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# First year college student success for Black and other students of color: A Village initiative at the University of Utah

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Acknowledge the Undergraduate Studies Office at the University of Utah and Associate Dean Ann Darling.

# **FIRST YEAR COLLEGE STUDENT SUCCESS FOR BLACK AND OTHER STUDENTS OF COLOR: A “VILLAGE” INITIATIVE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH**

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*Abstract: Our paper highlights the “Village Block U” program at the University of Utah, which was intended to provide a set of academic and campus/community leadership experiences for Black and other students of color. Through interviews and first hand observations by founders of program, the instructor and teaching assistant, findings indicated that supportive racial culture enabled the students for first year success. But it remains to be seen if this program can help students overcome major life challenges they face ranging from lack of financial aid and need to work, to undocumented immigrant status, family responsibilities and academic challenges.*

The purpose of this research is to provide a first-hand perspective and evaluation of The Village Block U program at the University of Utah in the 2016-17 academic year. In 2015, two African American doctoral students created “The Village,” a leadership bridge program for Utah African immigrant and African American middle and high school students with college aspirations. The program focused on six areas: 1) leadership; 2) scholarship; 3) advocacy; 4) involvement; 5) community; and 6) culture. In 2016, a college curriculum-base course was developed in concert with the University of Utah, with achieving a similar focus and the overarching goal of teaching students of color how to navigate academe. University administrators felt programs like this were needed to support these particular groups of Black students given the overwhelming presence of Whiteness in this region and that Blacks in Utah comprise only 2% of the entire state population.

Thus, an extension of “The Village” concept was recreated as the University of Utah Block U program. The overall purpose of this Block U was to help students achieve the goal of completing general education requirements in year one while being in a primarily Black cohort with other students of color to provide an in-class supportive racial space of cultural affirmation and academic support while being taught by an African American full professor. The curriculum focused on activist leadership approaches to campus change and navigating hostile climates (Gusa, 2010; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000); students then applied the learned knowledge to service/servant leadership projects. Specifically, the course offered a graduate assistant who helped with understanding assignments, provided topic specific tutoring, and educated students about additional campus academic supports. Moreover, the course was conducted in a subsequent semester to allow students to be immersed in the literature, and then to present group projects about activism related topics. In summation, students conducted community service with city-wide, social justice-based organizations and reported on those experiences in the second semester. Activities ranged from literacy to supporting undocumented families and protesting domestic violence.

The research questions we explored were 1) how did participants experience the program as impacting retention through the race-centered leadership? and 2) what challenges did participants face in navigating academic and personal/family responsibilities?

## **Research Perspectives**

Two strands of research perspectives serve as the backdrop to this study. The first focuses the experiences of students of color on predominantly white campuses and the support structures needed for student success, especially for African and African American students. In looking at retention, there is the importance of increasing retention for historically underrepresented populations, and a movement away from the belief that there is one way to integrate all students on a college campus (Bergerson, Hotchkins & Fruse, 2014). This is due to increases of students of color in higher education and a history of systemic and institutionalized racism that allows for marginalization, failure, and lack of access and support for college students of color. Conversely, more currently accepted environmental theories, focused on a sense of belonging, consider the whole person and the ways their racial identity and background shapes their ability to be successful (Keene, 2016; Strayhorn, 2012).

Emerging research demonstrates the importance of physical, epistemological, and transformational cultural connections for African American and African students' college success (Manyibe, Manyibe & Otiso, 2013; Roubeni, DeHaene, Keatley, Shah & Rasmussen, 2015). These areas emphasize the need for connections to people from similar cultural backgrounds, to culturally relevant knowledge and learning as a relevant form of capital, and to positive transformation of their cultural communities, and break racial stereotypes (Harper, 2015; Yosso, 2005). Authentic connections to cultural heritage, campus cultural agents, cultural validation support student success especially in leadership endeavors both on and off campus, and academic disposition, or individual academic qualities of a student, played a significant role as well for African and African American students (Museus & Neville, 2012).

The second body of literature that grounded the project and the study was based on campus leadership with undergraduate students. Currently, there is a major campus movement to prepare undergraduates to be leaders. Some of this is based on the scholarship on leadership identity and the effects of leadership programs on student identity and confidence as a leader (Dugan, 2006; Komives, Mainella, Owen, Osteen & Longersbeam, 2005; Salisbury, Pasarella, Padgett & Blaich, 2012).

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

The leadership identity theory work focuses on the development of self; interactions with group influences; changing world views and self-views with others; the importance of developmental influences; and a broadening view of leadership. However, this type of leadership model was modified for our Village program and included more emphasis on issues of how one leads by following and servant leadership and its importance to African American campus presence, student protest leadership and servant leadership for the Black community both on and off-campus (Alston, 2005, Biondi, 2012; Kelley, 1992).

