

**“WHERE NO ONE LOOKS LIKE YOU”: PERCEIVED IMPACT OF IDENTITY
REPRESENTATION ON STUDENT SUCCESS**

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Abstract

When diversity efforts in higher education are measured by student population alone, such measure fails to consider how diversity in the institution’s workforce may impact student success. As faculty and staff play a critical role in students’ college experience, this study investigated students’ perceived impact of identity representation on their success. Through qualitative research and semi-structured interviews with undergraduate and graduate students from two public universities, this research confirmed that students view identity representation as critical to their success. The findings revealed three main areas of impact of identity representation – personal impact, impact on students’ sense of belonging, and impact on students’ academic achievement. The findings of this study are aimed to engage higher education institutions in reflecting how diversity and inclusion efforts are effectively impacting the success of their students.

Keywords: identity representation, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, sense of belonging

Introduction

When diversity efforts in higher education are measured by the student population alone, such measure fails to consider how diversity in the institution's workforce may impact student success. Faculty diversity has been identified as one of the crucial factors that impact college students' academic success and development (Henderson et al., 2020). Just like students bring their cultural experiences to the classroom, so do faculty, staff, and administrators when they make decisions and actions that shape students' academic experiences. These decisions ultimately translate to how an institution operates and how students are supported. If a diverse student population is the goal that higher education institutions strive for, diversity among their faculty, staff, and administrators must also be considered as an important element in shaping student success.

Identity representation in higher education is a multifaceted concern. The notion that Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 solved the concerns pertaining to diversity and inclusivity would be false to assume. In fact, higher education institutions are especially vulnerable to litigation when it comes to protected class, as outlined in Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Colleges and universities must make sure that their policies and procedures are free from discrimination based on sex, disability, race, color, or national origin. Having a diverse student population is only one indication that the institutions are adhering to Title VI, but to achieve true diversity and inclusivity, institutions must also consider the diversity among the faculty, staff, and administrators serving their students. Studies have shown that diversity among educators and staff is beneficial to student success. Lindsay (2021) explained, "Given the evidence of positive effects on students of having at least one teacher who shares their race or ethnicity, state boards of education, other state policymakers, and school leaders need to recognize teachers' race and ethnicity as markers of teacher quality" (p.17).

This research study examined the importance of identity representation in higher education as perceived by students. More specifically, this study investigated students' perceived impact of identity representation on their success and their perceptions toward institutional DEI priorities in supporting the success of a diverse student body. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how to achieve multidimensional diversity and

inclusivity so that students of all identities can be equally supported in their educational journey. Additionally, this study sought to identify ways in which higher education institutions can broaden their diversity and inclusivity initiatives so that students receive a greater return on their educational investment. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do students perceive that identity representation in higher education impacts their success?
2. How do students describe the commitment of their institutions to DEI priorities in supporting the success of a diverse student body they serve?

Literature Review

Although the student population in higher education has diversified over the years, institutions of higher learning continue to struggle to make their faculty and staff population representative of their student body. Unlocking the formula for an effective approach to diversity in higher education is complex and extends beyond the development of institutional policies and procedures which are a necessary start. In an ethnographic case study, Byrd (2022) stated, “instead, successful diversity practice requires the guidance and participation of stakeholders who possess agentic understandings of structural barriers to equity and who are prepared to take effective action, including through race-conscious, equity-minded practice across organizational levels” (p.5).

James-Galloway and James-Galloway (2022) suggested that race-evasive policies tend to fail in improving racial diversity in higher education. If policies fail to address the concerns and challenges with diversity in higher education, it suggests that there are other factors that impact the work toward diversity. Policy documents often become the cornerstone of diversity for an institution as their purpose is to outline the expectations and goals of what diversity should look like for an institution. Byrd (2022) found that the work towards diversity in higher education is faced with challenges due to the bad design of policies, plans, and goals that lack strategic vision, intentionality, and resources.

Federal laws, such as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, prohibit discrimination in education and in other settings. Although these laws provide the blueprint for what specific actions and decisions are

considered discriminatory, they do not guide institutions on how to define or achieve diversity. Institutions understand that, because of federal laws, discrimination is illegal; however, these laws alone do not remove racial tensions, racial inequities, and racial biases.

