

Belonging in the 21st Century [Scholar's Program]: Exploration of Sense of Belonging Among Black 21st Century Scholars at Indiana University Bloomington

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Abstract

When students have a strong sense of belonging to their university or institution, they may experience gains in outcomes such as higher achievement and retention levels, but predominantly white institutions (PWIs) have traditionally had hostile environments for underrepresented student populations such as low-income students and students of color. We used an interview-based method to examine the sense of belonging amongst 21st Century Scholars students at Indiana University in Bloomington (IUB). The interview questions were constructed using four indicators within Museus' CECE Model, and responses were analyzed using these same indicators to create a picture of the students' experiences at IUB and within the 21st Century Scholars Program. The results of the interview analysis formulated findings for future research and implications for the 21st Century Scholars program itself.

Keywords

Low income, students of color, sense of belonging

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Suggested citation:

Machovina, N., Murphy, M., Salzman, C., & Thornsby, A. (2021). Belonging in the 21st Century [Scholars Program]: Exploration of sense of belonging among Black 21st Century Scholars at Indiana University Bloomington. *Journal of the Student Personnel Association at Indiana University*, 1-20.

Introduction

When students have a strong sense of belonging to their university or institution, they may experience gains in outcomes such as higher achievement and retention levels (Strayhorn, 2012). Given the positive outcomes, it is important for colleges and universities to be aware of and contribute to a student's environment to increase their sense of belonging. However, predominantly white institutions (PWIs) have traditionally had hostile environments for underrepresented student populations such as low-income students and students of color (Hope et al., 2018; Means & Pyne, 2017; Jack, 2014).

To support low-income students, the state of Indiana has created the 21st Century Scholars Program which is a merit- and need-based aid program to increase college access and retention. At Indiana University Bloomington (IUB), nearly 20 percent of 21st Century Scholars identify as Black or African American (Indiana University Bloomington, 2020). Given the large population of these students on campus, it is important to explore how these students perceive the IU environment and experience a sense of belonging on campus.

Prior to the mid-20th Century, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) educated 90% of Black students pursuing higher education. However, "as education integrated, many institutions were not ready to meet the needs of African-American students, and as a result African-Americans were subjected to many challenges at PWIs" (Haywood & Sewell, 2016, p. 112). This ill-preparedness highlights the importance of researching and assessing Black students at PWIs as this data can "decrease the marginalization of students from historically underrepresented groups" (Singer-Freeman et al., 2019, p. 1).

The purpose of this assessment project is to determine what factors affect the sense of belonging and campus climate that Black 21st Century Scholars perceive at IUB. The research team aims to assess the 21st Century Scholars Program benefits, requirements, and the general culture at IUB to determine what factors have the strongest influence on sense of belonging for Black 21st Century Scholars on campus. As the number of low SES students continues to rise at IUB, it is important to assess this population so the resources and knowledge needed to these students can be strengthened.

Given these overarching themes in today's field of higher education, the following research questions remain:

RQ1. How does a student's identity as a Black 21st Century Scholar affect the way they navigate the environment at IUB?

RQ2. What are the factors that contribute to the college life experience and sense of belonging amongst Black 21st Century Scholars at IUB?

Thus, by conducting one-on-one interviews with Black 21st Century Scholars and analyzing the data based on indicators from the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model as outlined by Museus (2014), the research team aims to answer the research questions and to fill the gaps in current research by providing the unique experiences of these scholars at IUB.

Literature Review

The research team began by utilizing relevant literature in the field to formulate the research questions. The team researched the 21st Century Scholars Program to see how it connects to sense of belonging. To expand on this further, research was done on low-income students, Black students, and how these identities intersect at PWI's to impact the way Black, low-income students navigate their college experiences. Museus's (2014) CECE Indicators were chosen as the framework for the interview questions due to how they incorporate these themes into considerations for practice.

21st Century Scholars

There are many factors that can be attributed to the rise in numbers of low-income students going to college. In Indiana, one of the reasons is the 21st Century Scholars Program. This is a first-dollar scholarship program that offers full-tuition scholarships for qualifying students at universities in the state of Indiana. To qualify, students need to apply in 7th or 8th grade and have a family income under \$48,470 for a family of four (IUB, 2020). Recently, an assessment of the 21st Century Scholars Program noted that it was successful in increasing enrollment; however, there has been little research to show if the program impacts student retention or completion rates (Kelchen, 2017).

At Indiana University in Bloomington (IUB), over 3,000 current students are 21st Century Scholars (IUB, 2020). Due to the large number of 21st Century Scholars at IUB, “The IUB21CS is Ranked #1 in Indiana for the number of students receiving the ‘first-dollar, full-tuition, need-based Indiana 21st Century Scholarship’ at any four-year public or private university” (IUB, 2020, par. 3). In fact, the program just placed number one for four-year graduation rates, which is difficult to maintain as the largest program (OVPDEMA, 2020).