We also used critical race theory (Howard, 2008; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) as a methodological interpretative framework to analyze the data, understanding that racism is endemic, dominant ideologies need challenging, counter-storytelling represents valid perspectives of communities, and transdisciplinary knowledge informs various forms of discrimination.

## **Methods and Data Sources**

The research design of this study utilized qualitative methods with an emphasis on case study research (Merriam, 2001; Yin, 2017). Eleven students participated in two 45-60 minute open-ended interviews and two 30 minute observations in class and at their selected off campus community organizations. Interviews were transcribed after being audiotaped and observation notes were included in the data corpus. These collegians took the aforementioned Village Block U courses in the fall of 2016 and spring of 2017. Using cross-case synthesis to examine cases individually and comparatively for categorical convergence (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2017) we compared behavioral similarities of participants. Line by line, open-ended coding of the data was used to inform the research by "reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes" (Creswell, 2007, p. 149) to organize categories. In doing so, six salient themes emerged and were analytically coded into two main findings: 1) Academic accountability; and 2) Friendship tug-of-war. Member checking was conducted to assure an accurate depiction of participants' experiences.

### *Results and Points of View*

Critical race theory (CRT) aided in understanding participants' primary sources of racialized trepidation due to interacting with the campus ecology, resulting in the emergent themes of academic accountability and friendship tug-of-war. Navigating the campus successfully was directly connected to participants' perceptions that their physical presence as Black students was valued and that they belonged intellectually. "I loved the Village classes because in there, expectations were high and I was not stereotyped as unintelligent because I am Black" (Janet). Drake added "Having a Black professor who understood me as a Black man was extra important. I felt he was invested in my academic elevation and called me out when I was underachieving." The Academic accountability theme is defined as being dedicated to achieving positive academic outcomes as a collective and actively working to correct deficit majoritarian narratives about Black collegians' inferiority through academic excellence.

Friendship tug-of-war refers to using cohort friendship bonds created in the Village course to support, protect and assist participants in successfully matriculating through their first year of college. Leslie explains "we developed a family atmosphere due to spending so much time studying and hanging outside of class together. I wanted to make sure my cohort did well holistically so we all reciprocated." John summarized the experience "we had each other's back. Our success is connected. Sometimes we argued over academic commitment, but we made up so the push and pull was worth it. Ultimately, we all did well because we looked out for each other."

These themes were contextually bound within a predominantly White university where participants experienced racism and racial microaggressions in their other courses and while living in the residence halls. However, the Village Block U courses served as ethnic enclaves (Guiffrida, 2003; Museus & Quaye, 2009) where participants felt safe, appreciated and nurtured. Results of this study indicate that overall, students valued the nuanced experiences found within Block U Village program cohort, which were culturally congruent unlike the overarching campus. It was an environment that kept the students engaged with academic endeavors through an emphasis on student activism, grounded in the experiences of students of color and service to the Black and other communities of color. It also served the purpose of introducing students to campus engagement and leadership on the issue of hostile campus racial climate issues and off campus community circumstances.

To illustrate, for the final spring course project students revisited campus demands made in 2015 by Black students concerning how the university is obligated to systemically address hostile campus racial climates, due to an increasing absence of Black faculty members and the lack of a diverse student body. Through their research and leadership activities, they found that the same issues were still of concern, but since 2015 new ones had emerged that undergraduates were concerned with, namely the treatment of religious minority students such as Muslims after the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and the anti-immigrant rhetoric regarding a border wall directed at Latinx students.

### *Questions for Further Exploration*

A series of questions need to be asked after the initial program implementation. The most notable is, how can a race-based campus leadership for Black students work when so many of these students are also facing multiple issues that create a compound effect on their ability to survive after the first year of college? For example, many of the students worked part time or full time jobs while they were taking classes and also had family responsibilities. This in turn created a tremendous strain for the students to do well in their other classes to complete their general education requirements. So the problem of finances, financial aid and going to college needs to be discussed as a major potential issue for first year student success despite racial leadership programs (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Another issue is that of linking campus student leadership to an actual major. The students in this cohort would have benefited from the Village Block U emphasis on Black community investment and "giving-back" being linked to an actual major that could provide them with an academic and career path road map in which they could start to form a student identity linked to courses of interest, faculty engagement with them, and eventual careers and programs of study.

Still, the overarching benefits of the Village Block U program was that it provided the first-year students of color a supportive space for them to start the college intellectual and socialization process. The instruction and supportive services within the year-long class made the college going process more explicit for these students and gave most of them the confidence to succeed academically and start to navigate in predominantly white spaces with more confidence. Finally, the peer-mentoring relationships created a sense of racial, immigrant status, social class, and gender/sexuality pathways through culturally appropriate teaching and advising.

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