and offering advice on interviewing and seeking employment. One current SAHE student who identifies as Asian/Pacific American noted,

When I arrived at CSU, a member of SOCN took an active interest in helping me improve my interviewing skills [after observing my skills during the SAHE mock interviews]. I really appreciate that someone took the time to meet with me individually to better present myself.

Another former SOCN member shares her experience:

When I went to the American College Personnel Association conference for the first time it was quite an experience trying to network with people. A SOCN alumnus introduced me to many of his colleagues who he was actively involved with on a national level. I networked with many of them, including my future employer.

The success of the SOCN will be fortified by the continued support and commitment of alumni.

The Legacy of the SOCN Lives On

The network aims to be a welcoming organization for all students of color, regardless of how they self identify or to what degree they wish to be involved with the network. For some students, it has been a place for social interaction, while for others it has been an avenue to

effectively create change in the SAHE program. The network hopes to be a strong presence in the SAHE program and the campus community at large. In addition, the SOCN will continue to recognize the different identities that exist within the group.

The SOCN will continue to enhance the SAHE program for current and prospective students through its objectives and initiatives. Additionally, the SOCN will serve as an instrumental voice in development of the SAHE curriculum. By being actively involved in the SAHE selection process, the SOCN will assist the graduate program to recruit and retain a student cohort that is committed to diversity. The SOCN is intentional about being visible during the selection process by serving on committees, hosting students, or attending outings with prospective students. The network hopes to convey that the SAHE program is supportive of students of color by establishing connections with prospective students. Though the network consists of graduate students with limited time, they are committed to making every effort possible to connect with the people of color coming to interview for the SAHE program. Students in the network try to answer questions the candidates have about the program, the CSU campus, and the Fort Collins community. It is important for prospective students of color to understand that the SAHE program tries to provide as many resources for support as possible. As such, the SOCN will maintain an environment for students of color to be embraced during their tenure at CSU.

Although the Student of Color Network's history is short, the SOCN will continue to advocate for diversity, organizational change, and be a strong support system for many students. The foundation has been set for an integral and valuable role in the SAHE program at CSU.

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