Factors impacting retention among African American students at Mississippi State University

By

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African American retention is low at the college level, especially at Predominantly White Institutions. Factors such as resources, support systems, aggressions, and racism impact African American enrollment and graduation. Mississippi State University has low enrollment and retention rates for African American students, despite programs in place to increase these rates. This research uses anthropological methods to explore the experiences and knowledge of resources among African American students at Mississippi State University. Results indicate that the programs meant to combat low retention rates are ranked low and not widely known by participants. Negative experiences of racism and aggressions are also reported by participants. Understanding this is will help increase effectiveness of retention programs at Mississippi State University and policies that create safe and welcoming campuses and promote diversity and inclusion.
DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to all minority students at Mississippi State University, who face larger challenges than their majority peers.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend a large amount of gratitude to several people who have supported, helped, and guided me through this process. I would like to thank my family for the continued support of my education and multiple changes in my life plans. I especially want to thank my wonderful fiancé, Blake, for not only supporting and encouraging me but also being my rock. Thank you for listening to me complain and always giving me the necessary push when needed. A huge thank you to my friends for keeping the encouragement flowing to keep me going strong, especially Karen Hall, who upon many instances has specifically kept me going and writing. I would also like to extend a small thanks to Derek Anderson for his lectures in my Introduction to Anthropology class. Without his passion, I would not have discovered my own for this amazing field.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .......................................................................................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................................... iii

LIST OF TABLES ............................................................................................................... vi

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................. 7

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY ................................................................. 11

  Introduction...................................................................................................................... 11
  Racism .............................................................................................................................. 11
  African American Retention ..................................................................................... 13
    African American Males and Females .................................................................... 14
  Resources for African Americans ............................................................................ 15
    Diversity and Inclusion ............................................................................................ 15
    Faculty and Mentoring .............................................................................................. 16
    Safe Spaces .................................................................................................................. 17
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 18

III. SETTING AND METHODOLOGY ........................................................................... 19

  Setting .............................................................................................................................. 19
    Retention in the United States .................................................................................. 19
    Retention in the Southern United States .................................................................. 19
    Mississippi State University ..................................................................................... 20
    Retention Programs at Mississippi State University ............................................. 21
  Methods ......................................................................................................................... 22
  Quantitative ................................................................................................................... 24
  Qualitative ..................................................................................................................... 24
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 24

IV. TRIBULATIONS AND COMFORT: STRESSORS AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS
    OR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS ................................................................. 26

  Introduction ................................................................................................................... 26
  Demographic Data ....................................................................................................... 26
  Experiences on Campus ............................................................................................... 28
V. EXPERIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE: AGGRESSION, VALUE, AND KNOWLEDGE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS
   Introduction..................................................................................33
   Challenges Among African Americans in College..........................33
     Challenges that African Americans Face in College..................34
     Reasons African Americans Drop Out or Not Graduate..............36
   Perceived Racism..........................................................................36
     Racism and Aggression on Campus.........................................36
     Value of African Americans on Campus..................................37
   Resources....................................................................................38
   Conclusion....................................................................................38

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION....................................................39
   Contributions to the Literature....................................................40
   Limitations...................................................................................41
   Conclusions................................................................................42

REFERENCES.......................................................................................433

APPENDIX

A. INTERVIEW SCHEDULE.................................................................47
LIST OF TABLES

4.1 Continuous Variable with mean, standard deviation (SD), and range..............26
4.2 Categorical Demographic Data with the number of students and percentages......27
4.3 Frequency Students Travel Home..................................................28
4.4 Frequency of Negative Experiences..................................................29
4.5 Rank and Mean of Resources at Mississippi State University......................30
5.1 Themes Associated with Challenges for African American in College...............35
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

African Americans experience lower income and access to resources such as healthcare and education. Higher education improves these by providing better upward mobility and opportunities. Yet, fewer African Americans enter college, and when they do, do not graduate at the same rates at their white counterparts. African American retention in higher education is extremely low, especially in Predominantly White Institutions. Because of this, many universities and colleges institute programs and policies to increase African American enrollment and graduation rates. These programs focus on creating diverse and inclusive environments, so that students feel welcome and have easier access to resources and support on campuses.

African American graduation rates are 42% across the United States compared to 62% for white students (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education 2016). Disparities in retention rates are even more pronounced at Predominately White Institutions (referred to hereafter as PWI) where African Americans constitute only 14% of enrolled students with fewer than half eventually receiving degrees (Johnson 2013). In the Deep South, African American retention and graduate rates are complicated by a history of racism, perceived racism, and problematic black-white interactions (Robertson and Mason 2016). Of the 50 best colleges for African Americans listed by Essence Magazine, 35 are PWIs and only 5 are in the South (Clark and Terrell 2016:120-127). At Mississippi State
University, a PWI in the Deep South, 20.4% of students were African American, in the Fall of 2011, compared to only 18.9% in the Fall of 2016 (Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness 2016).

Mississippi is in the Deep South of the United States. It is also home to Mississippi State University, where retention remains low, despite efforts to increase African American enrollment and graduation. Mississippi State University has programs such as the Holmes Cultural Diversity Center that promote diversity and inclusion on campus. It sponsors student organizations and training programs, meant to combat aggression, racism, and exclusion of minorities on campus.

