

Black Culture Centers: A Review of Pertinent Literature

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Black culture centers provide important university support and services, such as advising, career development, mentoring, and leadership skill building. This article examines the existing literature related to this vital campus resource and identifies existing gaps for further exploration. A review of relevant literature indicates that though Black culture centers (BCCs) have existed at traditionally White institutions for over forty years, there have been relatively few empirical investigations into their roles, functions, and perceptions and even fewer studies examining culture centers generally. In light of declining financial resources and demands that directors demonstrate that BCCs are helping to create positive student outcomes, a common theme within the discourse surrounding BCCs involves validating their existence. Opponents often downplay the contributions of BCCs, arguing that they foster self-segregation and prevent African American students from integrating with the broader campus community. They claim that the roles of BCC are too narrow in that they are solely for African American students and merely serve a social mission. These widely held misconceptions pose a challenge to BCCs and ultimately present a threat to their existence. It is imperative that BCC researchers move beyond the anecdotal and develop more empirical evidence of the necessity of these race-specific culture centers.

Keywords: Black culture centers

Black culture centers, which emerged during civil rights and Black power protests of the late 1960s and 1970s, provide important university support and services, such as tutoring, academic advising, career development, mentoring, and leadership skill building (Bankole, 2005; Davis, LePeau, Patricoski, & Schmeckebier, 2005; Hord, 2005a). Though Black culture centers (BCCs) have existed at traditionally White institutions (TWIs) for over forty years, there have been relatively few empirical investigations into their roles, functions, and perceptions and even fewer studies examining culture centers generally. In fact, since the first study (Bennett, 1971) related to BCCs was released nearly 45 years ago, there have been fewer than 20 published scholarly articles on this topic.

Almost all of the literature consists of anecdotal essays (Cooper, 2014; King, 2005; Pittman, 1994; Young, 2005), commentary describing the history and necessity of the centers (Bennett, 1971; Stovall, 2005), and conceptual articles defending the relevance of the centers (Asante, 2005; Hefner, 2002; Young & Hannon, 2002). Furthermore, most of the research focuses on a case study of one or two centers; absent from the literature are empirical examinations of multiple centers. A body of empirical research would be of great import to student affairs professionals, as research may provide organizational models and examples from which to base decisions. As institutions seek to provide funding to programs that increase diversity and student persistence, they are holding programs and offices more accountable. It is essential that these programs have a body of literature to defend their importance to the campus community. The purpose of this literature review is to synthesize literature related to Black Culture Centers on university campuses. An integrative review of the literature pertaining to Black Culture Centers was conducted primarily through online search engines: Academic Search, ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and WorldCat. The purpose of an integrative review is to summarize extant literature on a topic of interest, while also identifying deficits in the existing body of knowledge (Cooper, 1982).

All scholarly literature related to Black or African American Culture Centers was collected and reviewed.

Background: Black Culture Centers—Establishment & History

Due to the momentum started with the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements during the early and mid-1960s, student protests became widespread at campuses across the country, and student activism quickly escalated following the April 4, 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Rojas, 2007). After the passing of the Civil Rights Act, the Higher Education Act, and the GI Bill, the '60s were a time when traditionally White institutions (TWIs) experienced a large influx of Black students, with enrollment increasing from 3,000 in 1960 to 98,000 in 1970. Between 1960 and 1977, the Black student attendance at all higher education institutions skyrocketed from 227,000 to 1.1 million (Patton, 2005). However, most of these students were clustered in small numbers across predominantly White campuses. Unfortunately, university faculty, staff, and students at these institutions did not provide the support that Black students needed, and African Americans experienced feelings of isolation and marginalization. Overt and covert racism were also widespread but were often ignored by administrators (Williamson, 1999). In response to unfair treatment, Black students and their supporters staged protests and sit-ins at universities across the country and demanded the establishment of Black Studies programs/departments, an increase in Black enrollment, recruitment of Black faculty, and many schools sought the formation of Black culture centers and Black student unions or associations (Hefner; 2002; Patton, 2005; Stovall, 2005).