Given the large number of 21st Century Scholars that attend IUB, it is important to learn more about how the program supports these students, and how this support may affect students’ sense of belonging on campus. Data from IUB shows that 90 percent of first-year, full-time 21st Century Scholars return for a second year (IUB, 2020). However, there is no data for retention rates beyond this, graduation rates, or the factors that may play into a student’s decision on whether to return to campus. To learn more about this, we plan to research the sense of belonging experienced by Black, 21st Century Scholars at IUB, because this information can impact the likeliness of retention for these students.

Black Students at PWIs

According to Fry and Cilluffo (2019), 10 percent of undergraduate students identified as Black in 1996 at public four-year institutions, and that number has only slightly increased to 13 percent in 2016. At IUB, Black students make up 4.9% of the undergraduate population (Indiana University, 2020). Despite this increase in Black students at public four-year institutions, Black students still face lower graduation rates. According to Payne and Suddler (2014), in 2005 the national graduation rate for Black students was just 42 percent. In addition to lower graduation rates, Black students also experience anti-validating experiences, such as microaggressions, or “the everyday, commonplace, and often ambiguous forms of racism faced by people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, as cited in Grier-Reed, 2010, p. 181).

To cope with racial microaggressions, Black students rely on academic and social spaces referred to as counterspaces, “where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (Solorzano et al., 2000, p. 70). The Neal-Marshall Black Culture Center (NMBCC) is an example of one of IUB’s counterspaces for the 1,502 Black students as it “supports teaching, research, and service missions of the university, while also offering a positive and hospitable social environment for African American and African students, faculty, and staff” (Neal-Marshall Black Culture Center, 2020, p. 1).

Intersectionality of Black and Low-Income Students

This assessment specifically looks at Black Low-SES students in the 21st Century Scholars Program. Means and Pyne (2017) find that “low-income, first-generation college students are also more likely to be Students of Color” (p. 909). When looking at parents’ income for dependents who earned bachelor’s degrees during the 2015-2016 year in the United States, 52% made less than \$39,200 (Baum, 2019, p. 206). Based on a 2017 study on college student socioeconomic status and mobility, Indiana University students were found to have a median family income over \$95,000 (Aisch et al., 2017). With a large population of high-income students, there is a stronger possibility of stereotype threat and a decreased rate of degree attainment amongst low-income students as they study alongside their high-income peers (Jury et al., 2017).

It is important to consider the intersection between race and social class, invoking intersectionality as defined by Crenshaw (1991). Originally derived in the field of law about Women of Color, intersectionality focuses on the power, oppression, and marginality of Women of Color as a product of “intersecting patterns of racism and sexism (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1243). This framework has since been applied to other marginalized characteristics such as social class. When studying this specific student population, an intersectional framework can be applied to the body of knowledge available.

Of that body of knowledge, research indicates that “race and class in education are intertwined partners,” creating “a tango that negatively impacts college students who belong to racially and economically minoritized groups” (Sarcedo et al., 2015, p. 2). Bridges (2020) shares that colleges have historically struggled to retain and graduate Black students, especially first-generation students from low-income families. Despite the fact the assessment does not focus on first-generation students, it is a helpful context for the student population. Out of any race or ethnicity among students who started in four-year public institutions, “Black students had the lowest six-year completion rate of 45.9%,” and within the same period, 62.4 percent of all students finished a degree or certificate (Shapiro et al., 2017).

According to the American Council on Education (ACE)’s Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education report that Black students were more likely than any other racial or ethnic group to be low-income (Espinosa et al., n.d). Over half of all dependent Black students were low-income (51.4 percent), and 65.4 percent of independent Black students were low-income (Espinosa et al., n.d). This is problematic as “socioeconomic gaps in college enrollment and attainment have widened over time, despite increasing returns to postsecondary education and significant policy efforts to improve access” (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016, para. 4).

Despite the gaps in degree attainment, numbers of students from low-income backgrounds enrolling in an institution of higher education have been on the rise. This increase is especially true of public four-year institutions, where “17 percent of dependent undergraduates were classified as being in poverty, compared to 12 percent in 1996” (Fry & Cilluffo, 2019). While enrollment increases are positive, it is worrisome that there are still large gaps in degree attainment between low-income students and their middle- to high-income counterparts. This gap indicates poor retention for low-income students which is harmful because it can leave students with college debt and no degree.

The disparities in graduation rates between students of low- and high-income are the result of a variety of factors including psychological barriers, such as students’ identity management, otherwise known as sense of belonging (Jury et al., 2017, p. 25). This can be influenced by a student’s ability to be involved on campus or need to work. Another influence is that of stereotype threat, where low-income students succumb to the negative stereotype that they are not competent enough to graduate, and these stereotypes are largely influenced by the culture of the institution the student attends (Jury et al., 2017).

Sense of Belonging

According to student development research, one significant indicator of retention is a student’s sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012; Means & Pyne, 2017). Sense of belonging “refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3). Having a positive impact on a student’s sense of belonging can increase their likeliness to persist to degree completion.

A student’s sense of belonging can be impacted in a variety of ways. Some ways are learning communities, learning centers, student organizations, faculty members, peers, and academic advising (Means & Pyne, 2017). Ability to participate in some of these programs can unintentionally exclude low-income students due to the time and money needed to be involved. “Due largely to a lack of resources, low-income, first-generation students are more likely to live and work off-campus and to take classes part-time while working fulltime, which limits the amount of time they spend on campus” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 3).

