



Experiences of students of color majoring in psychology at a predominantly White institution



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Abstract

We examined the experience of psychology majors and minors of color in the Psychology Department using mixed methodology. More specifically, demographics information, three scales, and focus groups were conducted to understand how students felt about peer relationships, faculty, support, and other resources. Descriptive statistics, correlations, and focus group themes are discussed.

Introduction

- The university strategic plan includes recruitment and retention of diverse students.
- While the percentage of racial and ethnic minority students within the school and at the university has increased over a 7-year period (37.5% and 34.5%, respectively), the growth has been more substantial at the department level.
- At the department level, the percentage of racial and ethnic minority students has risen by 67% for majors and 58% of minors. This suggests our major and minor seem particularly attractive to racial and ethnic minority students.
- Despite the influx of racial and ethnic minority students into the program, the program and classes have not changed.
- The department is interested in exploring how to best support racial and ethnic minority students majoring and minoring in psychology.
- Additionally, retention efforts will contribute towards diversifying the discipline of psychology, particularly as many of our graduates go into post-graduate work in the field.

Method

Participants

- The participants were 15 racial and ethnic minority students who major or minor psychology.
- The majority of students were female (66.7%), senior (60%), and Black (73.3%).
- The average age was 21.6 ($SD = 1.59$).
- Eleven students (73.3%) reported that their cumulative GPA is between 2.5 and 3.5.
- About half of the students (46.7%) were transferred from other institutions.
- Twelve students (80%) have stayed three years or more at Salisbury University.

Method, Cont'd

- About half of the students (46.7%) reported that they have plans to earn advanced degree in psychology.

Procedure

Recruitment.

- Three recruitment methods: (1) posted flyers; (2) faculty announced the study in classes; (3) majors and minors were emailed and invited to participate.
- Interested students contacted a faculty designee, who scheduled them for a focus group session.

Focus Group Structure.

- Focus groups were facilitated by two university staff members from a different department, who had experience in focus group procedures.
- Focus groups were held on-campus at a time convenient for students.
- Sessions were recorded on two digital audio recorders for data capture. Food was provided.
- Focus group questions were as follows:

- How did you decide to major/minor in Psychology?
 - How connected do you feel with the Psychology Department? What contributes to this sense of connection?
 - What does the Department do well? What is your absolute favorite thing about this Department?
 - What does the Department need improvements on? If the Psychology Department were to change one thing about the Department, what would it be and why?
 - What are some of the difficulties you have faced in the Department as a student of color?
 - What support, resources, and guidance do you wish you had from the Department as a psychology major/minor of color?
 - How have your peers as well as Psychology Department supported you when you encounter difficulties as a student of color?
 - If you were to give a piece of advice to a newly declared Psychology major of color at SU, what would it be?
 - Any feedback you have to the Department we have not discussed yet?
- After, participants completed a short survey, and were debriefed.

Method, Cont'd

Measures

Psychological Measures

- Demographic information: Gender, age, year in school, household income, cumulative GPA (7 point scale from 0, increased by .5), expected semester GPA (7 point scale from 0, increased by .5), course load (credit hours), standardized test scores (ACT or SAT)
- The Scale of Ethnic Experience (Perceived Discrimination Factor Only) (SEE; Malarne et al., 2006)
- Faculty Support Scale (FSS; Shelton, 2003)
- Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (ASE; Roeser et al., 1996)

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations ($N = 15$)

	FSS	SEE	ASE	cGPA	eGPA
FSS					
SEE	.007				
ASE	.431	-.479*			
cGPA	.002	-.328	.089		
eGPA	.427	-.241	.252	.383	
<i>M</i>	4.05	4.11	4.21		
<i>SD</i>	.45	.49	.61		
α	.921	.749	.815		

* $p < .10$

Focus Group Themes

Theme	Elaboration
Relationship with professors.	Seen as valuable and meaningful. Most felt connected; saw faculty as friendly and helpful. Depth of relationship impacted by personal connection, taking multiple classes, and multi-role relationships.
Atmosphere of department.	Saw dept as inclusive and welcoming. Faculty left doors open, respond quickly to emails, and are available. Students felt faculty would be available if needed.
Systemic issue.	Dept. not visible on campus; offering B.A. instead of B.S; institution professing commitment to diversity and yet they do not see it carried out in action.

Results, Cont'd

Focus Group Themes, Cont'd

Theme	Elaboration
Reasons for majoring/minoring.	Taking high school Psychology courses; exposure to individuals with mental disorders; family members being in a related field; other majors not working out.
Advising relationship.	Advising experiences varied, but considered important. Successful relationships included care about student's interests and future plans. Some suggested being matched on interest area or race.
Need of student support group.	Consistent interest in having a space that welcomed students of color, yet not exclusively just for them, to build relationships and knowledge.
Students' learning process.	Students need to be proactive in seeking opportunities, info as to which classes/faculty to take, becoming resourceful, and responsible.
Representation of diversity.	Wanted more diverse faculty and student representation, specifically more Black faculty members. Having Black faculty as an instructor, and racial minority faculty sharing their experiences, were positive. Students were at times the only student of color, and felt spotlighted.
Addressing student concerns.	Experiences were generally positive. Suggestions included taking students' feedback seriously and have transparent accountability for teaching.
Professional development.	Wanted more support and guidance, including in post-career planning. Existing clubs and forums were helpful, but more was needed.
Teaching techniques.	Satisfied with the diverse selection of courses and quality of instruction. Appreciated connecting course content to real life issues. Students preferred more discussions and audio and visual resources. Students do not feel spotlighted.
Connecting with peers.	Students varied in peer connections and were impacted by transfer or commuter status, or if they see their race represented in class. Class discussions and group assignments help with peer connections.
Internship, research, and other opportunities.	Wanted more internship, research, and other opportunities. Transfer students have limited time to gain experience, and some projects moved too slowly. Some students want to see internship and/or research to be a requirement for majors.

Conclusions

There are some concrete steps that the dept. can take to further support psychology majors and minors of color. While some can be easily implemented (e.g., disseminating internship, research, and other opportunities creatively, providing space and opportunities for student-faculty interactions), others may take time for meaningful changes (e.g., diversifying faculty, increasing dept. visibility).

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