Existing literature focuses on the factors that impact retention, such as access to support systems, resources, aggressions and racism. It also examines existing programs, to provide insight to improve retention at PWIs. Retention is also studied by gender and athletic involvement, with a focus on African American men. Resources, such as mentoring, inclusion programs, and safe spaces are also posited as possible factors to improve retention rates.

This research project asks African American students enrolled at Mississippi State University what problems they face staying in school and what resources they access to help them with those problems. Semi-structured interviewing of currently enrolled African American students is used to investigate access and knowledge of resources along with challenges for African Americans students. Open-ended questions also explore students’ experiences at MSU. This mixed methods study aims to better understand the factors that impact retention for African American students at MSU
Chapter two reviews the literature on African American Retention, with a focus on the factors that affect students’ decisions to stay in college. Retention rates of African American males, females, and athletes is included in this chapter, as are the rates of African American enrollment at Mississippi State University. Retention programs across the United States and at Mississippi State University, in particular, are discussed. Resources include inclusion programs, mentoring, and safe spaces as possible areas that could improve retention of African American students at Mississippi State University.

Chapter three provides an overview of retention of African Americans in the United States, the Deep South, Mississippi, and Mississippi State University. It presents the overall context of Starkville, MS and the African American population at Mississippi State University. This chapter concludes with methods used to investigate the experiences of students on campus and their knowledge of resources.

Chapter four describes the demographics of the sample for this project. It explores stressors and support systems on campus. It also presents data from ranking tasks to investigate the knowledge of resources at Mississippi State University, using SPSS 24 to analyze data.

Chapter five presents the qualitative results from the data gathered. Here, students’ experiences are outlined along with their use of resources and specific challenges they report. The experiences of African American students on campus are presented in two parts: 1) racism and aggression on campus, and 2) how valued African Americans feel on campus.

Chapter six discusses the findings in the study with a focus on knowledge of resources and negative experiences on campus. Here, findings are related to existing
literature. The chapter concludes with the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Retention rates for African American students at the collegiate level are exceedingly low, more than 30% lower than their white counterparts (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education 2016). Disparities in retention rates are even more pronounced at PWIs (Johnson 2013). In the Deep South, African American retention and graduate rates are complicated by a history of racism, perceived racism, and problematic black-white interactions (Robertson and Mason 2016). These problems are not overlooked as many colleges and universities create academic programs to provide support and improve retention for African American students (Brooks, Burt, and Jones 2012:206). Despite this, disparities persist between African Americans and whites in both college retention and graduation rates. This project aims to investigate the problems that influence retention as well as resources African American students use to mitigate their struggles in attaining a college degree. Specifically, it explores the difficulties that impact African Americans decisions to remain in and graduate from a southern college, Mississippi State University.

Racism

Racism is deeply rooted in the formation of the nation’s history, affecting all types of institutions, including higher education (Karkouti 2016:60). Racism is defined as a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race; a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles; racial
prejudice or discrimination (Merriam Webster 2017). Therefore, it is no surprise that racism is expressed in many ways, and has a lasting impact on African American retention at PWI’s. Student affairs practitioners use a variety of terms to describe the feelings and perceptions of students of color at PWI’s, including descriptors such as marginalization, mattering, and isolation (Sims 2008:691). These terms can also be included in perceived racism and be a result of microaggressions and subtle racism on campuses. Certain aspects of the students’ interpersonal environment greatly influence their motivation to continue in school or to withdraw (Sims 2008:692). African American students’ experiences are inseparable from microaggression and other forms of racism. These also impact and reduce retention rates at PWIs. This is further complicated by the threat of stereotyping, which causes anxiety and resultant behavioral responses when students of socially stigmatized groups encounter stereotypes that those outside the group hold about them (Davis III and Harper 2017).

Aggressions and racism are still issues on campuses, especially in the form of microaggressions. Microaggressions are comments or actions that are subtly and often unintentionally hostile or demeaning to members of minority or marginalized groups (Merriam-Webster 2017). Microaggressions include microinvalidations, microinsults, and microassaults (Grier-Reed 2010:182). These microaggressions cause added stress and anxiety for students. These aggressions, especially on campuses and in classrooms, are stressors for African American students that add to their difficulties staying in school. Microinvalidations, microinsults, and microassaults are all forms of aggressions that African American students often face when going to school at predominately white institutions. Microinvalidations exclude, negate, and nullify the psychological thoughts,
feelings, or experiential reality of a person (Sue and Capodilupo et al. 2007:274). This can also be applied in social settings as well as in the classroom. Microinsults or "subtle snubs" are where the contributions of and/or persons of color themselves are unacknowledged, invisible, or marginalized (Grier-Reed 2010:182). Microassaults are explicitly racist and demeaning behavior (Grier-Reed 2010:182)

African Americans are faced with barriers such as hidden racism, alienation, unintentional acts of discrimination, intentional discriminations, forms of intimidation and problems associated with acquiring adequate financial aid (Lett and Wright 2003:189). All of these contribute to disparities and declines in retention.

Since African American students at PWIs are a small percentage of the overall student body, the support systems for them are relatively small. A support system includes close social ties, such as family, friends, and mentors. This is especially important when these students have family and friends who live far away. However, the implementation of a mentoring program helps provide much needed support.

Microaggressions both in and out of the classroom and the lack of support systems contribute to the numbers of African American students dropping out each year and ultimately, low graduation rates. To deal with these aggressions students need reliable and accessible support systems.

