

Becoming the Reflection: Exploring the Experiences and Sense of Belonging of Black Women Graduate Students at Indiana University-Bloomington

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and sense of belonging of Black Women Graduate Students at Indiana University - Bloomington. This study expects to uplift others in the value and quality of their storytelling as Black women graduate students here at Indiana University. This research is meaningful that positively impacts the community and provides insight on the experiences of Black women graduate students and to offer solutions to better provide for the students. In essence, this study revolves around the raw experiences of Black women graduate students at Indiana University-Bloomington. The study brings to light the urgency to act on basic measures that will create a fair and promising time at graduate school. Action and attention from Indiana University - Bloomington can finally create an ease in the graduate school hurdles for Black women. Lastly, the researchers, as well as the participants, recognize how our journey is paving the way and becoming the reflection for rising Black women graduate students.

Keywords

Sense of Belonging, Black Women, Graduate Students

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Introduction

Black women often lack a sense of belonging at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) and it is even more pronounced in doctoral programs where only 6.1% of Black students account for this demographic (Shavers & Moore, 2017). Of this underrepresentation of Black people who earn doctoral degrees, Black women earn 65.6% of the degrees obtained (Shavers & Moore, 2017). Despite this higher degree of attainment than their Black male counterparts, Black women still are subject to experiencing sexism, limited resources and support, covert and overt racism, tokenism, and overall unwelcoming, hostile environments (Shavers & Moore, 2017). Robinson (2013) justifies that Black women struggle silently in graduate programs while also having to balance several other roles and responsibilities, such as caring for their families. Because of all their silent struggles, roles, and responsibilities, Black women often have to employ a variety of coping mechanisms and strategies to overcome racial and gendered oppression, and the “use of silence as a survival strategy” (Robinson, 2013, p. 156). These behaviors range from silence to active resistance (Robinson, 2013). Despite the minimal studies on Black women graduate students, there remain recurring themes with Black women having to navigate the higher education landscape while being subjected to racism and sexism. This study aims to highlight the stories of Black women graduate students to bring attention to their experiences while providing implications for faculty and staff in the Bloomington area and campus community. The research question that our overall study aims to address is: What contributes to the sense of belonging, academic pursuits, and social support of Black women graduate students during their time in academia?

Defining Key Terms

As we were reviewing literature, we personally defined three key terms that this study will discuss. The key terms are well-being, sense of belonging, and persistence.

Well-being: The overall experience of health (mental & physical), joy, and prosperity. It includes high life satisfaction, a sense of meaning, purpose, and the ability to manage stress levels to the mind, body, and spirit.

Sense of Belonging: The human emotion of being an accepted member of a group. The feeling of security and support of an individual. It is when an individual can bring their authentic selves in whatever environment being introduced or navigated.

Persistence: The prolonged existence of something. It is the continuance of staying the course of action despite opposition and difficulty.

Theoretical Frameworks

To support our aims and purpose of this study about Black graduate women attending Indiana University - Bloomington (IU), we applied three theories to our work.

Black Feminist Thought

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is another one of the selected theoretical frameworks for this study. Black Feminist Thought is a theoretical framework championed by Patricia Hill Collins, a scholar in race, class, and gender. BFT states that Black women’s experiences and identities are inextricably linked and that their socialization must be understood through the system(s) in which they are situated (Porter et al., 2020). Meaning that Black women have to navigate through their respective collegiate environments, majors, or programs with their marginalized and intersecting identities at the forefront of their lives. Black women hold unique experiences within higher education, and they can be the victims of racism and sexism while navigating the higher education landscape (Shavers & Moore, 2017).

Black Feminist Thought aims to honor the lived experiences of Black women based on the intersections of not only race and gender, but class, sexual orientation, religion etc. and display the ways in which Black women are able to resist power structures (Shavers & Moore, 2017). Within this

framework, BFT also serves to encourage self-definition and provides a space for Black women to develop a new consciousness that serves as another tool of resistance to their subordination (Jacobs, 2016). For us, this framework centers on Black women and values the experiential knowledge they possess. It guides us in understanding the ways in which our participants have been able to navigate an institutional structure that historically has not served them. This framework illuminates the persistence and resistance of our participants despite the plights they may face in reaching degree attainment.