Students who are taking out loans and working throughout college are less likely to engage in activities that can contribute to sense of belonging. Recognizing this, 21st Century Scholars works to provide students with a tuition scholarship, also including opportunities as part of the program. Specifically, 21st Century Scholars at IUB have access to advising, peers from similar backgrounds, student organizations, learning centers, and access to faculty.

CECE as a Framework

As it relates to the environmental assessment purposes for this research, the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model as designed by Museus (2014) was invoked to gauge how college environments influence sense of belonging. Museus (2014) finds that “campus racial climates and cultures influence the adjustment, engagement, and success of racially diverse populations in profound ways” (p. 191). This Model is created as a response to Tinto’s theory of college student success, which is critiqued for “its application to the experiences and outcomes of racially diverse student populations” (Museus, 2014, p. 194). To speak to those racially diverse student experiences, Museus (2014) proposes the CECE Model that “underscores the environmental and individual influences on college success” (p. 207). Overall, Museus (2014) finds that undergraduate students will show a greater sense of belonging if they are met with more “culturally engaging campus environments” (p. 210).

The CECE Model finds that there are nine indicators of culturally engaging campus environments. Museus (2014) finds that sense of belonging is a “valid construct among racially diverse student populations and a significant predictor of success in college” (p. 214). The assessment was framed with the foundation of the following indicators: cultural familiarity, cultural validation, humanized educational environments, and holistic support. While all of the indicators have value, the aforementioned four apply most to the assessment as it relates to sense of belonging among students who hold marginalized identities on IUB’s campus. Museus (2014) described the four indicators as follows:

- **Cultural Familiarity:** “The extent to which students have opportunities to connect with faculty, staff, and peers who share and understand their cultural backgrounds and experiences” (National Institute for Transformation and Equity [NITE], 2017, para. 5).
- **Cultural Validation:** “Campus cultures that validate the cultural backgrounds, knowledge, and identities of diverse students” (NITE, 2017, para. 5).
- **Humanized Educational Environments:** “Availability of opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with faculty and staff who care about and are commitment to those students’ success” (NITE, 2017, para. 5).
- **Holistic Support:** “College students’ access to at least one faculty or staff member that they are confident will provide the information they need, offer the help they seek, or connect them with the information or support they require regardless of the issue they face” (NITE, 2017, para. 5).

The four CECE indicators were used to create questions for the interviews to gather data. Each question is associated with a specific CECE indicator. By having the CECE indicators drive the questions, the research team is incorporating the method of inductive data analysis, so the findings emerge from the data rather than assumption (Schuh et al., 2016).

According to Museus and Neville (2012), college students of color benefit from connections who understand their background or experiences. As a sense of belonging relies significantly on relationships and given the fact that the focus of this assessment is on the experiences of Black students at IUB, these indicators are vital to incorporate as they focus on campus cultures that highlight and support the cultural backgrounds, knowledge, and identities of diverse students (Museus, 2014). Overall, the indicators will aid the researchers’ understanding of support systems at IUB and how the students navigate IUB as a Black 21st Century Scholar.

Methods

To answer the following overarching questions, the research team took a qualitative approach through interview-based research:

RQ1. What are the factors that contribute to the college life experience and sense of belonging amongst Black 21st Century Scholars at IUB?

RQ2. How does a student's identity as a Black 21st Century Scholar affect the way they navigate the environment at IUB?

A qualitative approach was most appropriate for this study as it allowed for a purposeful design in a natural setting and, in turn, created a holistic perspective on the unique case of each participant (Merriam, 2009). The research team also incorporated phenomenology as a strategy of inquiry. Phenomenology is rooted in philosophy, psychology, and education, and it is primarily used to explain phenomena amongst populations, such as students, by documenting their personal reflections through interview formats (Creswell et al., 2007). This approach also allowed for inductive data analysis for "findings to emerge from the data, ideally without predetermined assumptions" (Schuh et al., 2016, p. 121). Thus, the research questions focused on the stories of the participants and identified the differences and commonalities between the participants' experiences both in college and within the 21st Century Scholars program.

Sample

The sample consisted of IUB students who identified as Black and who were members of the 21st Century Scholars program. The students were referred to by pseudonyms throughout the study to maintain privacy and confidentiality. In order to recruit participants based on the sampling criterion, an interest survey was created and provided to prospective students through distribution from the Director of the 21st Century Scholars Program, the Neal Marshall Black Cultural Center, Groups Scholars Program, 21st Century Scholars Leadership Corps, and the Black Student Union at IUB.

Data Collection

To initiate the data collection process, a short demographic survey, created and housed on Qualtrics, was sent to potential participants to complete virtually. All responses were collected and stored through the Qualtrics system, with results being shared amongst the four researchers for this project. The research team worked with the Director of the IUB 21st Century Scholars Program, Dr. Vincent Isom, and the Associate Director of the Neal-Marshall Black Cultural Center at IUB, Dr. Gloria Howell, to distribute the survey to prospective students. The team also created a flyer including information about the study and a QR code to the survey to send to the Group Scholars Program, the Black Student Union, and the 21st Century Scholars Leadership Corps to further increase recruitment efforts.