African American Retention

African American students constitute only 8.7% of college enrollments and an even lower 5.7 % of college graduates (LeNoir and Person 1997:79). PWIs have lower retention rates than Historically Black Universities (referred to hereafter as HBCUs). This is exacerbated by racial microaggressions and the lack of support systems and overall
inclusiveness. Mississippi State University is no exception. Here, the university saw a decline from 1,146 African American freshmen in the Fall of 2015 to 634 African American sophomores in the Fall of 2016. This is an important observation because it shows an almost 50% drop in African American students in just one year at MSU and a possible trend in retention of African American students.

African American retention varies by gender, athletic involvement, campus involvement, and diversity on campus. Literature shows that there are many factors involved in African Americans staying in and graduating from school. However, the most common thread, is that of adequate support systems at home and in school because this helps to motivate students to stay and succeed in school. Family and friends are an important part of this support. This is further complicated for first generation college students because family and friends are unlikely to have the resources and knowledge these students require for collegiate success. However, any type of campus involvement, including sports, adds to campus support systems that compliment those of family and friends. These include involvement in student organizations, mentoring programs, and safe spaces for students.

*African American Males and Females*

African-American male students face cultural, societal, academic, and lifestyle challenges that differ from traditional college students (Brooks, Burt, and Jones 2012:221). Approximately one out of nine African American male college students are athletes (LeNoir, Person 1997:79). African American male student athletes graduate at a slightly higher rate than African American male non-athletes (LeNoir, Person 1997:79). Thus, furthering the idea, that a local support system, such as teammates and coaches, full
of resources for success, increases retention among African American students. However, their athletic activities pose the most severe limitations on their opportunities to engage in scholarly pursuits (Bimper and Harrison et al. 2017:60). The question then posed is whether or not institutions are trading low-quality education for increased graduation rates. Furthermore, the graduation rates for this group are still low, indicating a need for investigation into other factors that impact low retention rates of African American students.

There is little information for retention among African American females, except when comparing them to males. There are few studies that look at the experience of female African American College students (Sims 2008:694). Very little of their experiences are recorded and no information on their athletic involvement or how it affects retention is included. Gender roles are complex for African American Women because they often adopt traditional and nontraditional roles simultaneously (Sims 2009:695). There could also be a link to a lack of African American women in the faculty and the low retention of African American female students. Students tend to talk to those who they perceive as having similar experiences. When there are limited number of female African American faculty, there are limited number of people for students to establish in their support systems.

**Resources for African Americans**

*Diversity and Inclusion*

Inclusion is defined as the act of including or to take in or comprise as a part of a whole or group (Merriam-Webster 2017). However, it also includes an integration that includes students unlearning their culture in substitution for the established campus
culture (Burt, Brooks, and Jones 2012:207). Diversity and inclusion are foci of PWI’s as they attempt to address poor retention among African Americans. Many universities focus on inclusion as well as diversity through retention programs that help minority students stay in and manage school. Retention programs, however, vary between institutions. Some institutions not only create “safe spaces” for students to talk about microaggressions but also provide a mentoring program. However, there are also efforts to create more diversity in student organizations, so that minorities also feel represented on campus.

**Faculty and Mentoring**

An institution is responsible for the healthy development and achievement of its student body regardless of race or ethnicity (Lett and Wright 2003:189). Mentoring strengthens support systems for students and provides them with the help they need to manage the stress of experiencing microaggressions. Studies indicate that African American students often shared many feelings of isolation, non-acceptance, and rejection in PWIs (Lett and Wright 2003:189). Therefore, mentoring programs are often incorporated into retention programs at universities to help alleviate these issues. Some mentoring programs are used to create places for students to talk about anything, a type of “safe space.” The African American Student Network or AFRAN is a humanistic intervention because it emphasizes addressing the socioemotional needs of students and the development of healthy supportive relationships (Grier-Reed 2010:181-182). In socialistic cultures, such as that of African Americans, it is important to be sensitive to those needs of African American students (Lett and Wright 2003:189). This includes the
need to have mentors, administrators, and counselors that understand the experiences of the students.

Mentoring from peer students or faculty members is an effective tool in providing the support necessary to overcome barriers for African American students (Brooks, Burt, Jones 2012:210). In interviews [with AAUP members], students almost always say the majority of their instructors, sometimes including faculty member of color, are insufficiently skilled to teach learners from a range of racial groups and cultural backgrounds (Davis III and Harper 2017). This, in turn, can add to feelings of not belonging that are most often associated with racism and microaggressions on campus. It is crucial that students participate in collaborative groups, enabling them to develop small, supportive communities of peers and bonding to the broader social communities of colleges while also engaging them more fully in the academic life of institutions (Sims 2008:293). Mentoring in this way could include both faculty and upperclassmen peers.

**Safe Spaces**

Safe spaces or counter spaces are defined as places (as on a college campus) intended to be free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations (Merriam Webster 2017). Safe spaces are not enough when it comes to providing assistance for students who need help. There is a lot of debate on safe spaces. This in turn has created a negative stigma associated to safe spaces and those who need them. Thus, creating more tension and stress on those who benefit from these spaces to feel safe and free of judgement.

The safety inherent in counterspaces (e.g., safe spaces) can provide sanctuaries for Black Students to (a) make sense of their experiences on campus and determine whether
a racial microaggression has even occurred, (b) find support and validation for their experiential reality, and (c) identify alternative ways for responding to such incidents (Grier-Reed 2010:183).