Environmental Theory

Environmental theory suggests there is a relationship and strong impact between humans and the environments they come across. Environmental theory “discusses students' success, and highlights two topics important to student affairs— the importance of adopting a holistic, learning-oriented framework for optimizing the impact of the college environment, and bridging the divide between student and academic affairs” (Kinzie & Arcelus, 2016, p. 51). When positioning environmental theory in our study, we will dive into two of the components that make up the theory: constructed and human aggregate (Kinzie & Arcelus, 2016). These components can make or break the experience of Black women in graduate school heavily influencing the social well-being and sense of belonging of this population. The constructed environment frame will allow us as researchers to further grasp the lens that Black graduate women view their environment at Indiana University - Bloomington. Human aggregate and construction describe the campus' personality, climate, culture, demographics and how the students' interactions affect them. Kinzie and Arcelus (2016) asserted the Holland model that explains how interests and the environments aligns for students and “once they arrive on campus they are continuing to gauge the extent to which the campus environment encourages or is unsupportive of their types” (Kinzie & Arcelus, 2016, p. 55). Our study is impacted by the Holland model because of the supportive and unsupportive environments and climates that our Black women graduate participants will convey.

Transition Theory

Schlossberg's Transition Model is significant when talking about the events, transitions, relationships, and assumptions that are impacted with Black women in regard to maturing at institutions (Patton et al., 2016). The model is made up of the Four S's of Transition that “influence an individual's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies, known as the “4 S's” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 47). We sought to learn more about what the transition for Black women may have looked like from their undergraduate to graduate institution and how receiving institutional support (if applicable) might have aided in the transition to different collegiate environments and contributed to a sense of belonging. Support is one of the crucial tools that will be measured for this study with Black women graduate students. This support can be “measured by identifying the individual's stable supports, supports that are to some degree role dependent, and supports that are most likely to change” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 47).

Goals & Interests

Our goals and interests coincide with this interesting and informative study. We expect to uplift others in the value and quality of their storytelling as students of color here at Indiana University. We expect to gain insight into a specific population that we may not identify with fully. As we interact with diverse groups of students, this information is not only pivotal for Student Affairs practitioners, but for educators, administrators, and students in any field. We expect to provide an open discussion of solutions on how Indiana University can better support these specific student populations for years to come. We hope that this meaningful research positively impacts the Indiana University - Bloomington

community and provides insight on the experiences of this student population and offers solutions to better provide for the students.

As women of color graduate students, we have first-hand experience of how transformative one's life is when trying to receive post-secondary education. We all understand how much it took to persist in getting our bachelor's. Now, as graduate students, there are even more significant challenges that may present when pursuing a master's or Doctoral degree. Black women graduate students still face isolation and marginalization, racism, and eroticization, microaggressions, have fewer funding, research, and network opportunities than their white and male counterparts, and risk dropping out of graduate programs (Apugo, 2017).

Racism, underrepresentation within programs, stress, mental health struggles, and imposter syndrome are just some of the things people can experience while being in academically rigorous graduate programs. Taylor and Reynolds (2019) mentioned how "dissonance is an omnipresent phenomenon for Women of Color, whose position within intersecting oppressive systems involves a legacy of struggle and lack of agency" (Taylor & Reynolds, 2019, p. 93). For this reason, we believe that researching the experiences of Black graduate students is essential. Since being in our graduate programs, we have already met other Black graduates who have conveyed their triumphs but also their tribulations. We feel like we have a great starting point in connecting with other graduate students to participate in the study. The conversations we've had thus far have ranged from talking about finances and the cost of living as graduates, faculty relations, research, and academic course work, transitioning to different collegiate environments, establishing a community, familial support, and experiences with racism on campus. We believe that graduate students have dynamic stories that need to be heard and we are honored to conduct a qualitative study to give the Black graduate student at Indiana University - Bloomington an opportunity to be heard.

Literature Review

American culture does not account for the challenges facing Black women nor does it value their stories (Griffith & Ford, 2022). The intersection of the Black and the woman identity under the graduate bracket has not resulted in a substantial amount of literature (Griffith & Ford, 2022). Griffith and Ford's study was specifically designed to raise understanding of the socialization process of Black women's experience in their graduate education studies. This concluded to the difficulty of interactions with white faculty, the importance of peer mentorships and relationships, and "the impact of support structures, and intersecting identities in academic settings" (Griffith & Ford, 2022, p. 4).