After two weeks of recruiting participants, 13 students completed the demographic survey. The research team created and emailed the prospective participants a Doodle Poll, consisting of two weeks of available times for participants to sign up for a 60-minute interview time slot. After sending out three reminder emails about signing up for interview times and at the two weeks provided in the Doodle Poll, the research team interviewed three students.

Due to COVID-19, these interviews were conducted via Zoom and were recorded using the Zoom recording feature. Participants were made aware that the interviews were to be recorded at the start of the call to allow for informed consent and transparency in the research process. All Zoom recordings were saved in the IUB Kaltura software system to assist in the transcription process, and the transcripts were added to the Microsoft Teams folder to ensure security and safety for the participants.

Data Analysis

After the three recorded interviews, the researchers individually reviewed transcripts to create categories based on the four CECE indicators (Cultural Familiarity, Cultural Validation, Humanized Educational Environments, Holistic Support) that were originally used to formulate the interview questions. Since each question was associated with a specific indicator, key terms and common verbiage within each response was coded and categorized by its corresponding indicator.

Following individual coding, the team met as a group to compare the given categories for consistency and to find themes. In the group coding process, the data for each indicator was divided into three sections: Student experiences and 21st Century Scholars Program and IUB efforts that are positive, those that are negative, and what should happen within the 21st Century Scholars Program and IUB. These three sub-categories allowed the group to notice four evident themes within the data based on common responses, references, terms, and experiences: Campus Culture for Black Students at IUB, Faculty and Staff Relationships, Resources and Opportunities within the 21st Century Scholars Program, and Finances.

Positionalities of the Researchers

All the researchers are second year graduate students in the Higher Education and Student Affairs M.S.Ed. master's program. The researchers have experiences ranging from college access, residential life, academic advising, and educational attainment. Combined, the research team has a collective interest in supporting students with marginalized identities as they navigate the collegiate environment and persist to graduation. Most specifically, research interests among the team lie with low-income and first-generation college students succeeding in higher education. One of the researchers has a vested interest in studying 21st Century Scholars as a low-income student herself, while the rest of the researchers acknowledge that they come from middle class backgrounds and how that has shaped their college experiences thus far. From these backgrounds and various passion areas, the team is passionate about identifying ways to support low-income college students within the 21st Century Scholars program.

The research team also recognizes that they collectively self-identify as white and are studying Black student experiences within the 21st Century Scholars Program. Formally acknowledging that the team is studying a racial/ethnic group that no one within the team identifies with, the researchers are taking a phenomenological approach to data collection in the research process. The researchers have not created any specific assumptions or hypotheses to collect from the data, but rather are focusing specifically on the experiences of Black 21st Century Scholars who complete the interview process. To avoid generating preconceptions about a student population they do not identify with, this research approach is purely to gain understanding. As white student affairs professionals, the researchers acknowledge that it is vital to engage in working with student populations that are minoritized within higher education. Through this research process, the team aims to gain a more focused understanding of the experiences of Black students in the 21st Century Scholars program and hope to utilize their findings towards recommendations for the program.

Findings

The research team interviewed Zara, Charlotte, and Peyton; all of whom are IUB students that identify as Black. These students hold a variety of roles on campus. Charlotte is currently a Resident Assistant (RA). Both Zara and Charlotte are members of the Hudson and Holland Scholars Program, which is housed under OVPDEMA. Peyton is a member of the Group Scholars Program, which is also housed in the same functional area. Based on the data analysis, the research team found the following four themes: Campus Culture for Black Students at IUB, Faculty and Staff Relationships, Resources and Opportunities within the 21st Century Scholars Program, and Finances.

Campus Culture

Campus culture has been defined in several ways throughout the history of higher education, but ultimately it is characterized by the university's "history, mission, physical settings, norms, traditions, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions which guide the behavior of individuals and groups in an institution of higher education" (Kuh & Hall, 1993, p. 2). Based on the three interviews, the students provided both positive and negative experiences that contribute to the campus culture of IUB. Regarding the positive experiences expressed in the interviews, all three of the students highlighted their different forms of involvement on campus. Charlotte discussed her involvement within the Black Student Union, through which she can create a sense of community amongst students who share her same racial identity, and Zara mentioned her involvement with the Black IU Tailgates, where she is also able to be around people who share her same identity.

Zara: I just felt like I belonged [at the Black IU tailgate] because it was people that I related to...you relate more to someone who most likely is the same skin color as you.

In addition to racial identity, Peyton touched on his involvement in a soccer club at IUB, which consists of other students that share his same passions and interests, fostering a sense of belonging on campus. All these students' involvement opportunities were found to correlate with the CECE indicator of cultural validation as these experiences "validate the cultural backgrounds, knowledge, and identities" of the students (NITE, 2017, para. 5).

