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WRH 301

The Black Experience in Higher Education: Desegregated, but Not Equal

Considering that our country supposedly values equality and diversity, it is nonsensical why there is an evident difference in the treatment of African American students in higher education. Higher education is just another part of American society that is both influenced and controlled by white supremacy. Regardless of whether individuals are aware of it, there are a multitude of systems, practices, and expectations in place that black students are forced to adhere to if they want to be taken seriously and sometimes even graduate. Some examples of this are feelings of isolation, adhering to standard English practices, and the use of standardized test scores for admission to colleges just to name a few. The experiences of African American students in higher education are starkly different than those of white students and highlight yet another way we keep African Americans from succeeding in our society unless they conform to the standards set by the people in power. The current system in higher education is ultimately harmful to both black and non-black students because it is forcing all students to adhere to similar expectations and beliefs regardless of cultural background.

For starters, African American students are kept out of many parts of higher education; this could be through racist admission processes, needing to use standard English in their essays and papers, as well as other means. The current white supremacist system in place tries to justify this with a multitude of reasons, and it is not just limited to the United States; black students remain underrepresented in the more elite colleges and universities in the United States and the United Kingdom. In both countries, there is evidence to suggest that elite universities are dominated by white students (Bhopal 2294). Furthermore, many students value diversity in their college experience and some scholars believe that having more diverse campuses helps students because it can help students understand the roots and the effects that racial inequality have within the society that they live. One scholar, Natasha K. Warikoo, focused on student’s moral identities and found that a lot of student’s moral identities were focused around *not being* racist and that this led to a specific and particular way of doing things (Bhopal 2296). The students on these campuses were aware of the racial diversity around them but did not discuss racial inequalities with their classmates who had different racial identities than them in fear of being considered racist. This is harmful to both black and non-black students alike. Since non-minority students are less likely to interact with black students and other minority groups in fear of being perceived as racist, black students and students from other minority groups are isolated from their white counterparts. An aspect of going to a diverse college is interacting and meeting people of different identities and beliefs than you and being exposed to new perspectives. Since both groups are closing themselves off from interactions with other racial or ethnic groups, they are limiting the perspectives that they are being exposed to and only cementing their current belief systems.

In some situations, this racial isolation is more harmful than others. When a black student attends a primarily white institutions (PWIs), this experience can be especially isolating and alienating. In one article titled *Black students' classroom silence in predominantly White institutions of higher education* the author reveals through interviews with students “that teaching material [at PWIs] centered on European-American culture and history influenced their silence. Participants perceived devaluing of people of color in course material and perceived that professors used and allowed racist language and opinions to pervade the classroom” (Laufer). It is key to consider the fact that this conclusion was drawn from actual interviews with African American students at PWIs. PWIs praise diversity and try to entice people of different backgrounds to attend their school, yet they do not pause to consider the rhetoric that they are using in their classrooms. This is not to say that all PWIs are guilty of devaluing people of color through the content in their classes as mentioned in Laufer’s research; this is intended to highlight how essential it is for all universities and colleges to practice what they preach when it comes to diversity. Diversity matters in higher education because “Diverse college campuses offer more worldviews for students to consider and engage with. College students can learn from peers with different perspectives shaped by a variety of experiences” (Moody). The African American students that were interviewed for Laufer’s article did not feeling comfortable sharing their different perspectives because of fear of being seen as different. Furthermore, the Black students “believed that self-silencing for the sake of gaining knowledge was instrumental for their development as a student” (Laufer). Because of this belief that is put in Black students head they are unknowingly participating in a society that does not value their beliefs and attempts to have them learn the white perspective of history and thought instead of valuing and showing Black and other minority perspectives.

Another aspect of higher education that takes away the individuality of Black students and the appreciation of Black culture is the idea of professional language. Often times in higher education, when writing papers and speaking in the classroom, there is an expectation that students will use professional language, and this is synonymous for using standard English. African American Vernacular English is highly stigmatized as a result of professional language and because of that the system of higher education has deemed it not suitable for many institutions. As a result of this, there is an unfair expectation that African American students will code switch from African American Vernacular English to Standard English in order to communicate in class or to write academic papers. Code-switching “involves adjusting one’s style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities. Research suggests that code-switching often occurs in spaces where negative stereotypes of black people run counter to what are considered ‘appropriate’ behaviors and norms for a specific environment” (McCluney). To fully see how it affects students in higher education, I found a piece that discusses how the experience of code-switching impacts the lives of black students at Penn State. Interviews with these students revealed that they often code-switch as a result of the negative stereotypes that are associated with African American people. One student said that he is very much so aware of the “angry black man” stereotype and because of this he “softens his tone and tries to be more consciously articulate in situations where he is around predominantly white groups of people” (Chellapilla). By softening tone and purposefully articulating words better, black students change their dialect and speech patterns to assimilate into a society that does not appreciate and accept their natural language patterns and thus, in a way, by code-switching these students are validating a system that does not value them. A common stigma around African American Vernacular English (AAVE) that exists is the idea that many still consider it to be the bastardized form of the European-centric dialect of English. This stigma sticks with students throughout their educational careers: “this carries forward for the rest of their education because the kind of language used in prestigious academic tracks, high-ranking institutions and professional opportunities don’t line up with the linguistic traditions that they grew up with” (Chellapilla). This is an evident example of elitism in American society that prevents African Americans from succeeding. Since black students are expected to learn and adhere to linguistic rules and traditions that they did not grow up with, they are once again put at a disadvantage because white individuals are raised speaking standard English and do not have to jump through the same hurdles as black students do.

