Author:

Samantha Ritchie

Title:

How Race Affects What we Study on University of Illinois Campus

About the Author:

I am a junior student in the College of Education at the university. I really do bleed Orange & Blue... I love the U of I!

In terms of my career and educational interests, I am very much drawn to educating people, age not withstanding. In my opinion, one is never too old to learn. I also am very easily taken with Psychology, particularly in terms of Education, but Developmental Psychology also intrigues me.

I intend to get my Ph.D. in something dealing with the combination of Psychology and Education (and perhaps even more narrowly in terms of African Americans).

I am very confident and driven, and when I put my mind to something only good things come of it. Lastly, I am a young woman with strong ties to my Christian values. These values have gotten me to my currently state, and I intend to allow them to help guide my future choices.

Abstract:

Educating the world about people and events of the world is vital to getting people to understand and appreciate diversity. Unfortunately, many events and people of the African American tradition are left out and therefore even African Americans have a hard time identifying with who they are and what they have been through as a people beyond slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. It is my firm belief that with the proper education of African American history—including how Black culture can and has benefitted the world—African Americans will develop a sense of self-efficacy that had, until now, been lacking. In light of this, I wanted to investigate the possibility that Black folks that have been educated about themselves have been able to develop a sense of identity and would want to study more based on their growing intrigue. My reasons for doing the research that I have decided to do is to uncover the way that African American college students feel about the classes that they take and whether or not these classes have an affect on their developing selves.

Initial Exercises:

9.03.2008

A Reflection on the U of Illinois

A group of friends and I were walking and talking with one another about our perceived school choices back when I was in the seventh grade. The friends I was with told me various schools that they were interested in attending—all of which were high schools. After all of them had answered, they turned the question on me. “What school would you be interested in attending Samantha?” They were all curious to know, seeing as I had given no responses to this point. My response was completely unexpected by the self-proclaimed group of prestigious students. After all, they were preparing for high school a whole year earlier than when most would. “I want to go to the University of Illinois in Urbana,” I told them.

All of the students were a bit taken aback. They had expected and answer in reference to high schools and my answer was beyond that realm—a university. Needless to say, I have always wanted to attend this university. I have always thought well of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and admired those who had decided to attend. I had been preparing myself to attend classes here for as far back as I can remember. I can easily recall the day that I received my invitation to join the ranks of those at this institution.

Things have yet to change much. I still feel as though I made a proper decision in coming here. I have learned things that are unique to being here, including how much spirit people in Urbana and Champaign and their neighboring cities can have—many of which do not know much about the university anyhow. Since I made the decision to come to this university, I have grown so much. Because it is a large school, the University of Illinois has taught me to seek out what I really need because things are not always simply dropped in one’s lap. However, it is not as though the University has left me without the guidance that I may have neglected to ask for. That is always a blessing.

I have, thus far, enjoyed my time here. I do not think that any other place would have suited me as well. Although I have come to know some of the misfortunes of being at this institution, the good outweighs the bad on any scale. I have learned far too much for me to leave this school at graduation claiming that I disliked my stay here. And the best part is that I have, thus far, enjoyed my time here. I do not think that any other place would have suited me as well. Although I have come to know some of the misfortunes of being at this institution, the good outweighs the bad on any scale. I have learned far too much for me to leave this school at graduation claiming that I disliked my stay here. And the best part is that there is much more to come.

Question:

What is the role of African American studies courses in the average UIUC student’s quest for identity?

Do the core and elective classes taken on the UIUC campus contribute to the average African American student’s search for self?

Plan:

Are there particular subjects academically that are key to assisting one’s identity quest?

What are the core identity issues with which African Americans deal?

Has the student's academic history shaped or shattered his or her desire to search for identity?

For the department (preliminary research):

How many students typically take classes that are specific to the student’s demographic information? What percentage of non-African American students take AFRO classes?

What percentage of the whole body of African American students has a major or minor in AFRO?

What are the most attractive courses for students?

What would you hope that this course means for the average African American student?

What is the role of African American Studies courses in the student’s quest for identity?