As noted throughout the interviews, most of the students' peer interactions were occurring outside of the 21st Century Scholars Program. It became evident that the students felt the Program lacked a sense of community. Although the location of the 21st Century Scholars Program is said to have offered a type of counterspace for the students to feel comfortable and relaxed on campus, involvement and community building was an individual effort. Yet, despite this lack of community within the Program, the students expressed growth in themselves through their individual efforts to find a sense of belonging. For example, Charlotte expressed the sense of accomplishment and further validation she felt through her work.

Charlotte: I feel like now as a sophomore I can see a huge change within myself, like high school feels such a long time ago...A moment that affirmed my decision to attend IU would probably be...when I first got the RA job or when I made the Dean's list.

Despite these positive aspects of IUB's campus culture and fostered sense of belonging, the students also expressed the negative experiences they have had throughout their time, thus, affecting the culture they perceive at IUB. Peyton discussed his time in the Quarantine and Isolation Housing when he first arrived on campus and tested positive for COVID-19.

Peyton: I had to quarantine in Ashton and that experience wasn't so great because...it wasn't just like a really good living condition. I would assume that because if you're sick, they supposed to take care of you and make sure you're comfortable and check on you and make sure you're okay. It's actually not that way.

Charlotte and Zara both talked their experiences with anti-validation on campus through racist events and microaggressions.

Charlotte: One thing I've really realized since I've been here are like microaggressions...I heard of them but had never experienced them.

Zara: They were putting like KKK posters in Eigenmann. And so that kind of made me like question IU a little bit too.

All these instances were found to have negatively affected the students' feelings of cultural validation and made them question their place on campus.

Resources and Opportunities

In addition to the connections and relationships the students have made through the 21st Century Program and throughout their time at IUB, they also emphasized the resources and opportunities they have received through the program. With two of the key areas of focus of the 21st Century Scholars Program being "student engagement and enrichment" and "career exploration and preparation," each

student mentioned the large number of opportunities the program offers them to excel at IUB (IUB, 2020).

Peyton: 21st Century does send out a lot of emails...there's canvas page for groups and 21st century. And there's so many resources for leadership opportunities or mentorship.

Zara: And they'll send opportunities. Yeah, like a lot of the events that they have and also send opportunities that kind of relate to your Major. Like they'll send like stem opportunities for like minorities. And stuff that I probably wouldn't see if I wasn't in 21st century scholars...they try to give us as many resources as they can.

The opportunities and resources the program offers their students plays a large role in their focus on providing Holistic Support. In addition, the CECE indicator of Humanized Educational Environments was also observed throughout the interviews as the 21st Century email list that Peyton mentioned is how Charlotte found the FASE Mentorship program, which provided her with the “opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with faculty and staff” (NITE, 2017, para. 5).

Charlotte: The whole reason I found out about the FASE mentorship because it was like a part of like a newsletter that the 21st century scholars sent out. It told us different things on how to be involved and ways just try different outreach tools.

Overall, the interviews conveyed that these resources and opportunities have had positive and lasting impacts on their experiences at IUB and within the 21st Century Scholars Program.

Faculty and Staff Relationships

In addition to student experiences and opportunities on campus and perceptions towards culture, another theme that was commonly found throughout the interviews were the students' relationships to the faculty and staff on campus and within the 21st Century Scholars Program itself. The most common type of staff relationship discussed was that with the students' advisors, particularly their advisor within their 21st Century Scholars Program. For both Zara and Charlotte, they consistently mentioned their Hudson and Holland advisor Dr. Miriam Attenoukon, Mimi, whom they felt they could go to for questions and concerns that centered around both academic and personal topics.

Zara: I literally love my Hudson and Holland advisor. Her name is Mimi and I love her like she was one of the staff and faculty members I was talking about that can like- I can just talk to about like my mental health or how my week has been going and things of that sort doesn't always have to be school, school, school.

Charlotte: For starters, my advisor in Hudson is named Mimi...every time I have question, I still go to Mimi.

Peyton, who is a part of the Groups Program at IUB, would primarily utilize his Groups advisor, Ms. Berry, as a resource for academic and personal support. In fact, Peyton emphasized that his relationship with Ms. Berry is what keeps him connected to IU.

Peyton: If I lose connection with IU, she could be the only one who can actually put me in that situation to reconnect and kind of give me the opportunities to find other resources to kind of get back to where I was.

In addition to these advisor relationships, Zara also expressed her positive relationships with professors that have created a sense of validation and belonging.

Zara: It's honestly really surprising because...I pass a teacher or professor and they'll know my name. It's kind of assuring.

Through these faculty and staff relationships, it was evident that these responses connected to the CECE indicators of Cultural Familiarity and Holistic support as the students were able to “connect with faculty, staff, and peers who share and understand their cultural backgrounds and experiences” and felt that they are “[provided] the information they need, [and offered] the help they seek” through those relationships (NITE, 2017, para. 5).