Walkington (2017) uses the foundation of Black Feminist Thought to portray the Black woman's experience in social interactions, workplace discriminations, peer mentoring and self-care. The four main themes of Black Feminist Thought: a) the importance of self-definition, b) the significance of self-valuation and respect, c) the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and d) the centrality of a changed self to personal empowerment; can be used as strategies of resistance against the racism and sexism experienced by both Black women faculty and Black women graduate students in higher education (Walkington, 2017).

Looking within a historical context, "Black women earned twice as many baccalaureate degrees in contrast to Black men" (Perkins, 2009, p. 53). In comparison to graduate school, both Black men and women had very similar opportunities to further their education. However, over the years a growing number of Black women compared to their male counterparts have been awarded master's or doctoral degrees. Despite the number of challenges that fall upon the backs of Black women (finances, preparation, family obligations, discriminatory practices, etc.). Black women's graduate and professional education is a topic that has severely lacked scholarly attention (Perkins, 2009). Perkins (2009) elaborates on the historical lens of graduate and professional education and how it is based on a German model of scientific research. Their study discusses how an educational system was created in an

unequitable approach; it can be navigated and succeeded by a population deemed inferior in being able to attain.

While speaking on the context of Black female students, Shavers and Moore (2017) explored the perceptions and experiences of Black female doctoral students at predominantly white institutions and their impact on academic's persistence and overall well-being (Shavers & Moore, 2017). Black women in graduate programs have been found to experience a higher degree of isolation and dissatisfaction than their White and male counterparts, suggesting that many Black women struggle silently in doctoral programs (Shavers & Moore, 2017). The authors recommended that "the perpetual outsider was a dominating thing that illustrates the psychological and emotional turmoil that Black female participants experienced in their doctoral programs at PWIs and the different strategies that they used to cope" (Shavers & Moore, 2017, p. 217). Unwelcoming spaces, tokenism, and outsiders at home were subthemes that helped support the perpetual outsider theme.

Furthermore, Robinson (2013) draws upon Black Feminist Theory and oral narrative research to illuminate the stories of Black women graduate students while discussing their educational experiences (Robinson, 2013). In understanding the everyday racism and structures put in place meant to barricade Black women, this study sought to understand the communication methods Black women draw upon while in their graduate programs. This scholarship highlights the voices of Black women graduate students defining their identities, disclosing their realities, and articulating their critical consciousness as Black females (Robinson, 2013). A major theme that Robinson (2013) details is the idea of Spoke Tokenism. This denotes Black women having to decide to speak or not to speak and for whom and for what purposes (Robinson, 2013).

In Patterson-Stephens et. al's article (2017), in recent years, there has been an increase of Black women in doctoral programs and there has been an interest from these programs in showcasing diversity (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). One of the focuses of this study is to address the support and success methods implemented for diverse populations, such as Black women. The article speaks on the double bind or the duality of oppression meaning the oppression that Black women face from both angles of their identities (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). The participants reveal feelings of exclusion from spaces in academia, stress from financial expectations, and sacrifice of their well-being to continue in the program (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). On a positive note, they placed strong emphasis on mentorship which they found through valuable experiences with faculty women of color (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). Nevertheless, several faculty and advisors were adamant about their success in the program. Internally, imposter syndrome did not fail to make an appearance in their lives; Black doctoral women faced doubt from seeing and hearing that they were products of affirmative action (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). The motivators stemming from their social and familial relationships attributed their persistence in their doctoral programs.

Regarding this persistence of Black doctoral women, Yi and Ramos' (2022) qualitative study examines not only the experiences, but the motivations of doctoral women students of color. This study focused on the strategies and sources that women of color utilize despite experiencing racism and sexism (Yi & Ramos, 2022). It was found that doctoral achievement was seen as a collective pursuit (Yi & Ramos, 2022). Meaning that women of color achieved their doctoral degrees to symbolize to their communities the possibilities that come with receiving and education. Degrees were also obtained to help better support their families, and lastly, they saw support (from faculty, peers, etc.) and allyship as guiding forces to pursue their degree because they were pushing for them to succeed. Doctoral achievement was also seen as a collective purpose. This meant that women were motivated by the advancement and privilege a doctoral degree can be when trying to enact change (Yi & Ramos, 2022). With a doctoral degree, they were able to leverage a seat at the table, meaning that they had the ability to be a part of important conversations and serve as advocates.