Demographic/Background questions:

How old are you?
What is your major?
Where are you from?

Have you ever studied abroad?
How was the racial makeup of your neighborhood while you were living there?
What high school did you attend?
How was the racial makeup of you high school while you were attending classes there? Was is rather homogeneous or diverse?
Did you take any race- or culture-specific courses there?
Have you taken these courses at all before you decided to enroll in GWS/ENGL 280 on the UI campus?
How much exposure would you say that you have had to African American studies (literature, art, music, film, etc.) before taking GWS/ENGL 280 on a scale from 1 to 5?
1 None; 2 Very Little; 3 Some; 4 A Lot; 5 Tons of Exposure

Identity questions:

What identity issues do you think most African American college students deal with?
How would you describe your identity?
Have you ever taken a course that was particularly meaningful to your search for identity?
Can you recollect a class that helped you to question who you are or how you see yourself?
Would you say that your identity as an African American and an American are separate?

***If you’ve studied abroad, how did the experience affect your identity?***

It is a stigma that during college much soul searching occurs, are you searching yourself in an attempt to develop an identity?

Class questions:

Why did you choose to take GWS/ENGL 280: Black Women Writers?
How do you feel about the class? (ice-breaker)
Did you enjoy the class? (ice-breaker)
Do you think the course’s ideals are consistent with what you learned?
Before you took the class, who did you expect to see in the class in terms of demographics?
Did you have any expectations for the class?
Which books/title periods/authors are the most meaningful? Why? (ice-breaker?)
Did GWS/ENGL 280: Black Women Writers encourage other courses like it? Why or why not?

Research Assumptions

A major reason that people do research is to find out if their assumptions are correct. Some assumptions that may be a result of my research topic will probably be that my results will not be able to be generalized because of the demographics of the people that I am interviewing—all African American females. Also, it is likely that my interviewees tell me what they think I want to hear as opposed to what they actually may think and they might assume what my purposes for interviewing are before I actually conduct the interview. Another potential assumption about my research topic is that the interview will mostly be a review on the class whereas my research is not necessarily to review the class, but to begin to understand why people decide to take the classes that they do. Finally, two important issues will be demographics and one’s background. The variation in experiences with African American studies courses and more generally, the culture, will lead to different responses than for those who have less of an experience. Because I am interviewing all African American students, a likely assumption is that is there already a significant amount of African American cultural experience that the students bring to the table and therefore this course will be more likely be something that they experienced before. After the interview process is complete, I will be able to really determine the assumptions that were correct, and those that were incorrect.

Data:

Literature Review

November 5, 2008

I am using a source called Racial Identity Development in African American Children: Cognitive and Experiential Antecedents, in a book called Black Children: Social, Educational, and Parental Environments. This chapter is very good because it will allow me to use the student’s background to determine how they may have defined their racial identity. Because the article begins with an explanation of what one may define as race is very important. It allows me to be able to potentially ask questions about what the interviewer defines as race. I can compare the definitions one to another as the first step to understanding identity according to the article is to understand the concepts that affect what makes up identity. The article continues introducing Piaget and his theories of cognitive development.

The next reference I have is a book called The African American Child: Development and Challenges. This book has a number of different resources and references to the things that African American children deal with as they grow up in this society, one of which is racial identity development. The chapter from this book that I am dealing with particularly is chapter six. In this chapter I will be referencing some of the Identity models that are mentioned including William Cross’s Nigresence model and Robert Sellers’ Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity as well.

Another source that I am using is called the Profile of an Independent Black Institution by Dr. Carol Lee. The reason that I have chosen to use this source is because it will help me to address the more academic side of the interviews and research that I am engaging in. I am going to incorporate it because it will help me to determine how the students are engaging in the information that they are learning in the chosen class. This chapter from Lee’s book, Teach Freedom: Education for Liberation in the African-American Tradition talks about the best way that an African American student can learn the material that they are presented with. In this, the references that I can connect from these ideals to the potentially practical uses of these ideals in the college classroom will be an interesting thing to examine.