Despite these positive connections to the IUB faculty and staff, the students also expressed some areas in which their relationship with the 21st Century Scholars Programs staff could be stronger. For

instance, the students expressed a lack of connection to the general 21st Century Scholars Program aside from their specific department, such as Hudson and Holland and Groups. In fact, during a mandatory program for the 21st Century, Charlotte recalled that she could not remember the names of the 21st Century staff members that led the event, and she felt that there was a lack of follow-up communication on their part.

Charlotte: I do not remember these two people's names at all. However, it was like a mandatory meeting about how to go super 21st century. It was a man and a woman that facilitated it. I really wish I could remember their names.

Although the stronger connections they have made with their assigned advisors have overpowered the potential negative effects of this occurrence, it can still be viewed as a shortcoming on the program's focus on creating lasting connections between students and staff.

Finances

Alongside the three previously discussed themes, the most common theme to be brought up in each interview was that of finances. When asked the students' reason for attending IUB, each responded that they were given full tuition paid scholarships to attend the university and be a part of the 21st Century Scholars Program.

Charlotte: Alright, so firstly, I chose to attend IU just because they gave me the most money. I had a scholarship to go here. And you know, being a first-generation student was like really convenient.

Peyton: The reason why I chose to attend the IU Bloomington was because I got accepted into the Group Scholars Program....Basically mostly, I think for me, it's mostly like financially.

Zara: I also got a full ride scholarship on top of being a 21st and do scholars....So that also factored into it.

As low-income students, the aspect of financials is very important and highly beneficial to these students as the program pays for their education and preparation for their futures. However, the focus on finances was the students' primary connection to the 21st Century Scholars Program itself, creating its own unique problem of disconnect. In other words, the students expressed that they utilized the programs resources, such as advisors and staff, solely for financial questions and advice rather than for personal guidance and support or community building efforts. For instance, when asked how the students felt supported by the program, they responded with the following answers:

Charlotte: They pay for me to go to school, so I appreciate that. I guess them paying for me to go to school allows like different doors open.

Peyton: I would go ask [21st Century] about financials.

Aside from the financial help the students receive and the opportunities and resources the 21st Century Scholars program announces to its students, the interviews highlighted that the students would prefer for the program to focus on "creating a sense of community outside of their financial offerings" (Charlotte, personal communication, November 9, 2020).

Discussion

Once the results were finalized, they needed to be evaluated in the context of our research questions: In this analyzation, the research presented several key themes that the participants' answers highlighted. We found that campus culture and resources within the program had a large impact on how Black 21st Century Scholars navigated IUB. Additionally, we found that faculty and staff relationships and finances were contributing factors to participants' sense of belonging. This discussion will be an expansion of the results and will go further into depth on the participants' answers within the context of these results.

Campus Culture for Black Students

There were a variety of factors that led to students feeling like they belonged at IUB. Two participants talked about culturally validating campus spaces, such as the 4th floor of Wells Library during tutoring hours for their program, the Neal-Marshall Black Culture Center, and the building that hosts 21st Century Scholars, Groups, and Hudson and Holland. All these spaces had other students with similar cultural backgrounds and identities that all contributed to the participants feeling like they belonged on campus. Additionally, a participant mentioned an informal gathering, the Black student tailgate, because this space allowed the student to relax and hang out with people who identify like them with “no drama.” Another example was when Charlotte went to BSU’s meeting and felt at home by the natural exchange of Black culture.

Spaces the students mentioned above are especially important at PWI’s because they act as counterspaces. “Academic and social counterspaces for coping with racial microaggressions have been identified as essential for the academic survival of African American college students” (Grier-Reed, 2010, p. 182). Charlotte and Zara specifically mentioned feeling targeted or demeaned by microaggressions on campus and feeling safe in the spaces mentioned previously. Both also mentioned being surprised by the demographics of IUB, as they both went to high schools that had higher percentages of Black students than IUB.

Due to this, Charlotte and Zara said they appreciated any opportunity to spend time with other Black students because they could more easily relax and feel like they could be their full selves around people who shared their racial identity. Based on this information, we have recognized counterspaces as a way in which Black 21st Century Scholars navigate the IUB environment and support these students in succeeding on campus.

Resources and Opportunities Within 21st Century Scholars

There were a variety of resources students mentioned within the 21st Century Scholar program that benefited them. Every student mentioned the email opportunities that the program sends out. While Peyton did not personally pursue any of the opportunities in the emails, Peyton acknowledged they have a lot of resources, internship opportunities, and research programs that students can utilize. Zara noted that they were particularly useful for students of color as they shared opportunities specifically for marginalized students that she did not learn about through any of her other involvements. She said if she did not see this list, she was unsure where she would find similar opportunities. Charlotte used this list to get involved in FASE which also helped connect her with IU staff that she feels connected to. In this sense 21st Century Scholars facilitated connections with new staff and an IU programs which impacted the way participants were navigating IUB.

In addition to the email opportunities, students shared various resources and opportunities that have helped them feel connected to campus. Many of these occurred through specialized scholars’ programs such as Groups, Hudson and Holland, and the Cox Legacy Scholars program. The participants mentioned enjoying workshop opportunities within these programs and other social activities that helped to create an identity for the group. Zara mentioned they wished 21st Century Scholars had a strong identity like Hudson and Holland, so they were more familiar with members and felt more connected to the group. Similarly, Peyton attended IUB specifically for the Groups Scholars Program and feels connected to campus as a Groups member more so than as a member of the 21st Century Scholars Program. However, creating the same environment as Groups or Hudson & Holland as for 21st Century Scholars can be difficult due to the vastly different sizes of the programs.