Speaking on pushing Black women graduate students to succeed, Edwards et. al. (2011) explored the complexities of three Black female researchers and defined their success for Black female faculty members at a public research-oriented university. Some of the participants in the study classified themselves as unsuccessful in their doctoral studies and it is “more apparent that success for Black female faculty is as unexpected for them as is their presence in the professoriate. It is possible that their minimal presence in the academy limits the ability to concretely define success” (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 23). According to their only Black doctoral participant, their success is seen as a never-ending journey and the participant mentioned, “Success is being able to advance in this career. It is hard to define it because there are continual markers” (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 21).

Our study contributes to the literature with novelty by providing a platform for Black women to express that they do not belong in their academic spaces, while providing a history of literature, higher education institutions, and experiences that contribute to that exclusion. We are delving into how Black graduate women are challenging the oppressive measures during their graduate programs at Indiana University - Bloomington.

Positionality Statements

We would like to be transparent about how our identities align with the sense of belonging of Black graduate students. We all identify as underrepresented graduate students at a predominantly white institution striving to graduate. Below are our individual positionality statements:

Researcher 1 (she/her/hers) is a second-year graduate student in the Higher Education & Student Affairs Master’s program at Indiana University. She graduated from Indiana University in 2021 with dual bachelor’s degrees in Informatics and International Studies. Researcher 1 currently serves as a Graduate Supervisor for Residential Programs & Services during her time in her program. Researcher 1 identifies as a first-generation Black woman, with interests in researching persistence, retention, and environments of Black students across academic terms and disciplines. Researcher 1 is passionate for assisting Black students across the diaspora with leaving their mark at their collegiate institutions.

Researcher 2 (she/her/hers) is a second-year student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Master’s program at Indiana University. She serves as a Graduate Advisor for Student Organizations in the Student Involvement and Leadership Center. Researcher 2 received her Bachelor of Science in Politics and Government with a minor in African American Studies from Illinois State University. Researcher 2 identifies as a Black cis-gender woman and is a first-generation undergrad/grad student. Having attended a predominately white institution and as a Black woman, Researcher 2 has a special interest in supporting Black women students through their academic endeavors at PWIs. Now as a graduate student, Researcher 2 understands more intimately the complexities of being a Black graduate student and wants to better understand the way to support students as they navigate academically challenging programs and new collegiate environments that may differ from their undergraduate institution.

Researcher 3 (she/her/hers) is a second-year, Black woman in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Master’s program at Indiana University. Researcher 3 serves as a Graduate Supervisor in Residential Programs & Services. She received her bachelor’s degree at Purdue University in Mathematics in 2021. She is committed to helping students of color discover their own passions to leave their legacy on their college campuses. Researcher 3 is also committed to researching the imposter phenomena, grit and sense of belonging of Black undergraduate students, especially in the STEM Field.

Researcher 4 (she/her/hers) is a second year, first-gen, Latina student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Master's Program. She works as a Graduate Assistant for Student Engagement at the Center of Excellence for Women and Technology. She received her bachelor’s degree from the University of Vermont, a predominantly white university in 2021. As a graduate student herself, Researcher 4 is aware of the obstacles from the admission process to graduation. Researcher 4 is

interested in supporting marginalized student populations across the board in their journey to making college their home and finds the Black women graduate identity overlooked.

It is important for all researchers to spend time pondering about how they are paradigmatically and philosophically positioned with who they are studying. Also, it is important for researchers to have self-awareness of how their salient identities, positioning, and the fundamental assumptions they hold might influence their research related thinking in practice. This is about being a reflexive and reflective and, therefore, a rigorous researcher who can present their findings and interpretations in the confidence that they have thought about, acknowledged and been transparent about their stance and the influence it has had upon their work.

Methods

We conducted a qualitative study interviewing Black women graduate participants at Indiana University - Bloomington from various academic departments. The purpose of conducting interviews was to explore the experiences and sense of belonging of Black Women Graduate Students at Indiana University - Bloomington. We conducted meaningful research that positively impacts the Indiana University - Bloomington community and provided insight on the experiences of Black women graduate students and to offer solutions to better provide for the students.

At the time of data collection, The Indiana University Graduate School Student Demographics note that African Americans make up 4.36% of the graduate student body, as it is a predominantly white institution (The University Graduate School Student Demographics, n.d.). The study included between one to two researcher(s) in a 45–60-minute Zoom or in-person interview, which was recorded and transcribed following each interview. The data was stored in a confidential IU Google Drive shared only with us, our professor, Dr. Maurice Shirley, and our graduate student mentor, Da’Ja’ Askew. We also transcribed the interviews by completing the Semi-Structured Interview Protocol Sheet found in Appendix B. For the interview, we gave pseudonyms to the participants to keep confidentiality. We completed 15 interviews in total.