Identity Representation and Student Success

The American Council on Education (2020) reported that people of color hold only 20% of full-time faculty positions in the United States. The population of this survey included over 258,731 full-time faculty at over 700 institutions and 9,980 of department head faculty. More specifically, 20% of 268,711 total faculty positions equates to 53,742 full-time faculty positions held by people of color in over 700 institutions. In turn, minority students are not afforded the opportunity to connect with faculty members who share their identity and non-minority students are not exposed to faculty diversity, which can enrich educational experiences for all college students. In addition, according to Pritchard et al. (2020), a CUPA-HR research report depicted a decline in minority group representation among assistant professor, associate professor, and full professor positions.

According to Carrell et al. (2010), female students enrolled in introductory math and science courses do significantly better when the course is taught by a female faculty. In addition, according to this research, higher-performing female students are also likely to continue to enroll in college math and sciences courses and graduate with a STEM degree. There is growing evidence that suggests that students of color are also positively influenced by faculty who share their identity. Price (2010) concluded that black students enrolled in STEM courses are more likely to continue in a STEM field after their first year when their STEM courses are taught by black instructors.

It is commonly suggested that representation is one of the fundamental tools that measures institutional commitment to diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, research suggests that identity representation in higher education impacts students and their success (Ashford-Hanser et al., 2020; Carrell et al., 2010; Price, 2010). In a research study conducted at a Texas Hispanic-serving institution, underrepresented minority students were less likely than white students to agree to the statement that role models made them want to remain in their college major. The outcome of this finding was attributed to the

small number of underrepresented minority faculty at this institution to which the students would relate (Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020). Similarly, Stout et al. (2018) concluded that having faculty with the same ethnicity as students can have a significant positive impact on students' graduation rates. According to Llamas et al. (2019), the racial and ethnic composition of a campus and the composition of student and faculty racial and ethnic match are positively correlated with students' GPA. Similarly, reviewing numerous factors that influence historically underrepresented minority students seeking STEM degrees, Ashford-Hanserd et al. (2020) revealed that two-thirds of white students indicated that role models and mentors influenced their decision to seek a biology degree, while only half of underrepresented minority students revealed the same.

Cultural Competency

Faculty, staff, and administrators' comfort level and experience with diversity issues is vital to the success and implementation of any diversity initiative. If the personnel responsible for executing and making institutional decisions are not experienced or comfortable with diversity, institutional decisions may inevitably create visible and hidden challenges for students. Doucette et al. (2021) suggested that not all faculty are comfortable or prepared to instruct a diverse group of students and implement a multicultural curriculum. They further noted that when faculty are not comfortable or prepared to instruct a diverse group of students, this discomfort may be attributed to the lack of diversity training offered by their institutions.

Accordingly, research suggests that educators can benefit from university courses focusing on diversity. A study involving pre-service teacher candidates showed that teacher's attitudes towards homosexuality, race, social class, and women's equality shifted upon taking courses on diversity (Lake & Rittschof 2012). Diversity training is critical in ensuring that higher education staff members can properly identify challenges and match resources to assist students.

Punti and Dingel (2021) attempted to identify the limitations of using cultural assessment tools in higher education to prepare students to thrive in a diverse and global community. The findings suggested that the process of assessing privilege and racial inequalities should be done in a dialogue involving faculty, staff, and students. Such a

dialogue, the authors argue, would help gain a deeper understanding of the issues pertaining to inequalities in students' experiences and would allow all stakeholders to be heard and to express their beliefs and experiences.

Minority Serving Institutions

In the United States, Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) consist of Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs), Native Serving Institutions (NSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs). Minority Serving Institutions are colleges and universities recognized by the federal government and identified to serve minority students of specific races and ethnicities. If an institution obtains a designation for serving minority students, they are eligible for federal funding and grants (Schmidt, 2022), thus adding a possible financial incentive for colleges and universities to find ways to support minority students who are enrolled in their institutions.