Employing the strategy of civil disobedience, students conducted sit-ins and other protests on campuses in response to discrimination and neglect from campus administrators (Rojas, 2007; Williamson, 1999). They worked together to form Black Student Unions and challenged universities to become relevant to the needs of the African American student population. They came together to formulate lists of demands to present to university administrations. One common demand was a center or house where students could gather. Initially, administrators were very resistant to appeasing student demands, but protestors refused to back down (Rojas, 2007; Williamson, 1999).

The literature detailing the emergence of BCCs (Hefner, 2002; Pittman, 2006; Princes; 1994) does so from an historical perspective with little consideration to how and why the centers evolved in the following years. What scholars do address, however, is the continuing need for Black culture centers at TWIs across the country. This is most evident in Frank Hord's (2005) edited text, *Black Culture Centers: Politics of Survival and Identity*, a collection of essays and commentary related to the relevancy of Black Culture Centers at post-secondary institutions. In the earliest commentary on BCCs, Bennett (1971) discusses the aspects of centers that address the needs of the Black community, while Pittman (1994) addresses the ways in which the centers benefit campus communities. He argues that they provide academic and social support, enhance the campus climate for students, and increase Black student retention (Pittman, 1994). Patton (2004; 2006a; 2006b; 2007), a leading BCC scholar, has identified multiple ways in which BCCs benefit Black students, including: serving as a "home away from home" that helps them cope with feelings of isolation on TWIs; aiding them when transitioning to campus by providing support services and programming; affirming cultural identity through educational initiatives where students can learn about continental and diasporic African history and culture; and helping recruit more Black students.

Threats and Challenges

In her historical examination of three BCCs from their founding to the time of the study, Foote (2005) found that BCCs “serve as spaces where Black students can cope with a hostile, unfriendly or indifferent campus environment” (p. 191). The Black students and alumni interviewed in the study reported that they benefitted from the BCCs in different ways, but none claimed that the centers impacted them negatively (Foote, 2005). Cultural centers are also beneficial to non-Black students as well. In their commentary published in *Black Issues in Higher Education*, Young and Hannon (2002) hold that BCCs help in broadening the perspective of the academy. In spite of their many benefits, there are individuals who believe BCCs are no longer needed on university campuses (Young & Hannon, 2002).

Three commonly held misconceptions about BCCs identified by Bankole (2005) include: 1) the assumption that they further isolate Black students who typically make up a small student population at TWIs, 2) rather than being in support of cultural education, the centers serve to politically indoctrinate Black students, and 3) they should emphasize multiple cultures, instead of a single monolithic one. Because of these widely held beliefs, many institutions have started to advocate a single multicultural center model. Stewart (2005) agrees that these challenges exist but identifies more areas for concern, arguing that challenges for BCCs come from a number of places, including demographic changes in society, parallel changes in post-secondary institutions, efforts to prioritize multiculturalism over specific groups/ethnicities, the interplay of modern technology, and pressures from popular culture.

Bankole (2005) and Pittman (1994) add that the many challenges facing BCCs include a lack of funding, staff and support, the ability to support the empowerment of their constituents, and opposition to their continuation due to claims of self-segregation. Hefner (2002), when addressing the debate over whether BCCs need even exist, maintains that there is an increased need for cultural centers, because an increasing number of students of color are enrolling at TWIs but represent a small portion of the student body. Furthermore, Pittman (1994), in his commentary defending the establishment and sustenance of cultural centers, states that those who oppose BCCs allege that they promote separatism and reverse racism. Combatting these claims, he contends:

Charges of separatism and reverse racism discrimination are hurled at students of color who, on most campuses, are numerically unable to pose the kind of “threat” that some critics seem to believe is imminent. The academic and residential life of these students requires them to negotiate and survive in White or “integrated” settings most of the time. The time spent in a cultural center, by comparison, is hardly significant enough to warrant such charges. Contrary to prevailing perceptions, some research has shown that students of color tend to socialize outside of their racial and ethnic groups more than White students. (Pittman, 1994, p. 104)

Contrary to the objections of antagonists, BCCs foster leadership development and involvement for students regardless of racial identity, as well as a sense of community, cultural pride, mattering and self-preservation (Patton, 2006a).