Faculty and Staff Relationships

In our research, we asked about relationships with 21st Century Scholars advisors and staff and noticed there was a lack of connection between students and 21st Century Scholars staff; however, this does not signify that students feel a lack support in the program. It is important to note that the 21st Century Program at IUB is under the umbrella of the Office of the Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (OVPDEMA). This Office also oversees programs such as Groups and Hudson and Holland.

Due to the connection between these departments, there are shared resources for students. All the participants in this study were in 21st Century Scholars in addition to either the Groups Scholars Program or Hudson and Holland. In the interviews, participants mentioned being encouraged to see the advisor for their specific programs, rather than a 21st Century Scholar advisor. Participants noted that they had extremely close bonds with their program staff, enjoyed spending time with them, and felt like they could go to them for any problem.

Charlotte mentioned being visited in the hospital by a program staff. While no student mentioned a 21st Century Scholars specific advisor that they could go to anytime, all students were able to specifically mention at least one staff member in OVPDEMA that they could go to for support. When asked about Peyton's advisor, Ms. Berry, Peyton mentioned being able to connect with her and that Ms. Berry knows what Peyton is going through. Zara mentioned how they appreciated there was one shared office space 21st Century Scholars, Groups, and Hudson and Holland; they went on to talk about how they could go into the office space and have pleasant interactions with anyone, regardless of the specific office they worked for. The rich connections Charlotte, Peyton, and Zara have with at least one staff member within OVPDEMA positively contribute to their sense of belonging amongst Black 21st Century Scholars at IUB.

Finances

All students mentioned finances being an important factor of their membership in the 21st Century Scholars Program and in their decision to attend an Indiana school. Zara noted that the finances she received from both 21st Century Scholars and Hudson and Holland allowed her to live on campus and get involved in campus life. Both are factors that can contribute to a student's sense of belonging (Means & Pyne, 2017). Charlotte and Zara specifically mentioned being accepted into leadership positions as something that validated their experience at IU. This shows that the finances offered from the program contribute to the college life experience as well as the sense of belonging amongst Black 21st Century Scholars at IUB (Means & Pyne, 2017).

Despite the significant positives associated with receiving the scholarship, the students expressed a disconnect to the Program as a result of its large focus on finances. In other words, the students felt that they could only utilize 21st Century Scholars advising staff to answer their financial questions rather than form connections that could lead to a sense of cultural familiarity or validation. In addition to this lack of potential connection, Peyton also expressed his concern with the arrangement of the scholarship and its limitations on summer course opportunities for students. Due to the variety of students' curriculum requirements and pathway, this limitation can further hinder a 21st Century Scholars student's connection to IUB and the program.

Limitations

Through the research process, there were various limitations the researchers worked through. Among those were three main limitations: (1) the number of interviews, (2) the involvement of participants, and (3) the limited understanding of key terms. The following sections outline the specificities of each limitation and how the researchers considered them throughout the assessment process.

Number of Interviews

The researchers were hoping for between four and eight interviews and did meaningful follow up with the ten students who filled out the demographic information. The assessment process yielded three interviews in total, proving to be a small sample size from the 21st Century Scholar program. While the quantity of interviews was a limitation, the researchers learned a lot from the three quality interviews conducted.

Involvement of Participants

The three participants all mentioned having a strong involvement with the Groups Scholars Program or the Hudson & Holland Scholars Program, both of which are in the same office as 21st Century Scholars. Since the program is all within OVPDEMA, students were often pointed towards resources within their more specific cohort, rather than the 21st Century Scholars Program at large. This led to lower levels of engagement with the program we chose to study. Considering all the interviewees felt their involvement with 21st Century Scholars was minimal in comparison with the other programs in the office, the discussion reflects results for all offices within OVPDEMA.

Incorporation of Key Terms

As the researchers prepared interview questions, they planned for certain questions to go with one of the four CECE indicators. For example, one of the questions included “salience” and was intended to go with Cultural Validation, which concerns how campus cultures validate the cultural backgrounds and identities of students (NITE, 2017). The participants gave thoughtful answers about salient experiences, but the researchers reflected that they should have defined how they were using salience. In another instance, the researchers asked participants what they would do with an unlimited grant. In reflecting, a small example may have helped participants in thoughtfully answering the question. Overall, the lack of examples was a choice from the researchers to limit leading questions, but in retrospect the research may have been impacted by a lack of understanding as well.

Recommendations and Implications for Practice

The results of this assessment project yielded several key themes that were discussed by the participants in the study. Among those themes, the interviews yielded several items that they would like to see improved upon or added to the 21st Century Scholar program experience. To reflect the findings, these suggestions have been compiled into a brief summary of recommendations and implications for practice. Overall, the students cited a desire for social outreach and programming from the program, more focused communication from the 21st Century Scholar staff, and mental health support and/or programming. These recommendations come with an admission that they represent a small subsection of the 21st Century Scholar program student body but are worthy of consideration.