Furthermore, AAVE is not difficult to comprehend, it just requires more effort for white individuals to understand. The institutions in place make it so white individuals can skate on by with little effort whereas black individuals are forced to change their language patterns and dialects to succeed in professional settings. It is nonsensical to force black individuals to change while white individuals have to do nothing. In an article from the Conference on College Composition & Communication, “the way Black language is devalued in schools reflects how Black lives are devalued in the world… [and] the anti-black linguistic racism that is used to diminish Black Language and Black students tin the classrooms is not separate from the rampant and deliberate anti-Black racism and violence inflicted upon Black people in society” (“This Ain’t Another Statement! This Is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!”). In order to combat the systems of white supremacy that exist in our country, we must accept and begin to value different vernaculars that are different from standard English. If the United States is truly a democracy, why does the country force individuals to change how they speak depending on the setting? By not appreciating different means of speaking, it can be argued that you are taking away people’s individuality as well as aspects of their culture.

Even before their admittance to any higher education institution, Black students are put at a disadvantage. A striking number of standardized tests used by the many states in our country are used to determine funding. This is detrimental to the school districts that Black students, as well as other minority students, are attending because they do not have the resources needed to do well on these exams as a result of lack of funding. Furthermore, the use of standardized testing as a means of admission and assessments for prospective students at most universities puts these students at even more of a disadvantage. Not only are standardized tests not an accurate or reliable means of testing a student’s understanding or learning, but they have also historically been used as an instrument of racism and help to maintain a biased system in which white individuals thrive. A lot of research has been conducted on this topic, and it has been found that Black students as well as other minority groups have experienced bias as a result of standardized testing. According to one article, “standardized tests have become the most effective racist weapon ever devised to objectively degrade Black and Brown minds and legally exclude their bodies from prestigious schools” (Walker). Often times, this is the result of urban schools not having close to the same budget or resources as suburban schools. Suburban schools typically score higher than urban schools because the areas tend to be more affluent. Research has shown that “affluent and more educated families were better positioned to leverage this new information to capture educational opportunities in communities with the best schools… an unintended consequence of better information was less, rather than more, equity in education” (Walker). Not only is this harmful to African American students living in the urban environment, but it also helps to perpetuate the existing patterns of racial and socioeconomic segregation that exist in our country. Since affluent, often times white, families are moving into suburban school districts because they know that their children’s future schools have the funding and resources for them to do well on standardized tests to get them into a good college, the country is allowing these racial and economic divides to continue since it has yet to be addressed. This is especially alarming when one takes into consideration that because of the differences that urban and suburban school districts have in resources and funding, “on average, students of color score lower on college admissions tests, thus many capable youths are denied entrance or access to so-called ‘merit’ scholarships, contributing to the huge racial gap in college enrollments and completion” (Walker). Standardized testing effectively strips opportunities from the people who often times need them the most. To help people in less affluent communities reach new levels of economic prosperity, changes need to happen when it comes to standardized testing. As it is now, white people and individuals with money are able to pick up and move to whatever school district will get their kids the best grades and test scores so that they can get into the colleges they want. Black families and other minority groups do not often have the same financial flexibility and need to do well on standardized tests and other exams to attempt to get on that same level. However, the way that these exams are designed are not to help these students succeed. The way that standardized tests exist currently in our society are to keep the current hierarchy and power structure that we have. This is harmful to white students as well because as a result of higher education actively trying to prevent a great deal of Black and other minority students out of the system, they are not introduced to perspectives that are different from their own. In a world that is becoming more and more interconnected as a result of the internet, understanding and appreciating viewpoints different from your own is essential if one wants to thrive. Since white students are not receiving much exposure to different thoughts or beliefs many will not know what to do when they are faced with a person or belief that they do not agree with.

Higher education is supposed to be a place where individuals go and learn more about themselves and the field that they want to become a part of. Diversity plays a key factor in determining one’s values and beliefs because it exposes individuals to ideas that may not be like the ones that they hold. As a result of this, people often times challenge their own beliefs as well as the new ones that are being introduced to them to determine whether or not they agree or disagree. The current Black experience at college is impacting this aforementioned diversity because Black students are having to change how they portray themselves in order to fit in. This leads to feelings of isolation because they feel as though they cannot be their authentic self and when this is combined with the fact that they are expected to adhere to a vernacular that may be different from the one that they are used to speaking, Black students are stripped of some of the unique parts that make them who they are. Higher education should be for all people regardless of race, gender, and various other identities. As a country, the United States is remaining complacent in attempting to address the issue of education inequality when it comes to minority groups, specifically African Americans. To be a true democracy America needs to ensure that all citizens have the opportunities and access to said opportunities. As it is now, white individuals have an advantage in the realm of education and the lack of support for African American students is ultimately harmful to students of all races and ethnicities.

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