Discuss:

12.17.2008

One day, as a sophomore in high school I was sitting in a classroom and my teacher cracked open a book. The book was entitled, The Color of Water, by author James McBride. My
teacher told my classmates and I that this was the book that we would be reading for the next couple of weeks. I examined the book that she was holding and recalled my own copy. It was about three or four inches thick, so I figured that it would not be too hard to read if I did not like it. I did not really have thoughts about its contents when I picked it up that evening, but James McBride shocked me. I was engrossed in the lives of he and his mother. The story was so compelling, so absolutely enthralling, that I had no desire to fall asleep while reading. And that night, I almost did not sleep. The next day, when I arrived at school, I brought my backpack, James McBride’s book, and baggy eyes. Every other class that I had that day could have been for nothing, but once I made it to my American Literature class no one would have known that I stayed up until three o’clock in the morning reading more than what was assigned. After a couple of days, I had completely read the whole book, including the acknowledgements and all the copyright information. According to the syllabus, I still had a week to finish reading had I been staying on track with the rest of the class. At every class period, I would sit there and realize how much I knew about the story, and because I did not want to spoil it for the rest of the class, I kept my mouth relatively shut. But Ms. Heidkamp and I were on one accord; I could talk to her about the book in detail.

The reason that I liked the book was in part because of the way it was written; the chapters alternated between being about James, and then being about his mother. The stories of their lives were incredible because of the struggles that they both went through and dealing with being a part of a community, but really being apart from the very same community. I recalled some of the same feelings in my own life that were shared in their stories throughout the book. Being a Black woman can be very intimidating when the people around you that look like you, look at you in ways that will discourage you from being true to yourself. And that is, to some degree, the story that McBride told—although in the context of him being a mixed-race man (Black and Jewish), and his mother being a Jewish woman.

When I arrived on the campus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign when I was in eighth grade for a science fair, I immediately felt as if I was at home. I felt as though this was a place where I could and would be able to do what I want. I have been at the U of I for many years, and have been at the U of I for at least one year. I interviewed people in a number of places, only where people were comfortable however. Most of my interviews were about the different reasons why they should appreciate their own groups—and for some people, why they should detest another group.

The second stage is the dissonance stage, where one has begun to embrace the positive elements of being a part of the group of which one is a member. This person begins to make commitments to improving the state of one’s own socio-racial group. Finally, there is the integrative awareness stage in which the person has learned to think positively about people from other races. This person is willing to interact positively with these other people and can recognize the beneficial elements of other races as well as their own.

There is another model that is similar to Helm’s model that will add to the pieces that include assimilation, miseducation, and racial self-hatred. The assimilation perspective is about the same as the other models that outline exactly that. There are two people in particular that stand out. One model is by a renowned researcher by the name of Janet Helms. She has created and revised models of racial identity stages for years. The model that I am using for these purposes is the Racial Identity Model for People of Color that was prepared in 1992. Within this model, there are five stages: conformity, dissonance, immersion/emersion, internalization, and integrative awareness.

Conformity is the stage where people are likely to just conform to the societal influences that they feel have an impact on them. This is usually a stage that occurs before people learn about the different reasons why they should appreciate their own groups—and for some people, why they should detest another group.

The first stage is the Pre-encounter stage which has three subsets which include assimilation, miseducation, and racial self-hatred. The assimilation perspective is in explaining in more detail what it means for a person to be in each of the stages that he or she is in. The first stage is the Pre-encounter stage which has three subsets which include assimilation, miseducation, and racial self-hatred. The assimilation perspective is in explaining in more detail what it means for a person to be in each of the stages that he or she is in. The first stage is the Pre-encounter stage which has three subsets which include assimilation, miseducation, and racial self-hatred. The assimilation perspective is in explaining in more detail what it means for a person to be in each of the stages that he or she is in. The first stage is the Pre-encounter stage which has three subsets which include assimilation, miseducation, and racial self-hatred. The assimilation perspective is in explaining in more detail what it means for a person to be in each of the stages that he or she is in. The first stage is the Pre-encounter stage which has three subsets which include assimilation, miseducation, and racial self-hatred. The assimilation perspective is in explaining in more detail what it means for a person to be in each of the stages that he or she is in.
young ladies’ actual names have been altered in order to maintain anonymity.