Multicultural Centers versus Race-Specific Centers

Lori Patton’s (2010) edited volume, *Culture Centers in Higher Education: Perspectives on Identity, Theory, and Practice*, provides insight into multicultural (and race-specific) centers from a variety of perspectives discussing their establishment, function within higher education and sustainability in the future. Emerging several years after race-specific centers, such as BCCs, multicultural centers started to appear on college campuses in the 1980s and 1990s as the enrollment of students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds increased at TWIs (Castillo-Cullather & Stuart, 2002; Hefner, 2002; Princes, 1994; Stennis-Williams, Terrell, & Haynes,

1988). Prior to the 1980s, very few multicultural centers existed at universities in the United States, but the rapid diversification of the student population also led to growth in multicultural centers.

With this increased diversity the question of the relevance of ethnic-specific centers arose among university leadership. A prevalent sentiment held by administrators is that BCCs no longer pursue their original missions and are not relevant to universities, because they are unable to meet the needs of more diverse campus communities (Hefner, 2002; Patton, 2006a, 2010). A number of campuses across the country have redefined the missions of their BCCs, developed multicultural centers, and poured millions of dollars into them in an attempt to meet the needs of an ever-changing student population. Proponents of BCCs argue that these newer initiatives may be precursors to total elimination of race-specific centers (Hefner, 2002). While weighing in on this issue, Hefner (2002) noted that a large number of BCC directors and staff members are hesitant to collapse race-specific centers into a single multicultural center:

Many directors of Black cultural centers believe this new push is quietly undermining their historical role. In fact, they are worried that Black centers either will be pushed to compromise their African-centered foundations in order to appeal to other ethnic groups or, more ominously, drop the “Black” title all together and become “Multicultural” centers. Either way, many directors are putting on their battle armor because they feel “under attack” (para. 5).

At the center of this debate over the advantages and disadvantages regarding types of centers are questions concerning who they should serve, in what ways, and if every sizeable ethnic group on campus should have a center (Hefner, 2002).

Individuals in favor of the establishment of multicultural centers (MCCs), as opposed to mono-cultural or race-specific ones, emphasize the impact of providing broader services to students of color and underserved populations (Castillo-Cullather & Stuart, 2002; Patton, 2006a). They surmise that MCCs contribute to the building of racial harmony, handling acts of racial/cultural hate and intolerance, and cultivating cross-cultural appreciation. Multicultural center proponents call for the merging of mono-cultural centers in hopes that MCCs will increase understanding of intercultural commonalities and foster diversity awareness and identity development for students from multiple populations (Castillo-Cullather & Stuart, 2002; Princes, 1994; Stennis-Williams et al., 1988). Advocates of race-specific facilities postulate that they promote separatism and further isolate groups that exist in the margins of the campus community (Patton, 2006a).

Supporters of mono-cultural centers maintain that there are countless advantages to offering a more focused mission directed toward an identifiable population with specific needs (Castillo-Cullather & Stuart, 2002; Patton, 2006). Population-specific initiatives can be more effective in recruiting and retaining minoritized students who are often ignored or overlooked. Focusing efforts toward a specific group can help with identity, community, and leadership development for marginalized student (Castillo-Cullather & Stuart, 2002). Collapsing existing centers into cross-cultural or multicultural centers, proposes Patton (2006a), is based upon the misconception that the needs of all underserved and underrepresented students can be realized through a single initiative.

Similar to some culture center employees, many students of color feel threatened by the idea of merging race-specific centers with multicultural centers, arguing that collapsing the centers would invalidate and ignore their specific experiences as students of color (Patton, 2006a). Though race-specific culture centers often face criticism from administrators who question their relevance, Lozano (2010) maintains that Latino culture centers are often times the only space on campus to “offer a holistic learning experience allowing Latina/o students to explore racial/ethnic identity development and engage in social justice activism, political education, community outreach,

academic mentoring and support, leadership development, social and professional networking, and alumni outreach” (p. 11). Each of the aforementioned factors can contribute to a student’s sense of belonging, academic confidence, and leadership skills. Lozano (2010) regards culture centers as a safe space for Latino students where they can explore their complicated identities, which often involve issues related to language, biracial/cultural identity, ethnicity, generational residency status, sexual orientation, gender roles, and indigenous identity.