Safe spaces are also meant to be a place where someone can go without judgment or having to defend their beliefs. However, specifically during the past year, safe spaces have been confused for places where one goes to cry for being “oversensitive” and “entitled”. An article in USA Today College, states that these spaces could be more harmful than beneficial, because it teaches students to become uncomfortable anytime a sensitive issue arises, such as gay rights in an ethics classroom (Mansouri and Zhang :2016). Articles like this furthers the idea that safe spaces are unnecessary and creates a large stigma for those who feel the need for a space like this.

Conclusion

Many factors that impact African American retention at the college level have been discussed here. Racism and microaggression are discussed as heavily influencing factors. Different types of aggressions can present different themselves on campuses and in classrooms. In addition, different retention programs across the United States use various methods of mentoring in partnership with safe spaces in hopes of creating a higher retention percentage. Studies on retention rates among African American males, females, and athletes varies, but all have a stronger focus on African American males.
CHAPTER III

SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

Setting

Retention in the United States

Retention of minority students in higher education institutions is a concern for many US colleges and universities. African Americans, specifically, have extremely low retention rates country wide, especially at PWI’s). African American students cite the lack of minority representation and diversity on campuses as problems that contribute to poor retention. These along with microaggressions that students experience both in and outside of the classroom, contribute to the problem. Many PWIs work to incorporate programs that would improve percentages of African Americans who remain in school and receive degrees. Many retention programs are housed in diversity and inclusion programs. These programs include mentoring, easier access to resources, and encouraging the creation of a local support system on campus. Other programs focus on student activism and campus involvement. Despite these recent efforts, disparities remain in enrollment and graduation between African Americans and whites.

Retention in the Southern United States

Perceived racism and feelings of alienation are included as factors in poor retention rates. Because of this, the Deep South is an ideal area to investigate factors that impact retention. In Essence magazine’s top 50 colleges for African Americans only 13 universities listed were in the south and of those 8 were HBCUs (Clark and Terrell
2016:120-127). This leaves on 5 PWI universities that are considered a good place for African Americans to go to college, thus supporting the need to investigate the factors that impact African American students at a southern PWI. These five colleges include: Georgia Institute of Technology, University of Florida, Xavier University of Louisiana, Emory University, and Rice University (Clark and Terrell 2016:120-127). Mississippi is considered part of the Deep South and has yet to be the center of investigation for African American Retention at Predominantly White Institutions on the college level. African Americans in higher education in Mississippi is far from a simple problem, especially in the rural South where it is heavily influenced by poverty and the educational, historical, and structural challenges that create additional barriers to higher education (Wilson 2011).

**Mississippi State University**

Mississippi State University is a public university in Mississippi which is situated in a city with a population of approximately 25,000. The city serves as the county seat and is home to more than half of the county’s population. Over 50 percent of the city’s residents have some college education (Claritas 2013). The university is a prominent feature of the city with much of the population directly or indirectly associated with the institution.

During the 2011-2012 academic year, there were over 20,000 students enrolled with more than 80 percent classified as undergraduates. Almost half of the student population was female. The majority, approximately 70 percent, was White with more
than 20 percent African American and other minorities; international students accounted for less than 20 percent of enrollment (King 2012).

Mississippi State University is ranked 6th out of the 14 colleges in Mississippi for diversity (Niche.com 2017). Rankings were determined by the number of minorities at each university. However, the rate of retention is still low and declining with a drop from 20.4 percent of African Americans overall in the Fall of 2011 to 18.9 percent African Americans overall in the Fall of 2016 (Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness 2016). This is total decrease of 1.5 percent of the overall African American student population over the past five years. Last year there was a decrease of 489 African American students from the 2015 freshman class to the 2016 sophomore class, representing African American students who enrolled, but did not continue for a second year.

*Retention Programs at Mississippi State University*

There are other resources on campus for students that include the Holmes Cultural Diversity Center and textbook vouchers. However, to the knowledge of the author, none of these resources are strongly advertised to the student body. Investigation is therefore needed to determine what factors are present when a student decides to no longer attend or graduate from Mississippi State University.

The Holmes Cultural Diversity Center is named after Dr. Richard E. Holmes, the first African American alumnus (HCDC 2017). This program is geared towards helping Mississippi State University become a more diverse and inclusive campus. This includes sensitivity training and programming in which all students are appreciated as valued
members of the campus community (HCDC 2017). This program also includes mentoring
to fellow students with the Peers Assisting with Students or PAWS program. This
program is meant to combat low retention rates of first year students (PAWS 2017).
Along with programs and training seminars, HCDC also sponsors student organizations
that help promote diversity. It sponsors 11 student organizations, two of which are
specifically geared towards African Americans (HCDC 2017).

Methods

This project investigates what factors impact African American students’ ability
to stay in school at MSU. Mississippi State is an ideal place to investigate the factors that
influence retention among African American students because of its location, student
enrollment, and programs to specifically address retention. Semi-constructed interviews
were used to collect data on challenges for African American students and their
knowledge and use of available resources. Thirty participants who self-identified as
African American and who are current students at MSU were interviewed during the
Spring semester 2017 following approval by the Institutional Review Board.