Students and parents may be particularly interested in universities with specific minority-serving designations for distinct reasons. Gasman et al. (2015) explained that some students select HBCUs not only because of the location but to achieve a supportive environment that supplies a sense of belonging, and an environment that embraces cultural support. However, institutions that rely on donorships, government grants, and state funding unique to their minority-serving designation are taxed with making complex decisions when considering what programs and initiatives to fund. Institutions designated as Minority Serving must identify options that enable them to support the diversity of their student body. Garcia (2018) explained that the federal government has recognized Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) since 1992; however, the term *servingsness* is a concept that lacks a clear definition to the present day.

Unfortunately, with elusive concepts connected to what *servingsness* may look like at Hispanic Serving Institutions and the lack of appropriate guidance may lead to the development of inadequate programs in these institutions. In a recent study, Connors (2022) examined ten equity reports at public two-year and four-year Hispanic Serving Institutions in Florida and noted that the equity reports did not identify a clear link to

advancing equity for any historically oppressed identity. The lack of specific metrics that guide the advancement of equity may cause barriers to student success in these institutions. Such barriers may be caused by the ambiguity in the institutional priorities and the measures necessary to support minority students.

Identity designations held by colleges and universities may send implied meanings and messages to students, parents, and other stakeholders. The designations held by institutions are often used as a power marketing tool for higher education, while their central purposes should be fostering cultural acceptance among their faculty and staff and identifying strategies to support minority students. Nehls et al. (2022) examined the perception and climate of student affairs staff at newly identified minority-serving institutions and found that campuses rely on higher education leaders to increase communication about diversity efforts and to establish institutions' intentions to support MSI matters. The findings of this study illustrated that lack of intentionality among institutional leaders could translate into institutions being perceived as *minority-enrolling* as opposed to *minority-serving*.

When colleges and universities are issued this special designation, it implies that these institutions have programs and resources in place to support minority students. In addition, identity designations issued to universities may further imply to students that these institutions employ a substantial number of minority faculty, staff, and administrators, which is often not the case (American Council on Education, 2020).

It is necessary for all higher education institutions, and especially those holding special identity designation, to examine the ways in which identity representation among their workforce impacts students at their institution. Nevarez et al. (2019) explained that "teacher diversity symbolically conveys a message of hopefulness that diverse students can see themselves in professional roles" (p. 24). If identity representation for faculty, staff, and administrators is not examined or if it is not considered to be an element of *servingsness*, then institutions are overlooking an important segment of educational research that illustrates the paramount impact that identity representation has on student success.

Methods

This qualitative research study explored students' perceptions of how identity representation and institutional support of DEI impacts their success. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explain that qualitative research seeks to obtain a depiction of an individual's meaning-making process and interpret their life experiences. This research study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of how students perceive identity representation within their institutions, how they believe their institutions support the success of diverse student body, and how they believe both of these elements impact their success.

This study was conducted at two public universities in the southern region of the United States, both of which are accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. These higher education institutions were selected as settings that would allow us to capture diverse student participation from two public universities in different states. Although both institutions are in the southern region of the United States, they have different student enrollment trends and different designations and classifications.

To protect the confidentiality of student participants, we used pseudonyms for both institutions. Horizon University is a medium-sized public research institution with R2 status (a doctoral institution with high research activity). It is also classified as a Hispanic Serving Institution. Cypress University is a public research institution that holds an elite designation as an R1 university (doctoral institution with the highest research activity) and does not hold a minority serving designation.

The participants for this study were degree-seeking students enrolled at these two institutions who volunteered to take part in semi-structured interviews with the researchers. We chose semi-structured interviews as they allow the participants to discuss their experiences and beliefs as to how identity representation impacts their experiences and success. The interview guide comprised 18 questions that were designed to capture participants' experience with faculty and staff diversity and their beliefs on how faculty and staff identity representation impacts their success. The questions were categorized into four sections.

The first group of questions was designed to capture participants' prior exposure to faculty who shared the student's identity and prior exposure to faculty members of different identities. The second group of questions was designed to explore participants'

knowledge of their institution's DEI policies and initiatives. The third group of questions sought to capture participants' beliefs on how identity representation impacts their success. The final question asked participants to share any additional thoughts they may have regarding any of the constructs examined in the prior three sections or their overall feedback about identity representation and its impact on student success.