Participant Recruitment

First, we designed a creative flyer, located in Appendix A that was distributed to the Black Graduate Student Association, academic department newsletters, campus buildings, hallways, bathrooms with high foot traffic, word of mouth and online GroupMe chats that some of us are involved in. The GroupMe’s name is “Black in Bloomington”, which is for Black graduate and professional students and young professionals in the Bloomington, Indiana area. The questionnaire mentioned an email for the participant to contact the research team for more information. In terms of networking, the academic programs of our potential participants include Higher Education and Student Affairs, Media, Technology, Social Work, African American and African Diaspora Studies, Anthropology, Education, Mental Health Counseling, Public Affairs and much more.

Screening Questionnaire

We attached a link of the Screening Questionnaire or a QR code of the Screening Questionnaire in the flyer for participants to submit. This was a standardized, screening questionnaire to determine if those interested are eligible to participate in study. This questionnaire included:

- Preferred Name, pronouns, and email address
- Name your IU Bloomington School/College
- Do you identify as a Black woman in a graduate program at Indiana University - Bloomington?
- Are you interested in an in-person interview or Zoom interview?
- List your availability. What are the days and times during the week that you are available?

Once our study was approved to start interviewing, we emailed the potential participants including the logistics of when they would like to interview. For instance, we asked participants if a specific time and day works well to be interviewed. This email came from Researcher 3 and carbon copied to the other researchers.

Results

For our coding method, we used a thematic analysis that categorized our transcriptions by common themes. There were seven themes that we gathered from the interviews, however, the themes that were prominent in our study are: Isolation, Representation, Contentment, Despondency, and Authenticity of Self.

Isolation

The intense feeling of isolation seemed to come naturally to most of the participants after experiencing a taste of graduate school. We define Isolation as the experience of an individual being detached from others in an environment. Whether it stemmed from the treatment of professors towards graduate students or the built-in exclusion of a predominantly white university, isolation seemed inescapable for our participants. This theme felt like a deep-seated emotion and experience of the participants with many of them identifying the word “isolating” or “isolation” in their responses.

The initial acceptance, excitement and inclusion seen in the “Congratulations” letters from graduate programs seemed to not transfer over into the classroom. One of the basics of welcoming an individual to a space is recognizing their name. A participant expressed how this was not something that was guaranteed for her in class stating, “you were ‘the other’ in the room, and like, even though everyone should have been able to like, get my name right, or something like, I still had professors calling me the wrong name”. The inability for academic professionals to recognize their Black women students by their names led those exact students removing themselves mentally or physically from that environment.

Isolation was not a state that the participants chose to be in. Most of the participants came into their graduate school journey with the intent of wanting to build community and form connections. Participants claimed they tried so hard to build community. The consistent trial and error had a participant detailing, “I felt that tug of war, but I want to stay home. I don't want to go out. I don't want to do nothing. Um, I don't want to be around people”. Isolation ended up overwhelming the participants resulting in the questioning of their academic passions with one participant revealing, “My second-year fall semester was probably the one of the worst semesters I've ever had in my student academic career... because it felt so isolating...I'm losing my passion for this”. Isolation is deteriorating the being and the dream.

Environmental Theory played into the core of the comments from participants surrounding isolation. The constructed and human aggregate of IU was conveyed throughout the voices of participants. One participant stated:

Like you're continually bringing black women into spaces that they never had the option to help build. And so, it's like when I never had the option to say like it doesn't matter like how much you try to like fix it to appease me - It was never built with me in mind.

Participants recognize the historically exclusionary nature of their academic institution and are still seeing the continuation of this in real time propelling them towards an isolating state of mind.

Representation

Regarding representation in the graduate programs at IU and in general, there have been times where Black women felt that they were not seen, valued, represented, nor included. We defined the term as Black women portraying a role model of inspiration for the upcoming Black women. At times, being “the only” in their doctoral program. One of our doctoral participants in their final year stated that “having to go through every day in the classroom being the only person that being the only black person in my cohort can be mentally challenging and emotionally laboring”. Black women at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) may not deem themselves as desirable or worthy in their graduate programs. There are higher expectations for Black women in their programs. Our third-year doctoral participant commented:

Black women choose to research topics that are very salient to our identities, salient to the issues that we face, and because of that, our work is very intentional, it is very taxing, and we are not really given this space to do work that does not reach that same caliber across our coursework.