Fieldwork, including participant observation, was conducted from August 2016 to
March 2017. During this time, the Principle Investigator (PI) explored retention programs
and resources on campus. She also informally talked to several students about retention
and their experiences on campus in order to better understand the overall atmosphere on
campus. Recruitment for interviewing was through convenience sampling. The PI
approached all the participants at various points on the campus of Mississippi State
University through areas of high foot traffic (e.g. the Union and classrooms). The
Colvard Student Union was an ideal place to recruit between mid-morning and mid-afternoon. It is the center of coffee and food, which makes it a perfect place for student convergence. During semi-structured interviewing, the PI approached students in the Student Colvard Union who appeared to African American and asked if they were willing to participate in the study. She also visited two classrooms after receiving permission from instructors. In both cases, the PI explained the research project to students and asked that anyone who was interested in participating to contact her to schedule a time and place for this.

All participants were given the opportunity to pick the time, date, and place for interviews, although some chose to complete the interview immediately. The PI approached them, introduced herself, explained the study, and asked if they would like to participate. She gave the option to move to a more discrete area as most places were busy and crowded. The PI read the Oral Informed Consent script and discussed it to ensure that participants understood their rights. She stressed that they may stop the interview at any time, and that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. The PI also provided a copy of the consent with contact information.

Each participant was asked the same demographic questions. These included: age, gender, student classification, relationship status, how far they were from family, how often they traveled home, where they lived (on or off campus), and if they had a job. The date of the interview and the location of the interview were all recorded (See Appendix A). All data were coded and analyzed using SPSS 24.00 statistical package.
Quantitative Data

To better understand what resources students are aware of and using most often, participants were asked to rank 12 resources at Mississippi State University in order of importance. These included: family, sororities and fraternities, other student organizations, friends at MSU, Resident Advisors, professors, Holmes Cultural Diversity Center, student services, counseling, friends not at MSU, MSU personnel, and others. If a resource was not ranked it was given a ranking of 13 in the coding.

Qualitative Data

Participants were also asked questions such as, “Have you ever felt ignored by a group or in a class?” “What challenges do African Americans face in college?” “What challenges do African Americans face at Mississippi State?” “What reasons do African American students drop out of school or not graduate?” “Have you ever been called names, or been the center of a bad joke? What about fellow students?” If a participant responded “yes,” to any of these questions, they were asked “please tell me about that.” The goal of these questions was to gain insight to perceived racism, campus, and classroom environment. These qualitative were analyzed through the identification of themes. The frequencies of these themes are reported and explained in greater detail in the qualitative chapter.

Conclusion

The methods used to assess the resources and experiences of African Americans at Mississippi State University are quantitative and qualitative assessments. Qualitative research required open-ended questions for participants who answered yes to any
negative experiences on campus. These experiences are not only used to find themes that are associated with campus climate for African American students at Mississippi State University, but also to explore what factors could impact an African American student to stay enrolled. These data also represent themes that terms and rankings cannot show.

Quantitative research required the use of a ranking task, to determine what resources are most important to the African American students interviewed on campus. These data are important in knowing how retention programs and resources are being used and utilized by African American students.
CHAPTER IV

TRIBULATIONS AND COMFORT: STRESSORS AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

Introduction

This chapter explores the problems African Americans experience as minority students at MSU as well as their knowledge and use of resources and supporters available to moderate those stressors. First the demographic data are presented for the entire sample. This is followed by the specific difficulties students report associated with staying in school. Finally, ranking results explore the importance and knowledge of resources available.

Demographic data

All participants (N=30) were asked the same demographic data questions: age, gender, student classification, relationship status, the length of the relations, how far away from home they were in time (hours), how often they visited home, occupation, and whether or not they live on campus or in student housing. Table 4.1 presents continuous variables for the sample.

Table 4.1 Continuous Variable with mean, standard deviation (SD), and range

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>18 – 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance Home (hours)</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>.4 – 15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average age is 21 and ranged between 18 and 25. Drive time home average was a little over 3 hours, but ranged from a minimum of less than 30 minutes to 15 hours.
Categorical variables are presented in Table 4.2 with number of participants and percentages. The majority are female with only seven male participants. The sample is evenly split between lower classmen (50% freshman and sophomores) and upper classmen (50% juniors and seniors). The majority (n=22) report being single. Only eight report that they are in a relationship, which includes hanging-out, dating, engaged, and “its complicated.” The length of students’ relationships averages 18 months with a maximum of five years.

Table 4.2 Categorical Demographic Data with the number of students and percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Gender</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>Classification</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
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<td>40</td>
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<td>Relationship Status</td>
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<td>Single</td>
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<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Living Arrangement</td>
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<td>Off Campus Student</td>
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<td>Housing</td>
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<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Support systems are important assets in all students’ lives and may have positive impacts on African American students’ ability and decisions to stay in college. Therefore, students were asked how often they are able to go home. Table 4.3 presents these results. Sixty-six percent report being able to visit home at least once per month. However, another 19 percent say that they are rarely able to go home or it depends on their work schedules in addition to school.
Table 4.3 Frequency Students Travel Home

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability to Visit Home</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I can take off work</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once in a while</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three times a year over major breaks</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holidays</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every month or so</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice a month</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every weekend</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whenever I want</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MSU requires all freshman to live on campus for at least a semester. Therefore, data were collected on whether or not a participant lived on campus, and if they lived off campus whether it was student living. Off campus student living, is a type of apartment complex that has amenities directed specifically towards students. Campus Trails, for example, a student living facility located within walking distance to MSU’s campus, has building advisors that act like Resident Advisors in dorms. Only 10 participants interviewed lived on campus, but of the 20 participants that lived off-campus, 13 lived in student living style apartments.