Upon obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Boards of both institutions, we shared announcements seeking study participants for the study. Distribution methods included emails and posting announcements in physical locations frequented by students, such as student lounges and hallways. The announcement was also shared with several student association groups. Eleven students volunteered to take part in the study, and all interviews were completed between March and May 2023.

To analyze the data, we applied Saldana's (2013) values coding, which allows researchers to reflect on the value participants ascribed to the constructs examined in the study. Value, as defined by Saldana (2013), is the importance that participants attribute to a thing or idea, which, in the context of this study, refers to identity representation. In describing this coding type, Saldana (2013) stated: "The greater the personal meaning [of something to someone], the greater the personal payoff; the greater the personal payoff, the greater the personal value" (p. 28). Building on this premise, we paid particular attention to any statements in the transcripts that illustrated the personal value participants ascribed to identity representation as it relates to their success. Next, we categorized such statements into groups of statements that would allow us to reflect on their collective meaning and to identify the main areas of impact of identity representation on student success.

Results

Table 1 presents the profiles of all participants who contributed to this study. As illustrated, there was a balanced representation of participants from both institutions – Horizon University and Cypress University as well as across student genders, races, and majors. However, graduate students were more represented compared to their undergraduate peers.

Table 1*Participant Profiles*

Participant	University	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Degree level	Major
1	Horizon	Hispanic	Female	Undergraduate	Social Work
2	Horizon	Hispanic	Female	Undergraduate	Political Science
3	Horizon	Black	Female	Undergraduate	Art and Design
4	Horizon	White	Male	Undergraduate	Finance
5	Horizon	Black	Male	Graduate	Public Administration
6	Horizon	Black	Female	Doctorate	Education
7	Cypress	White	Female	Doctorate	Education
8	Cypress	Black	Male	Doctorate	Education
9	Cypress	Black	Male	Doctorate	Education
10	Cypress	Black	Male	Doctorate	Education
11	Cypress	White	Male	Doctorate	Education

To assess the impact of identity representation on students, the responses of 11 participants were carefully analyzed for themes. All participants were asked the same set of questions to deliver a consistent and reliable data collection approach. There were three overarching themes that emerged from the interview data analysis – (1) lack of student awareness of the university’s DEI priorities, (2) expected student support from institutions holding special minority name designations, and (3) the impact of identity representation on student success. The third theme was manifested through three sub-themes – (a) personal impact, (b) impact on sense of belonging, and (c) impact on academic achievement.

Lack of Student Awareness of University's DEI Priorities

In reflecting on questions related to diversity and identity representation at their respective institutions, participants commented on varied DEI initiatives or goals implemented for students or employees at their universities. Two participants discussed their awareness of an office at their institution that is responsible for diversity programs. Participant 10 explained that “In 2021, our university pushed the initiative of expanding their inclusion and multicultural engagement office, which included hiring a director, assistant director, and graduate assistants.” The interviewee explained that the expansion was to assist with DEI initiatives at her institution. Participant 3 stated that she was aware that her university had a DEI office but stated “not having awareness of any other university initiatives.” Furthermore, it was suggested by one participant that the DEI initiatives or goals at his institution were student-focused. As Participant 5 explained, “I believe there are [DEI] initiatives geared more towards students.” Eight participants were unaware of any DEI initiatives or goals at their university.

In the continuation of exploring the participants' awareness of DEI priorities at their university, they were asked about their awareness of DEI policies. The majority, seven out of eleven participants mentioned that they were unaware of any policies pertaining to DEI, whereas a small number of participants credited statements in their course syllabus to be the only awareness of DEI policies they had for their institution. Participant 4 explained that each of his courses had “those statements, and all professors have to abide by it.” Participant 7 shared a similar experience by explaining that he had limited awareness of DEI policies by citing, “nothing more than what's disclosed in the syllabus.” Participant 10 interpreted the purpose of the statements, enclosed in a course syllabus, to promote an inclusive environment for students by signifying, “many of the syllabus offers a statement of offering an inclusive environment, making everybody feel comfortable, including a mental health statement.” It was suggested by Participant 2 that her university's DEI policies were due to requirements that fall under federal law by explaining, “I know we have Title IV, and resources for Hispanic students, African American students, and students with disabilities, for example.”