I came across people from a number of different stages. From what I could determine one young lady, nicknamed Lady, seemed to be in the dissonance stage of Helm’s model. She had a sense of who she was, but she was not exactly comfortable being a part of the group with which she was associated. Despite that, she did not seem to be comfortable conforming to the ideals of the mainstream society and therefore did not rightly belong in the conformity or pre-encounter stages.

Another young lady was also interesting, as she had sentiments that put me in mind of the multiculturalist stage of Cross’s Negrescence model. This young lady, Arie seems to have this sense because of her numerous culturally diverse extracurricular activities that she has been a part of since her high school days. She also had strong connections to multiple different societies that had an affect on her outlook of the society in which she currently resides.

The next young lady, Janice had a sense of Cross’s intense Black subset of the immersion/emersion stage. She definitely had a sense of this because of the way that she spoke about Black folks. Janice was very strongly opinionated and seemed as though no one else in the world mattered except for her and her people.

Titi was very difficult to place just from the interview, but after much thought and review, I have come to believe that she would be in the internalization stage of Cross’s model, with the nationalist perspective. Titi had a lot of experiences that made me think that she might be in the immersion/emersion stage, but her past experiences coupled with her desire to change the way things are made her vitally important to the afrocentric movement.

Cody seemed to be in Cross’s internalization stage. Specifically, she was in the multiculturalist subset because of the way that she explained her experiences. She was one of the only people who had a sense of who she was and also had comfort with her identity. She was very open to new experiences.

Mary put me in mind of the dissonance stage from Helm’s model. She seemed, at first, to be in the immersion/emersion stage at the intense Black level because of what I perceived as her desire to be among the African American community. However, as we spoke with one another, I began to get a different picture that she was in the dissonance stage because of she changed her mind so often. She seemed to stumble a bit over her choice of words and to contradict herself about her beliefs about her own identity and what she felt about the outside world in general.

The next young lady, Dana, seemed to be in the internalization stage of Helm’s model because she had seemed to internalize some positive elements about herself and her identity as a Black woman, however, she did not seem to make it to Cross’s level of internalization—which is very similar to Helm’s integrative awareness stage—where she would have had some loyalties toward some group, including her own. She did not seem as though she would be interested in helping anyone to fight against negative cultural experiences, but she did seem to have a sense of herself.

Lulu was an interesting person as well. Lulu had a very weak sense of self and was very quick to answer during the interview that she was done soul searching, and rather she had done most of it in high school. Unfortunately, Lulu seemed to be in the pre-encounter stage from Cross’s model because of her discomfort. It was almost as if she had never had any experiences that caused her to really question herself, but had a solely negative view of the African American experience. For this, she seemed to be in the miseducation level of Cross’s pre-encounter stage.

I had a couple different assumptions as to what the people would tell me in their interviews that related to what I thought about the subject as a whole. I figured that a person’s academic background would affect the classes that she decided to take. I also assumed that one’s racial identity would affect who the young ladies would spend time with and what they do in that time. Moreover, I assumed that the young ladies who spent more time with studious friends than with those that were not as studious would be able to choose the classes that they were in more purposefully. Unfortunately this assumption was not examined during my interview process.

Through my interviews, I came up with a number of interesting findings, which include some trends among the interviewees and some things that were not so similar about the lot of them. I also discovered a few things that were very unexpected. All will be outlined following.

I asked each interviewee a question of what they thought the most problematic identity issues among the African American community on this campus are. Almost all of the interviewees responded by telling me that struggling to stay true to oneself and seeing themselves positively are the most complicated. They all figured that there were certain issues that all African American students have to deal with, whether they are male or female. Each person admitted that it can be difficult to be the only one in a classroom setting that is Black because one feels as though one person represents the whole community of Blacks when they really are just one voice. This leads to the main issue of staying true to oneself because the students feel as though they have to assimilate to the norms in order to avoid starting arguments, representing the whole Black race, or being the only one with a certain perspective in many class periods.