Social Outreach and Programming/Identity Building as a 21st Century Scholar

All the interviewees admitted that one of the gaps they recognize in the program is the lack of social opportunities and programming. Charlotte, in response to questioning about social programming she would like to see offered by the 21st Century Scholars program, responded:

Charlotte: But I feel like it'd be good to put faces to like the program itself. Just really make it like a home away from home...when I think home away from home, I think of the Group's program and different initiatives like that...Creating a sense of community outside of the financial offerings they have.

The other participants shared similar sentiments, reflecting an overall feeling of a lack of identity as a 21st Century Scholar. These students find meaning and identity in the other programs they are a part of, citing Hudson Holland, Group's, and Cox Scholars. Given this understanding, the first recommendation of this study is focused social outreach and programming to help students build their identity as a 21st Century Scholar. Given that these students find belonging and identity in the other programs they are a part of, bolstering the social outreach of the 21st Century Scholar program would provide an avenue for heavily involved and sparsely involved students to find community in the program. As Charlotte states, there is interest in creating a "home away from home" in the program itself, bridging the gap between the financial offerings the students benefit from and adding social opportunities for the scholars to connect with peers and the staff of the 21st Century Scholar program office.

More Intentional Communication from 21st Century Scholar Staff

The desire to build community and have social opportunities within the 21st Century Scholar program directly relates to the second recommendation, which is more intentional communication from the 21st Century Scholar staff. One of the participants, Zara, spoke about how she has strong connections with her Hudson and Holland advisor, but those relationships do not exist for her in the 21st Century Scholars program, stating:

Zara: And so I don't have a connection with the 21st century staff as much. The only person that I had a connection with was Jennifer Yeah. Jennifer Berry. And that, but, it was only Kinda like 1 encounter. So yeah.

Charlotte shared similar sentiments as well, responding:

Charlotte: ... While I did meet with them [21st Century Scholar staff], I haven't been with them since then.... When I mentioned I want to create long, everlasting relationship and connections and things like that...While it did help me in terms of like navigating it, it didn't really impact my connection at IU just because it was only for a temporary time... because of that, I feel like it will benefit me as a student if it were further.

Based on these responses, more intentional communication from the staff of the 21st Century Scholar's program could help further bolster the community and provide students more resources to connect to the program. The students have strong relationships with their advisors in other programs they are involved with in the OVPDEMA office but did cite that they would be interested in building those relationships within the 21st Century Scholar's program itself. Creating more opportunities for the students to get to know the staff of the program and to build those relationships would further bolster the positive impact on the students.

Mental Health Support and/or Programming

While a recommendation for bolstering the communication staff have with the scholars in the program is presented, there are various means by which this could be accomplished. Participants in the research spoke to various aspects that facilitate positive relationships with the staff they connect with at IUB. Specifically, Peyton spoke to those aspects that have made him feel more comfortable with IUB staff. When asked if he has opportunities to connect with staff in the program who he feels understand his identities, Peyton responded:

Peyton: I believe her name is Ms. Berry and I feel like I can connect with her and she would understand what I'm going through and kind of give me the best advice that she can.

A third and final recommendation because of this assessment is intentional support and/or programming around mental health. Specifically, Zara cited the importance of mental health support in her relationships with staff, stating:

Zara: Like I like the fact that I can just run into one of their staff [Group's, Hudson and Holland] and it doesn't always have to be like, you know, formal one-on-one. We can just talk about how our day has been and like how we're doing mentally and things like that. So I think they've definitely provided like a I guess you could say a pathway, like they don't make it intimidating to connect with faculty and staff.

She went on further to state how she would like to see events pertaining to mental health, including wellness check ins and programs. Given that all the participants cited having an informal connection with staff helped them feel more comfortable, mental health support and/or programming may contribute to building those relationships with 21st Century Scholar staff and bolstering the overall community within the program.

Conclusion

This study examined how Black 21st Century Scholars experience sense of belonging in the program and at Indiana University Bloomington as a whole. Through a phenomenological qualitative study, our research yielded three rich interviews from Black 21st Century Scholars. These interviews shed light on the experiences of these students at IUB, showcasing the positives, negatives, and aspirations moving forward. The data processing revealed the findings of this study contribute to the overall body of literature on low-income Black students by revealing what factors impact their sense of belonging in higher education.

Through utilizing the CECE Model (Museus, 2014) to synthesize indicators that contribute to sense of belonging, this research yielded four main themes: faculty and staff relationships, resources and opportunities within the program, and finances. From these themes, it is evident that informal relationship building, financial stability, resources, and opportunities are essential for these students to experience sense of belonging and success at IUB. From this research, we have gained a greater understanding of the conditions that help Black 21st Century Scholars feel belonging at IUB and have gained a better sense of ways to further build upon those experiences moving forward. These findings and subsequent recommendations will bolster the existing positive impact the 21st Century Scholar program has on Black IUB participants.

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