Expected Support from Institutions with Minority-Serving Designation

Throughout the interviews, participants described the need for higher education institutions holding a minority-serving designation to be very intentional with the type of support provided to students. They also suggested the need for such institutions to implement specific action plans to demonstrate their support to students. It was suggested by Participant 1 that HSI universities should help Hispanic or Latin students transition from secondary to post-secondary education. She explained, “HSI should help anyone who identifies as Hispanic or Latin. Help them transition from high school to college and guide them on how to register for classes and how to access financial scholarships or any other financial aid.” This view was echoed by Participant 8, who suggested that HBCUs should offer students financial literacy support to promote their success. The interviewee shared, “provide African American students with student support services like financial literacy and anything that's going to serve them to be successful in their institution.”

Additionally, some participants discussed having student organizations that would aid students in their success. Participant 5 believed that students who hold a primary language other than English could benefit from resources that affect their ability to effectively communicate and socially engage. The interviewee explained, “I believe, for Hispanic Serving Institutions, just having student resources there for anyone that has Spanish as their first language and English as their second language.” This view was further elaborated on by Participant 9:

Any added services that help students, I consider serving. Having programs like Black Honor Society. I don't think there is a Black Honor Society group on campus, and if there is, I'm not aware of it. Have a little bit more diverse groups and make sure students are comfortable on campus because it can be overwhelming when you don't see a lot of people with your skin color.

Other participants reported the importance for universities to create specific action plans with the intention of supporting the success of diverse student groups. Participants shared beliefs that university policies and procedures can be instrumental in providing student support when policies are designed with a purpose. Furthermore, intentionality and specific policies and procedures were attributed to student success due to a student's

ability to feel supported, and opportunities for networking. Participant 7 argued that policies and procedures should reflect the university's intent of how they will support their diverse students:

It should look like they [higher education institutions] are being intentional about the policies and procedures and not just using it [institution's minority-serving designations] as a box to check off. But you know, being intentional about programs and even the policies offered. Adhering to those policies to support those students.

Participant 11 shared a similar perspective by explaining that tailored student programs would contribute to student success and the student's sense of belonging:

I would expect programs that are specifically made for those type of students to feel welcomed and that are intentional for them to network and find success at that institution. I think serving implies that the institution is designed for the student to find success there. It implies intentionality.

Impact of Identity Representation on Student Success

As the central focus of this study, participants were asked about their views on diversity and representation among their faculty, staff, and administrators, and the associated impact of diversity and representation (or the lack thereof) on their success. This theme revealed three types of impact connected to student success – the personal impact on students, the impact on students' sense of belonging, and the impact on students' academic achievement.

Personal Impact

When discussing the impacts of diversity and identity representation on their success, many participants shared a positive psychological impact when such representation was present. Participant 7 suggested that faculty diversity aids students in envisioning themselves in a positive way in the future. The interviewee added, "faculty diversity has advantages. Just being able to identify with someone that has whatever [identity] aspect as you do, it can help you believe that you are capable and able to complete these things [one's goals]." Participant 4 argued that faculty diversity enables students to feel connected with their faculty by reporting that, "students who feel like they

can have a certain connection can go out and achieve that connection through similar backgrounds.”

Personal impact continued to be reported when discussing identity representation among university administrators and staff. Participants reported that staff diversity or lack of diversity impacted how they experienced college. College experience was reported to include having adequate student resources and programs available at an institution so students can explore their options and make decisions that would benefit them the most. Participants shared common beliefs that decisions made by their university could complement or impede a student’s sense of value.

Since university administrators have the authority to allocate resources in a manner that they believe would be best suited for their institution, Participant 3 believed that an administrator’s value system can impact how resources are allocated and distributed “based on the administrator’s own experience, they will value one thing [academic program] more or value a certain set of activities more than others based on their own experiences.” A similar outlook was shared by Participant 1. This interviewee shared that if diversity among university administrators was lacking, then administrators might miss opportunities to support programs or provide resources that would be important to minority student groups:

I feel like if someone who is not of a certain race or is not a person of color, they might not see how important certain programs or resources are to us [racial-ethnic minority students], and how it can affect us.