Because of this pressure to conform, many Blacks can eventually feel as though their opinions are insignificant or irrelevant. This, in turn, can lead to feeling as though they have no reason to think highly of themselves, and may make it difficult for them to see themselves positively. I am not saying that this is always the process that is followed when African Americans get into classes in which they are the only one, but I know that this is a possibility. Also, some of these ideas were expressed by the interviewees as something that they have experienced, as are they experiences I have had in my own life.

Another trend that I noticed among all of the interviewees was that many of them were taking classes in order to gain some sense of identity or to learn about where their ancestors came from. This was important to me because I intend to encourage the University of Illinois to recognize these things about my fellow African American students and employ more African American studies professors and expand the course selection. The fact that 64% of my interviewees had never taken an African American studies class before coming to college, and all but one was interested in taking more based on their experiences in their respective classes was a major influence in encouraging me to make some recommendations to the university.

If these classes helped the students to gain a comfort for being themselves and are able to be in their classes and make responses to questions without feeling as though they are the only one in their classrooms thinking along those lines, the classes should be offered and encouraged. Multiple students claimed that they wanted to take classes that were different than what they were used to taking up to this point. For instance, in terms of her former history courses, Mary said, “I’m tired of learning the same thing. I want to learn something different.” Although Lady did not want to take more classes about the African American experience, she did say she wanted to learn more about other cultures, as opposed to just the mainstream culture. She also stated that the reason she decided to take her African American Psychology class was because “the psychology contributions are mostly made by whites” and that she wanted to get an understanding of the psychology of Blacks.

There were some things that were inconsistent among all of the people that I interviewed. Some students were far more comfortable with themselves in terms of their racial identities than were others. I found it to be the ones who had already learned to some degree about their identities. These students typically were the ones that had experiences in multicultural societies or had multiple cultures to which they belonged. Take Arie for instance. Arie is a part of the African American culture but she also has roots in Jamaican culture. Arie lived in Jamaica at one point in her life and most of her family is from Jamaica, so she has experience living with that culture in her home. Arie had also taken a course called African American Ethnicity during her high school years, which gave her a “better understanding of African American culture” by her own statements. Others who did not necessarily have experiences in these outside cultures did not have as much connection to America as she did. Arie said that because of living in Jamaica, she had an opportunity to see the differences from here to there and for this reason she was able to appreciate America more for it.

Another difference that became apparent after examining my interviews dealt with the reasons for which the students took the African American studies courses. These students were encouraged to take African American studies classes on purpose as opposed to for other reasons, like stumbling upon it or in order to satisfy general educational requirements. Janice said that she was just searching among the courses that she would need for graduation and she just stumbled upon one called Black Women Writers, although she did not look at anything but the call number until the first day of class. As a result of the class, however, she decided that she would take other classes like it on purpose. This sharply contrasted with
the experiences of people like Cody who found the class after searching for something like it and decided to take it because she found it interesting.

There were other trends that I discovered during my experiences researching. One such trend was wildly interesting and dealt with the election of current United States President-elect Barack Obama. Most of the students that I interviewed after November 4, 2008, which was election day, said that because of Obama winning, they had a fresh sense of patriotism toward the US. There was one student that I did interview after the election that said that she did not feel any fresh patriotism toward the United States and explained that there still is a long way to go for African Americans in America. Titi said that “being proud to be an American is totally different from being proud to live in America.” She went on to explain that there are so many things that go into being American, but living in America does not always give you American status. This was the issue that many current American’s ancestors had to deal with in order to get to the state at which we are now. For instance, Blacks were enslaved, the Japanese were put in camps, and Mexicans were all called immigrants. These are all examples of living in America, but not really benefitting from being an American.