As our participants pursue their graduate studies at IU, they noted that they must work hard and not give up on their pursuits because there will always be another Black woman looking at them as representation and a mentor. A fourth-year participant stated:

I think about the people who are watching me. They have to also see that they can do it too. So that's also motivation and even when in your struggles people need to see that too, right? At a certain point, its like okay, I can't leave. Because what the hell am I going to tell the people that are watching me?

Furthermore, most of our participants expressed that seeing an increase of Black women faculty and staff in their departments motivated them to nurture and form positive relationships. A second-year participant asserted:

All the black women are looking for each other. We're all looking for each other. That's been a good way to find people. But, like I said earlier, we are out here crafting our own circles and togetherness as black women. The socialness is not coming because of IU.

Black women seeing mentors with the same salient identities as them keeps them persevering on.

Contentment

Even in the most difficult challenges our participants face, they have recognized moments of contentment that have helped them in the persistence of attaining their degree. We define Contentment as a mental or emotional state of peace, happiness, and fulfillment that is connected to one's mind, body, and situation of life. Some of our participants disclosed their feelings of contentment during their time at Indiana University - Bloomington. One participant gave an inspirational statement about her guiding purpose that reveals, “What's motivating me is just defying society; defying anyone that doubted me and proving people wrong and proving people right. I will be you know, the person that I know I'm meant to be”. Our participants vocalized they are able to push forward because of a purpose that is bigger than themselves, a purpose that will benefit others within their identity.

Another participant discusses what is one of the factors that keeps her going “I think I feel like I've kind of chosen my people who I know are gonna help me get through here and I know that they've got me um and that's enough.” This participant recognized that she has chosen the people that she

trusts to be there for her through this chapter of her life. We recognized that there are pockets of contentment that occur within the challenges of our participants' educational journeys, this comes either from the people they allow in their lives or prioritizing the purpose in this journey.

Despondency

Many of our participants relayed a story of how they felt despondent about not only being at Indiana University - Bloomington, but about being in the Bloomington community at-large. Despondency is defined as being in a state of low spirits (Merriam Webster). One participant gives a profound narrative about her experience within her cohort and department:

Year one, I hated it. I was quiet for about eight weeks because I couldn't figure out who I was supposed to be in this space. Honestly, I remember being told like they didn't think I was gonna make it to November. That's how much I hated it.

As our themes noted, often Black women represent a very small number within their respective departments. This often leads to a feeling of being unseen and unheard from one of our participants:

No, I did not feel supported. I did not feel supported, and I didn't feel protected as well and I felt very vulnerable and I felt like an open vessel but also a closed vessel. Open vessel meaning like, "oh my gosh, I have all these emotions that's going on on the inside of me" but closed on the outside because I didn't want to show those because I was afraid that I will be labeled as the angry Black woman.

Feeling unseen and unheard left her feeling as if she did not have a place where she could confide. Her narrative aligned with many of our other participants. Another participant talked about how there were minimal opportunities for Black people to be in camaraderie with one another throughout the year and how it leaves her feeling the need to leave:

But also, for my own damn sanity, I can't do another year in Bloomington. I don't think it's the school itself. I think it's the community that doesn't make you feel like you're quiet here because there's nothing for Black people to really do besides like two things a year. And after that you asked to sit down somewhere trying to not come across the wrong white person.

The participant felt that there was a culmination of lack of space and the expectation that Black people stay out of the way. She could not call IU nor Bloomington her home. In recognizing that there are not many Black faces on the Bloomington campus, one participant discusses what her relationship looks like with others in the Black community at IU. Surprisingly, she discussed feeling unwanted and unimportant:

You know what's also hard? Black folks here don't like to acknowledge that you are present, they look down, look around, they look you in your eyes and keep walking. And so that made me off with a little bit like Well, dang "y'all don't care that I'm here".

She expected to be able to find solace with the Black community at a PWI and did not. These are just of the few stories that our participants spoke on that led us to identify Despondency being a relevant theme for our study.