Participant 10 echoed similar views by explaining the importance of university administrators understanding the community they serve, “if university administrators don’t know the campus community, then they will not make adequate decisions or implement adequate programming.”

Similar information was shared by participants when discussing diversity among university staff members. Participants believed that diversity or lack of diversity among university staff impacted how students are treated and how students perceive themselves. Participant 3 detailed that diversity among university staff “impacts how students are

treated,” and Participant 5 explained that lack of diversity can appear to students as a preference of the university to “favor a particular group over another.”

Likewise, Participant 9 shared a contrast between his university and an HBCU university. The interviewee attributed the management of both universities and the difference in priorities placed towards student programs to the identity representation at the university administration level, “if you look at the administration at an HBCU, there are various student programs for Black students. I’m not even aware if a Black Honor Society exists on my campus.”

Impact on Sense of Belonging

Throughout the interviews, there were several reports that indicated that identity representation in higher education had an emotional or psychological impact on the way students perceived their own presence on campus. Participants reported that having identity representation made them feel welcomed, and it provided them with a sense of belonging because they were able to interact with staff or be taught by faculty who had the same or similar identity as them. Participant 6 and Participant 10 explained that “faculty diversity helps students feel comfortable” and “it makes students more comfortable when reaching out to those student support service centers, or when they need to reach out to their professor or advisor to get help or discuss their career path.”

Some felt that it may be challenging for some racial-ethnic minority students to establish personable relationships with their faculty when diversity is lacking. Participant 11 suggested that “it’s important for students to find community, and that community may be hard to find in predominantly white institutions.” Additionally, Participant 11 explained that “universities should be intentional about helping students create relationships with their instructors because it helps students to succeed and grow.”

Some participants argued that identity representation from staff and university administrators influenced the support structure at a university which affects the students’ sense of belonging and students’ learning experiences. It was suggested by Participant 11 that diversity among university staff cultivated an experience of belongingness by explaining, “I believe students go where they feel welcome, and they go where they feel trusted. A student may not feel very welcomed or may not feel very supported in a counselor’s office

where no one looks like you.” Participant 5 shared that diversity impacts a student’s learning experience by suggesting:

If a student of a different race, say Latin or Black enrolls and sees an all-White administration, or programs geared towards White students, then Latin or Black students may not feel a sense of belonging and it will impact their learning experience at their university.

Impact on Academic Achievement

In ten out of eleven cases, participants reported that diversity could have an impact on student academic achievement. The majority of the participants viewed diversity and the ability to create connections through similar identities and common backgrounds as advantageous to their academic progress. Participant 1 explained that students could experience a positive impact on their success as it would help minority students learn how to properly navigate various situations, “there are advantages because it [diversity] sets us up to know what we're doing and how to do it properly. Not an advantage to put us ahead of other people, but to keep up with everyone else.” Other participants explained how diversity could help them achieve a broader understanding of their subjects by being exposed to “different faculty perspectives on complicated topics” through their lived experiences. Participant 3 stated:

Faculty members who come from a diverse background are able to help students who also come from the same background really get the material or find a place for themselves, so they don't feel so alone. Part of being in college is finding a community that embraces you and helps you have a good college experience.

Participant 8 added:

Students would be able to get a diverse form of education with diverse backgrounds when it comes to instruction, since a lot of instructions provide real-life examples. Therefore, if your faculty provides students with diverse viewpoints, it will help the students obtain different perspectives from their instructors.