However, in contrast, the majority of students that I talked to said that as a result of the election, there was a sense of patriotism toward the United States that swelled up within each of them. As a matter of fact, these interviewees were not the only ones that felt the swell, I did as well. I felt proud of America for once in my life. I really felt as though I was a member of the American society because a part of me was being represented in one of the most important public offices in American history. Something that many of the interviewees agreed on, and that was perhaps best stated by Titi, is that younger generations of Blacks will be able to see themselves represented in a place of major power and influence and that will allow students to develop more self-esteem and self-efficacy as they grow up which will in time develop a stronger African American race.

Something else that I noticed that was majorly intriguing is that there seemed to be a difference among students who were just African American as opposed to Black with other roots, such as Latino, Asian and Lady with African or Jamaican ancestry. This turned into something rather interesting because it was an unexpected confounder in terms of determining the identities of African American students on campus. Although it would seem that this should not have an affect, it seemed that these young ladies had more of a comfort with themselves as a whole group than did the ladies that were from strictly American ancestry—at least to their knowledge.

This was unexpected because it allowed me to see that there are so many differences between people that it makes it very hard to generalize. In terms of finding out whether or not there was an affect on the development of anyone’s identity, I can honestly say that there was according to what I have discovered. First of all, it seemed to be true that there was a major influence on why the students took certain classes. Also, in nearly every situation, the student was interested in continuing the work in African American studies courses. Because I was able to ask the question of whether or not the students would continue rather plainly, I did not have to worry about interpreting my data in any potentially confusing manner. It was clear and overwhelming that the students enjoyed the African American studies classes that they were involved in. However, there limitations on the research. For instance, because I have not had a lot of experience in interviewing at this level and for these purposes, there are some important questions that I left out that, upon review, I should have added in order to get more in depth answers. Also, I had some questions that were not necessary that I asked the students. Some of the earlier part of my research seemed aloof and almost without proper direction, whereas the later interviews were much more prepared, although, still not perfect.

For any future research that should be done to develop more data I would hope that the researcher creates more guided questions and some questions that will help to beat around the bush a bit in order to get more of an idea as to what people really think. I have come to realize that that to some degree, it is necessary to beat around the bush because some people are very direct and they will not do it for you.

I also think that another method of forwarding my research would be to do similar interviews for people of other racial groups, and to include men so that more people can be represented and more opinions can be heard. I find it very important so that the University of Illinois can encourage more people of color to come to this institution. With opportunities to study in depth about one’s own culture, it is far more likely that the students will be willing to attend this university as opposed to another if they are looking to study cultural experiences.

James McBride examined his mother’s past in order to understand who he was and where he was going. Arie, Cody, Dana, Janice, Lady, Lulu, Mary, and Titi all began to examine their past through classroom experiences in order to understand where they were all going. I had to look at my own experiences in order to conduct this process. These examinations all fit into the principle of sankofa. To examine one’s past will help one grow into the future. In order to make it successfully to the future, we must all examine our pasts. School is a great place to begin. We must fight to be educated in our own ancestry in order to create better experiences for our posterity.

EUI Links:

An investigation into how Korean American Freshmen chose CPC and what they gain from their church: http://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/handle/2142/3727

Marine Corps ROTC and the University: http://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/handle/2142/3598

What factors affect how student's choose their majors?: http://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/handle/2142/3765

The previously mentioned studies relate to what I want to study in my own research based on identifying with what one engages in. Particularly, the three relate because they are all about choosing some life experience that one may want to partake in based on one's personal needs and interests. My research will be a bit more based in identity however.

Recommendations:

I think that getting more of an understanding of the Black cultural experience at an earlier age will have a major affect on the way that they see themselves. I think that an influential and positive initiative that the university should take based on the interviewee’s responses would be to encourage schools in the neighborhood to incorporate African American studies courses into the curriculum so that there is an increase in cultural consciousness around the campus. The courses should be regular—so at very least, once a week—in order to have students feel that they are learning some positive aspects of the African American community. The courses should explain positive aspects of the African American community including important people who have made positive impacts on American society in more depth than just a hours on one day throughout a whole year of school. Many elementary and middle schools, let alone high schools, do not offer these types of classes that will help foster knowledge of what relates to a person culturally. I strongly believe that with the help of the university on the surrounding community, the children will grow up more encouraged by what they are able to do.