Liu, Cuyjet, and Lee (2010) add that race-specific centers complete with staffing and resources gain more recognition than mere cultural festivals, performances, and food fairs. The facilities can address the development and cultural needs of students that otherwise are not being addressed. Moreover, these centers may aid faculty by exposing them to the needs of various student groups, as well as the cultural differences and similarities within ethnic groups and cultures, aiding in faculty multicultural competency development and their understanding of the diversity that can be found within a single ethnic/racial group (Liu et al., 2010). Shotton and colleagues (2010) agree that race-specific culture centers are necessary, as they counter experiences of isolation, alienation, dissatisfaction and overt racism faced by many minoritized students in higher education, while focusing on issues specific to cultural groups (Shotton, Yellowfish, & Cintron, 2010). In addition to serving the needs of historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups, race-specific culture centers can also help White students. Benitez (2010) observes that many White college students have had little to no cross-cultural engagement and are not aware of White privilege. He opines that culture centers may be used as spaces for the social deconstruction of “Whiteness” and racial superiority, aiding White students in thinking about their own identities by interacting with students of other racial and ethnic identities. Exposing White students to different races benefits both privileged and marginalized groups on campus (Benitez, 2010).

Black Culture Centers in Practice

Black culture centers provide important university support and services, such as tutoring, academic advising, career development, mentoring, and leadership skill building (Bankole, 2005; Hefner, 2002; Hord, 2005a; Patton, 2010; Princes, 2004). Typically housed in either academic affairs or student affairs divisions of universities (Bankole, 2005), they are described as a safe space for Black students to retreat from the “perceived hostility of an unwelcoming campus community” (Young & Hannon, 2002). Studies indicate that culture centers aid in recruiting and retaining students from historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups, provide a “home away from home,” help students cope with marginalization, and serve as a source of cultural pride and education (Patton, 2006a, 2006b; Jones et al., 2002; Jones & Williams, 2006; Strayhorn, Terrell, Redmond, & Walton, 2010). In their examination of the African American Student Center (AASC) at a Northwestern university, Jones and Williams (2006) report that undergraduates at this institution considered the center “a safe haven,” “a home away from home,” a place to talk about problems,” and “a place from PWI [predominantly White institutions] stress.” Jones and Williams (2006) reason that culture centers and other initiatives targeted toward supporting these populations can be viewed as factors that contribute to both the quality and quantity of students of color on campus. The sentiments shared amongst the interviewees in this study are indicative of the significant role the AASC played in student success at this university.

In addition to providing countless programs and services, culture centers are instrumental in providing a sense of belonging and aiding in skill development for some students. While examining Black students’ experiences with the BCC located on their campus, Strayhorn and colleagues (2010) found students understood the existence of the BCC as an affirmation of their presence on campus, which fostered a sense of belonging and mattering. In a word, these

participants felt that they, as Black students, were important on their campus. Strayhorn et al. (2010) emphasize that a sense of belonging is critical to an individual's identification with his or her community and has a number of behavioral consequences.

Implications

In sum, the literature concerning culture centers consists mainly of historical accounts and anecdotal commentary. Previous studies indicate that these centers aid in recruiting and retaining students of color, provide a “home away from home” for many students, help them cope with marginalization, and serve as a source of cultural pride and education. Though much of the literature is not empirical in nature, it provides a foundation from which future studies can build. Because there is so little research on this topic, there are many voids in the literature—dealing with topics such as Black culture center staff and leadership to quantitative and/or longitudinal examinations of BCCs. Future studies should seek to further support the relevance and necessity of BCCs within higher education through thoughtful investigations into culture center structure, programming and services, and student and faculty perceptions of centers.

In light of declining financial resources and demands that directors demonstrate that BCCs are helping to create positive student outcomes, a common theme within the discourse surrounding Black Culture Centers (BCCs) involves validating their existence (Hefner, 2002; Patton, 2010; Princes, 2005). Opponents often downplay the contributions of BCCs, arguing that they foster self-segregation and prevent African American students from integrating with the broader campus community. They claim that the roles of BCC are too narrow in that they are solely for African American students and merely serve a social mission (Patton, 2006). These widely held misconceptions pose a challenge to BCCs and ultimately present a threat to their existence. It is imperative that BCC researchers move beyond the anecdotal and develop more empirical evidence of the necessity of these race-specific culture centers.

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