Experiences on Campus

Participants also answered questions about experiences on campus and in the classroom. Data helped to determine perceived racism on campus and how well students could manage school. Questions included descriptions of known microaggression to determine if negative experiences were prevalent. Other questions were meant to gage how well African American students could manage school. Perceived racism on campus seems to be split evenly. Almost all of the participants were evenly split on experiences
on campus, with the exception of feeling disvalued on campus. Disvalue was determined by participants. Half of the participants (50%) responded yes to having a trouble managing or staying in school. The other factors were negative experiences on campus, in which half (50%) of the participants answered yes to being the center of a bad joke, feeling worthless or inferior, or being ignored in a group or in a class. When asked, a bad joke was defined as a racist joke. Participants were also asked if they or their friends felt that their contributions, values, and opinions were valued by others on campus. Twelve participants (40%) responded that they did not feel like their opinion were valued and fourteen (47%) of participants’ friends felt this way.

Table 4.4 Frequency of Negative Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Experienced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PARTICIPANT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing School</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brunt of Bad Joke</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disvalued on Campus</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt Worthless or inferior</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignored in a group or class</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Experiences</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ranking Task

All participants were asked to rank a list of 12 possible supporters and resources at MSU which include: family, friends at MSU, friends not at MSU, professors, student services, the counseling center, student organizations, resident advisors, MSU personnel, sororities or fraternities, and the HCDC. Some students were unfamiliar with some of the resources. In those cases, the term was assigned a rank of 13. Table 4.5 lists each resource with its average ranking. The means of each resource is given; a high mean is a
low ranking and a low mean is a high ranking. Student Services included services such as the Financial Aid office and the Library, MSU personnel included staff and other MSU employees, and “other” included anything else that participants deemed an important resource.

Table 4.5 Rank and Mean of Resources at Mississippi State University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Friends at MSU</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Friends Not at MSU</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Professors</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Student Services</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>MSU Student Counseling Center</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Student Organizations</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Resident Advisors</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>MSU Personnel</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Sororities and Fraternities</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Holms Cultural Diversity Center</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Per the participants in the study, family is ranked the most important resource. Family is followed by friends at MSU, friends not at MSU, and professors. These are followed by Student Services, the Counseling Center, and Student Organizations. Resident Advisors, other personnel, sororities and fraternities receive low rankings. Most interesting though is the ranking of the Holmes Cultural Diversity Center. HCDC is the center of retention programs at Mississippi State University. It is home to the previously mentioned PAWs program, meant to combat low retention rates. However, participants in this study were either unaware of this as a resource or simply were not using it. The only resource that ranked lower was “other,” which was included in case students were using support systems that the PI did not include in the list.
Variability in Rankings and Reporting Microaggressions

Students who report that they have not experienced problems staying in or managing school also rank professors more important (4.3 compared to 7.5, F = 6.6, p<.02), student services more important (5.9 compared to 8.0, F = 4.7, p<.04), and friends not at MSU less important (6.6 compared to 4.2, F = 5.2, p<.03) than their counterparts who do report having trouble staying in school. These associations do not, however, indicate a cause and effect relationship. There are three possibilities for this relationship: 1) Students who seek the help of professors and student services, but not friends who are not at MSU have fewer problems because they are accessing those resources. 2) It could also be that because they do not have problems managing school, they are do not need the same kinds or as much support or 3) there is a possibility that it could also be that because they do not have problems they feel more comfortable accessing these resources.

In order to compare perceived microaggressions within the sample, the PI summed the possible five questions (called names or center of a bad joke, felt disvalued on campus, felt worthless, ignored in a group or class, and friends’ contributions disvalued). Questions with positive responses (i.e., yes) were coded as “1,” negative responses as “0,” and these were summed for a possible 0-5. Problems managing school was not included here because these may be the result of problems not associated with microaggressions. The sum of reported perceived racism and microaggressions was compared by student classification. There is a significant difference between freshman and everyone else. Freshman are significantly less likely to report microaggressions that other classmen (F = 11.9, p<.002). This may be due simply to being on campus less time. Freshman have not had as much time to have these negative experiences as those who
have been on campus longer. It may also be that students become more aware of microaggressions over time and learn to pay more attention to them.

Furthermore, students who report microaggressions, meaning they answered “yes” to any of the five questions about experiencing these, also rank HCDC significantly more important (8.6) than those who reported not experiencing microaggressions on campus (11) (F = 4.6, p<.05). Even though these students rank HCDC as more important, the average ranking is still relatively low at 8.6 out of 13 with several other resources ranked higher.

**Conclusion**

The questions meant to explore the specific difficulties students report on campus explore campus climate and how it is associated with students staying in school. It is also expanded on in the qualitative chapter, for specific experiences. The ranking task results showed which resources are most important to African American students. It also revealed how well known programs meant to combat low retention on campus were to students.
CHAPTER V
EXPERIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE: AGGRESSION, VALUE, AND KNOWLEDGE
FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

Introduction
This chapter provides an in-depth look at the experiences and self-reported resources of African Americans at PWIs. Qualitative data from open-ended questions provide context for how participants understand the challenges African Americans face in college, the specific experiences they have, and what resources participants are aware of for African Americans in college. Participants were asked three types of open-ended questions: 1) challenges African Americans face in college, 2) what experiences they have, and 3) what resources are available to them in college. These questions asked specifically about these themes in multiple forms and had common patterns in the responses. The qualitative results were analyzed for major themes which are presented in table 5.1.