Authenticity of Self

Our participants have gone through the process of figuring out what being themselves looks like while at Indiana University - Bloomington. A common theme we've seen among our participants is Authenticity of Self, which we have defined as the mental state of being able to be one's true self regardless of environment, a sense of genuineness without risk. This is a theme that has been a common thread that has linked our participants in their interviews. Our participants have discussed if they are comfortable being themselves in the spaces they occupied, or what are the reasons why they feel like they cannot be themselves during their graduate studies. One of our participants mentioned a powerful statement of when she knows she can be her true self:

But I feel like I belong if I'm able to be vulnerable and without fear. Like I know that I can say what I need to say, and I can call somebody up and I can look a mess and not have to be performative.

Another participant details what it takes for her to feel like she belongs:

The one thing to think about is diversity and inclusion, but also belonging, right? I think one thing that makes me feel like I belong to a place is just the sense of if I'm able to navigate it and ask questions without fear. If I'm able to be my authentic self. If I'm in a place where I feel like I have to hide who I am as a person, or the things that I value, or the things that I love there for me, that's a problem.

Lastly another participant discussed her cemented state of authenticity:

So as a result, I'm typically comfortable and if I'm not comfortable, I'll say I'm not comfortable. And most recently, I've gotten so comfortable that I'll be in a space and tell people that I'm not going to apologize for what I just said. I mean, it is what it is. Be mad if you want to.

This participant was able to establish a boundary between her comfortability and the comfort of others that might be at a compromise of herself. These quotes are just a many of the narratives that were shared that for us to recognize this was a prominent theme.

Discussion

This research is prevalent in higher education today because of the programs that could be implemented. For instance, learning about Black women's experiences can lead to powerful mentoring programs, discussions, policy implementation, and a possible shift in campus culture. From the study, Black graduate women feel isolated surviving in their academic programs. They have understood the expectation that people have placed upon them in the program, but navigating the social standards, hidden curriculum, and social isolation poses challenges. Some participants expected to be more social with their colleagues.

Our study called attention on Black graduate women not being socialized nearly as much but they are expected to produce the best quality of work amongst their peers. There is a culture of pushing themselves beyond their limits in the pursuit of their academic and professional goals. Meaning that they have to stay the course even when they are lacking their own needs. When they are socializing it is because Black graduate women have been the ones taking charge and creating some of the few spaces not only for themselves but for the entire Black community here.

Furthermore, our participants have realized that their self-worth and self-esteem should not be defined by whiteness as there is another expectation of being strong and being the bigger person when

racial conflicts arise. Whether by choice of not the burden of representing their race or educating people of their ignorance is placed upon them. Every day they have to make a decision on what they can allow or what they will let go.

Lastly, it has been identified that there is an essential importance of Black graduate women having a support system whether that is through friends, family, colleges, etc. As they are pushing forward through the hardships of their academic program or their environment. They have to have a support system to be there for them when times are tough. Many of our participants have made it clear that Bloomington is temporary, they have come here for a specific reason and have plans to leave as soon as their degree has been accomplished. They have recognized that Bloomington is not an environment that is healthy for them and would contribute to their despondency more if they were to stay post-graduation. After interviewing fifteen wonderful and honorable participants, below is a call to action and recommendations for Indiana University - Bloomington.

Recommendations

To move Black women with a collective obstructive graduate experience forward, Indiana University must reimagine its current state. IU first needs to acknowledge and realize the underlying whiteness and white supremacy rooted within the institution. A participant revealed:

I think the first step... IU just has to admit that they're rooted in white supremacy...because it's always been performative. It's not authentic; I think IU can create a space where they really challenge everybody on campus to unlearn a lot of things.

There will always be racial trauma for Black women as they navigate through their graduate studies here unless this is recognized.

Looking ahead at the academic environment, a push for intentional hiring of more faculty and staff of color to signal a beacon of light for Black women on campus is crucial. One participant mentioned:

I think it would have been nice if I had at least a Black faculty member or if there was somebody who's maybe a Muslim, I could identify with...I could be a mentor to somebody that looks like me in the future.

Representation matters in the classroom, and it can make a difference in the day to day lives of Black graduate women.

When discussing heavy topics surrounding racism, IU professors and non-students of color should be required to obtain the proper education and training to avoid taking class time away on basic topics and placing the burden of educating the class on Black women. One participant highlighted her classroom experience stating:

Sometimes I feel like my learning can't continue because we spend so much time talking about basic aspects of racism for white students...aren't you in graduate school like? How did you get here without knowing that?