Furthermore, when the participants were asked if they believed it was important for college students to be provided with opportunities to create mentor relationships with faculty members who shared their identity, most of the participants held beliefs that

mentorship opportunities with diverse groups of faculty impacted their college experience and success. Participant 6 reported that mentorship opportunities with a diverse faculty can encourage students to “do better in school,” while Participant 10 shared that mentorship could help “student grow.” However, it was suggested that not all faculty may be equipped to provide mentorship. Participant 8 reported:

I think that mentorship is something that a lot of college individuals may desire. However, I think that when I’m thinking from a faculty perspective, I’m not sure if they are equipped so therefore, I wouldn't make it like a requirement. But I do say that if a student wants to seek mentorship, they [faculty] should be there, but given the times that we live in, I don’t know if they are going to find it, especially with whatever region that they live in. For example, if they identify as LBGTO, it may be difficult to find a mentor in that area because of the ramifications that can possibly come along with that.

Discussion

The results presented revealed themes that examined the impact that identity representation in higher education has on students and their success. As described by the American Council on Education (2020), in 2018-2019, only one-fifth of full-time faculty positions were held by racial-ethnic minority groups. The disproportion of full-time faculty positions correlates with the results of this research study, which suggests that college students desire to see and experience identity representation through diversity in higher education. The findings revealed that identity representation in higher education impacted students’ awareness of DEI university priorities, student support expectations from universities holding a special minority name designation, and their academic success and student experience.

To showcase a diversified student population, many institutions have obtained special designations to demonstrate that they are institutions that service a particular demographic. It is common for students and their families to consider a university based on the institution’s minority-serving designation. This university characteristic is often used by institutions as a recruiting tool to attract the attention of prospective students and donors. Additionally, minority-serving designations are usually designed to identify the

student population and not the faculty and staff population at a particular university. When examining student expectations of institutions holding a special minority name designation, participants in this study expected these institutions to design programs and services specifically to help advance the educational experience and success rate for minority students.

The findings of this study were consistent with the conclusion made by Nehls et al. (2022), who explained that higher education leaders at minority-serving institutions were responsible for increasing communication on diversity efforts and for establishing their campuses' intentions. Furthermore, as suggested by Schmidt (2022), minority-serving institutions are eligible to receive additional federal funding and grants to support the enrollment of minority students. Although participants' expectations in this study appear reasonable due to financial government incentives provided to minority-serving institutions, prior research suggests that some universities could benefit from identifying strategic plans that specifically target equity concerns and also identifying programs designed specifically to support the targeted student population. Prior research by Connors (2022) suggests that despite having designated funding, some institutions in Florida that held the Hispanic Serving Institutions designation were unable to provide a direct connection for advancing equity of historically oppressed identities at their institution due to their broad approach toward addressing equity issues.

Consistent with the literature, this study found that diversity among faculty can have a positive impact on students' academic success. The findings in this study showed that diversity among faculty would help students feel more comfortable in seeking academic support from instructors. In addition, participants reported that diversity among their faculty would benefit their education since they would be gaining knowledge from faculty members who have expert knowledge in a particular field or subject matter. Participants' feedback further supports the findings that faculty experiences and their expert knowledge were perceived to be a beneficial extension of their identity and unique perspective. This accords with observations reported by Stout et al. (2018), who noted that when students share the same ethnicity as their faculty members, student graduation rates increase.

The present findings show that having diversity among their faculty could help students envision themselves as successful individuals in the future, and it gives them the confidence to see themselves as capable of achieving their goals. Research findings further suggest that mentorship opportunities and an opportunity to be taught and mentored by faculty who share the student's identity were beneficial to the student beyond the classroom. These findings are consistent with prior research. Price (2010) determined that black students enrolled in STEM courses were more likely to pursue STEM fields when their STEM courses were facilitated by black faculty members. Furthermore, Llamas et al. (2019) explained that if there is a racial and ethnic match on college campuses between students and faculty, it positively correlates with students' GPA.

Moreover, this study examined how students perceived diversity among university staff and administrators. The results demonstrated that students perceive university administrators as having the ability to control and shape the programs and curriculum offered. Prior literature from Cahn et al. (2021) and Byrd (2022) suggests that if institutions want to create a diverse campus environment for their students, it must be done purposely by addressing barriers and developing equity across their institution. The findings of the present study further suggest that university administrators must be intentional when seeking to understand or improve their institutions' diversity footprint.