Challenges among African Americans in College
Participants were asked the same 3 questions about challenges that African Americans face in school: 1) “What challenges do African Americans face in college?” 2) “What Challenges do African Americans face at Mississippi State University?” and “What reasons do African American students drop out or not graduate?” There were 3 general themes in the responses to these questions. The first was money and the need for better access to financial aid and scholarships. Next was the feeling of not being included and represented on campus and by organizations on campus. Another was not being
prepared academically in high school for college and therefore, not being able to keep up in class and make good grades.

**Challenges that African Americans Face in College**

Participants were asked two specific questions about challenges in college for African American students. The first question was challenges in general and the next was about challenges specifically at Mississippi State University. Generally, participants listed money as a large challenge to African Americans. Specifically, the access to money in the form of financial aid and scholarships. When asked about challenges African American’s face in college, “not being understood,” “not being prepared by high school,” “financials,” and “not being included” were general common things. There was also a large theme in participants who were unsure what challenges African Americans face in general. One participant responded with “More so being understood and being known that we are a part of the student body but it could be financial.” Another participant pointed out racism on college. “People think racism is dead but it’s not, like being considered as only here because of sports, I have status as an athlete.” Whereas, another participant responded that “staying away from parties, focusing, and time management” would be a larger challenge.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financials</td>
<td>Money</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academically Prepared</td>
<td>Not being in “gifted” programs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not being prepared for college</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Struggle with the curriculum</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not studying</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Feeling out of place/not fitting in</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling included/being left out</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not having a network</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Known as part of the study body</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Not being understood</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>Parties</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of motivation</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Racism/Racial Tension</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time-management</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Themselves</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t know/I’m indifferent</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reasons African Americans Drop Out or Not Graduate

All participants were asked to list and explain reasons that African American students do not graduate or drop out of school. These answers were like the challenges African Americans face, but mainly citing money as the deciding factor. One participant listed “cost of tuition, drop-out to take care of family, but the main reason is money.” Other reasons included “no push or motivations,” and “coursework being too hard.”

Perceived Racism

There were two types of questions used to investigate perceived racism on campus. Participants were asked about negative experiences and how valued they felt on campus. Whether a participant answered yes or no to the questions was recorded and coded as quantitative data; however, if a participant answered yes to any of these questions, qualitative data were also recorded, to determine the severity of perceived racism on campus. Therefore, this section will only discuss the data of participants who had negative experiences on campus, or who felt undervalued to determine how inclusive and welcoming Mississippi State University’s campus is to African Americans.

Racism and Aggression on Campus

As mentioned in the Quantitative Chapter, there was an even split between students who have had negative experiences on campus related to racism and aggression. Each participant was asked if they have had personal experience, or if they had a friend who have experienced this type of behavior. Specifically, participants were asked if they have been the center of a bad joke or called names. Each response ranged from a mild experience to an extreme experience. The experiences ranged from being called names to
being the victim of violent behavior. One participant overheard that she “was one of those” during a discussion in a history class. Another participant stated that “at a football game, a drunk kid called my friend the N-word.” Even though none of the participants were asked about violent behavior, participants still offered the information. Another student stated “one night, a frat house wouldn’t let black baseball players in and it resulted in a fight in the parking lot.” Another student said she “was almost run over and called a black b****.” One student reported that

“My life was threatened before, I was going to the bathroom [in the dorms] and drunk white guys told me to go back to my room or my throat would be slit. I told the RA, RD, and police. The police said there was nothing that could be done.”

**Value of African Americans on Campus**

To gauge how inclusive African American students were on campus, each participant was asked questions about being ignored or undervalued on campus, both inside and outside of the classroom. Participants were also asked to describe any experiences peers may have had. Again, this datum’s yes and no portion was coded and analyzed quantitatively and was split evenly among participants. A few participants reported being ignored or undervalued in the classroom by faculty or staff, but did among other students. One participant who did have a negative experience through faculty or staff stated “in history class and we were talking about civil rights. I was the only black person and when my hand was raised, I was ignored.” Another student said, “I was told that there were budget cuts for a GA position [in my department] but a white intern was told to fill out an application.” Another participant responded with this:

“Yes. I am a transfer from Jones and I was in a Spanish group and they bullied me for being the ‘smart black guy’ because I
did the most work and my teacher got on to them [white partners] for it.”

Resources

All participants were asked to list, explain, and rank resources that helped African Americans in college. There were two themes to this: 1) generally and 2) at Mississippi State University. The main resource was a way to access money such as financial aid and scholarships. This seems to be one of the most common themes throughout the interviews with participants. However, family and friends were also listed as resources due to their ability to motivate and help a student throughout school.

Conclusion

The qualitative data were used to investigate the specific experiences of students on campus. Even though only half of the sample reported any negative experiences, these experiences ranged from mild to severe. Other data were collected to uncover knowledge and importance of resources. Open-ended questions were also used to discuss why these resources were important for African Americans to stay in college and graduate.
CHAPTER VI
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Anthropological methods were used to assess the experiences and knowledge of African American students. Experiences related to perceived racism and aggressions were explored to understand campus climate at Mississippi State University. Knowledge of the challenges and resources available to African Americans in college were also assessed. The importance of resources at Mississippi State University were also assessed to understand where students go when they have problems.