Constant disruption and the academic progress of Black women in jeopardy calls for an implementation of education for the disruptors.

Regarding Patterson-Stephens et. al's article (2017) about stress from financial expectations, when it comes to the financial aspects of the Black women graduate identity, there was no hesitation in stressing the financial burden of graduate school and our participants were quick to recommend raising

the stipends and the funding for Black women graduate workers. One of our participants stated “I don't know why I'm not getting paid more to be here like. They're talking about little stipend increases...because the amount of work I'm doing, I feel like a faculty member half the time”. There is a clear and justified frustration when the amount of work and the amount of pay do not match up especially when graduate school is in the picture and requires this work for graduation.

Spaces crafted just for Black graduate women are vital to the survival of these same women. From social to professional spaces, participants yearn to learn and grow from one another. One participant recommended, “I would like to see an intergenerational meetup like Black women who are here in Bloomington.” Making these spaces into reality signifies the potential to tie in new opportunities in community, mentorship, resources, networking, and empowerment for Black graduate women. An existing space for Black students on IU's campus is the Neal-Marshall Black Culture Center, however an increase in funding is needed for more programs, initiatives and professional staffing that can expand the capabilities of the center.

Black spaces outside of IU's campus are limited. The graduate experience does not stop at the parameters of IU, the greater Bloomington community needs to do the work to serve Black graduate women as well. A participant expressed:

Open your purses. Where is the money? If I could ask the City of Bloomington or IU for one thing, it is to come together with some money. Open your purses and your wallets, and your coins, and build. Can we get a Black owned building? So, I would like to see Bloomington and IU put more money towards supporting the presence of black people here.

There are resources specific to the Black community, and it is IU's responsibility to initiate the conversation with the city to pull and keep Black students in Bloomington with the establishment of Black owned businesses, hair salons, soul food restaurants, and religious affiliations. These resources are salient to Black graduate women, and they should be able to find them at arm's length, instead of more than an hour away in Indianapolis.

Conclusion

In essence, this study revolves around the raw experiences of Black women graduate students at Indiana University - Bloomington. The study brings to light the urgency to act on basic measures that will create a fair and promising time at graduate school. From feeling like an inspiration to feeling completely hopeless, the participants demonstrated their pits and peaks of holding these intersecting ideas in the graduate environment. They agree that there is much to work on for students of color and particularly, Black women. Action and attention from Indiana University - Bloomington can finally create an ease in the graduate school hurdles for Black women. Lastly, we, as well as the participants, recognize how our journey is paving the way and becoming the reflection for rising Black women graduate students.

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Appendix A

Participants needed for research study on *Black Graduate Women* at Indiana University-Bloomington

45-60
minute
virtual or in-
person
interview

The purpose of
this study is to
explore the
Experiences and
Sense of
Belonging of
Black Women
Graduate
Students at
Indiana
University -
Bloomington.

For more
information, please
scan our QR code
by Oct 25th at
5PM or Contact
Researcher 3

tingurl.com/jjmmffh

Appendix B**Semi-Structured Interview Protocol Sheet****Becoming the Reflection - Exploring the Experiences and Sense of Belonging of Black Women Graduate Students at Indiana University - Bloomington****Time of Interview:****Date:****Place:****Interviewer(s):****Interviewee (pseudonym):**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and sense of belonging of Black Women Graduate Students at Indiana University - Bloomington. This study aims to highlight the stories of Black women graduate students to bring attention to their experiences while providing implications for faculty and staff in the Bloomington area and campus community. We are hoping to conduct meaningful research that positively impacts the Indiana University - Bloomington community and provide insight on the experiences of Black women graduate students and to offer solutions to better provide for the students. We will use pseudonyms to protect the identities of participants. We will also make sure to delete voice recordings of participants at the end of our research process. The duration of this interview will last from 45 to 60 minutes.

Questions:

1. What is your program and what year are you in your program?
2. What brought you to Indiana University - Bloomington? What is your hometown?
3. How have your experiences been as a Black woman graduate student at IU?
4. Do you feel like you have support from your department overall?
 - a. From your faculty, peers, friends, etc.?
5. Do you feel comfortable in your academic spaces?
6. Do you feel like you could easily ask for help in your academic spaces?
7. What does social support look like for you as you navigate your graduate studies?
 - a. Are you involved on campus?
8. More specifically, what contributes to your sense of belonging and motivation?