In this study, the importance of having a community and a sense of belonging for students was also investigated. The findings suggest that a student's sense of belonging impacted student success and student college experiences in a positive way when diversity among university faculty, staff, and administrators was present. Findings show that a student's sense of belonging and sense of community appeared to be connected with the diverse make-up of the university. The findings revealed that having a sense of belonging enabled students to believe that they could navigate their academic objectives and seek academic help when needed. These findings were not unexpected given that prior literature, such as Gasman et al. (2015), suggested that some racial-ethnic minority students select universities such as HBCUs because of the belief that an HBCU can offer a supportive environment that provides students a sense of belonging by embracing different cultural support.

Implications and Recommendations

When there is a deficit in the prioritization of identity representation on college campuses, this decision, whether intentional or unintentional, has implications that may negatively impact student experiences, as suggested by the findings of this study. When this occurs, universities may not be employing opportunities that maximize a return on their students' educational investment at their university. Although federal and state law may set specific criteria when it comes to providing equal opportunities to applicants, it is important for institutions to examine their workforce to find any inequities that may have unintentionally developed throughout the years. University administrators and leaders have a responsibility to their students to explore methods that promote success by examining an institution's workforce to ensure that it provides the best possible educational experience for their students.

Universities that are interested in enhancing student experience and success through identity representation can begin by establishing clear objectives of what diversity, inclusion, and equity should look like for their institution. This practice can begin with the establishment of new policies or enhancement of current policies that communicate how an institution is going to embrace identity representation on its campus. Institutional policies should also address how equity concerns would be handled and the type of equity concerns that their institution may come across. Institutions that are unsure whether their students are impacted by identity representation on their campus could implement programs that obtain student feedback on how their students perceive identity representation on their college campuses.

Without adequate identity representation on college campuses, institutions may be limiting access to the diversified academic experiences of their students. This study identified students' perceived value of having a diverse faculty representation. The participants noted that having the opportunity to learn from a diverse faculty body directly benefited their academic achievements because it provided them with an opportunity to learn from faculty of different experiences and backgrounds as it correlates to their course subjects.

Another practical implication for higher education institutions that lack identity representation on their campuses may be to utilize the institutions' student transfer out record, student retention record, student enrollment record, and student drop-out record. Although institutions may have enrollment figures that meet their fiscal objectives for a particular quarter, institutions may need to be strategic to retain their students leaving because they are not provided with a sense of belonging or may perceive the available student programs as inadequate. Institutions should track and analyze trends that may identify obstacles to student progress and retention to determine if there are any common identifiers among the impacted students. If institutions are noticing similar or concerning trends with students who share the same identities, that could be an indication that additional resources may need to be allocated in order to support a particular student population. Institutions may need to address identity representation on their campus to ensure that they have the proper programs and resources available.

Limitations and Future Research

This qualitative research study concluded that identity representation in higher education does impact student success. Eleven participants from two research universities located in different southern states were interviewed for this research topic. Although this study yielded a diverse participant population, graduate students from Education were represented at higher rates compared to undergraduate participants and students from other disciplines. As such, this research investigation could benefit from a larger and more heterogeneous sample size. In addition, this research topic could be extended to universities and colleges in different regions of the United States and of different minority-serving designations.

Further, one of the research settings had limitations due to the political climate where DEI research and programs have been impacted by new state legislation. This added constraints to the recruitment of participants willing to participate in an interview process. In addition, incorporating a mixed-methods research design may have assisted in incorporating quantitative data as objective measures of student success.

Conclusion

Creating space for identity representation in higher education may be a difficult process for many institutions. Unfortunately, universities are not exempt from political agendas and public opinion. There are many visible and invisible variables that impact an institution's ability to effectively make decisions that promote diversity on its campus. However, as discussed in this study, students perceive that identity representation does impact their success. With evidence detailing the impact that identity representation has on students, universities and their stakeholders should confront internal and external obstacles that may be impeding their institutions' diversity progression. Ultimately, it will be the students who will experience the implications of promoting or limiting identity representation on college campuses. Hopefully, through this research study, institutions are encouraged to reflect and strive to have meaningful discussions in determining if they are exhausting all resources available to support student academic success.

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