Students discussed four main themes associated with challenges among African Americans in college: 1) Financial Problems, 2) Academic Challenges, 3) Inclusiveness, and 4) Understanding. A fifth theme was associated with otherness which included a variety of answers ranging from parties and lack of motivation to not knowing what challenges African Americans face.

Other data included experience with perceived racism and aggressions on campus. Even though only half of the sample reported having a negative experience on campus associated with perceived racism and aggression, the experiences recorded ranged from being called names to being threatened with violence. This points to a negative climate in at least some aspects on campus that can, in turn, lower retention rates at the university.

Resources were ranked at Mississippi State University on importance to each participant. These data show that African Americans still heavily rely on family and friends for help instead of the other programs in place meant to create a local support system. HCDC ranked extremely low compared to other resources meant to help minority
students. Part of this low ranking was due to students’ lack of knowledge about the Holmes Cultural Diversity Center and what it offered to African Americans.

**Contributions to the Literature**

Universities and colleges have programs in place to combat low retention rates of African American students. These programs mainly incorporate mentoring from faculty and peers. Other programs create spaces for students who have been the victim of racism or aggression to go.

This research adds to the literature by asking African American students about their knowledge and experiences on a campus that is in the Deep South. It explains what challenges African Americans feel they face in college and what resources they have access to. It also adds which types of resources are most important, including programs meant to make challenges African Americans face easier. In addition, it also gives examples to the types of aggression that students face on a southern campus, to give insight as to why southern colleges are not ranked high on lists for minority students.

Qualitative and quantitative data indicate that many African American students report having problems managing and staying in school. They also report experiencing perceived racism and microaggressions on campus. Many of these are micro. However, some also report aggression and, perhaps more troubling, an inability to receive help from those in positions to provide it (e.g., police, RAs, etc). By understanding what students are experiencing and problems they have accessing help and support with these, this research provides insight into the needs of students and possible ways to address these needs. For instance, for PWIs to institute effective programs, they must first know
what students require, what they are already receiving, what they are not able to access, and what is most effective.

Variability among this sample also indicate that retention for minority students is not a simple problem. Some students do not report having problems with school. They also rank certain resources higher (professors and student services). Freshman are less likely to report microaggressions. Too often, groups are treated as homogeneous. However, even with this small sample size, there are significant differences in experiences and support resources. These differences are key in understanding how to address problems in the future.

In addition, this research has the capacity to speak to retention across the board, not just among African Americans. Many of the problems managing school that African Americans report (e.g., lack of preparation, financial concerns, distractions, etc.) are problems many students experience. First generation college students and many from rural or poor backgrounds face some of the same challenges in managing school. Understanding these is an important step in addressing them to improve retention and education for all.

Limitations

This study provides insights to the experiences and knowledge of challenges and resources of African American students at Mississippi State University. This research aimed to investigate stressors that African American students face associated with staying in school and the resources they use to attempt to negotiate those challenges. One limitation was the small number of African American male participants. A total of seven male participants were interviewed. The PI attempted to include more men in the sample,
but ultimately, women were more willing to participate. More male participants must be interviewed for a more robust understanding of all African American students’ knowledge and experiences.

Another limitation was of the sample size itself (n=30). Although this is the minimum sample size needed for better analysis and cultural model of African American students at Mississippi State University, further study will be needed for a complete analysis and model. The research design also did not use random sample. A random sample was not needed for cultural analysis or data due to the nature of the data. Without a random sample, there is no true way to know if the data are representative.

Conclusions

This study presents evidence that there is a shared knowledge among African American students at Mississippi State University. This knowledge relates to challenges that African Americans face and what resources African Americans can use. There was an overall high importance on family and friends for help and low important on the Holmes Cultural Diversity Center and MSU staff. Even though the data were evenly split on the presence or lack of negative experiences on campus, the experiences can be categorized as perceived racism and aggression on campus, ranging from name calling to violent behavior.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE
1. What is your relationship status? How Long?

2. What are your living arrangements at MSU?

3. Do you live on Campus?

4. How far are you from family? How often are you able to go home?

5. Do you work? If so, what do you do?

6. What challenges do African Americans face in college?

7. What challenges do African Americans face at Mississippi State? Please tell me more about those?

8. What reasons do African American students drop out of school or not graduate?
9. Are these challenges different for African American students than for white students?

10. Have you had problems staying in or managing school?

11. Thinking about life on campus, have you or someone you know ever been called names or been the center of a bad joke?

   If yes, please tell me about those

12. Have you ever felt that others at MSU did not value your contributions, opinions, values, or even presence on campus?

   If yes, can you tell me more about these? Where these in the classroom or a different setting?

13. What about fellow students? Do you know of cases where people were disvalued like this on campus?
If yes, Can you please tell me about those?

15. Have you or someone you know ever felt worthless, flawed, or inferior?
   If yes, please tell me about those experiences.

16. Have you ever felt ignored in a group or in a class?
   If yes, please tell me about those experiences and how they made you feel.

17. When you need help with anything here at MSU, where do you go or what do you do?

18. What resources help African Americans stay in college?

19. Tell me about each of those resources and rank them in importance.

20. What resources are available for you to access at Mississippi State?
21. I am going to give you a list of resources. Please rank them in any way you like and explain how they are ranked and why.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sororities or fraternities</th>
<th>Family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student organizations</td>
<td>Student Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>The Student Counseling Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAs</td>
<td>Friends not at MSU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors</td>
<td>MSU personnel (staff, etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HCDC</td>
<td>Others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
