

“Black Students Do the Real Work!”: Maintaining Mental Health Among Black College Students at UCLA

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ABSTRACT

Black college students deal with academic and racial stressors due to the racism they experience at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI). Mental health care resources are universally available at UCLA; however, Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), the primary resource, is a mental health hub for 33,000+ students at UCLA. In this study, I explore how Black college students at UCLA view CAPS and utilize Black-run campus organizations to create their own “safe space.” Through a mixed-methods approach, I found that Black students do not utilize counseling resources because they are unwelcoming and there is a lack of culturally trained psychologists or Black psychologists available to discuss the imposter syndrome, microaggressions, and racism Black students experience. As a result, Black students take on the role of community organizers. Through the creation and maintenance of the Afrikan Student Union and other Black-run campus organizations, Black students create safe spaces for themselves and provide race-based resources to maintain retention within their community.

Keywords: mental health; Black college students; UCLA; Counseling and Psychological Services

Scholars within the social sciences have found that Black college students face numerous difficult challenges when attending predominantly white institutions (PWI). Kim Stansbury, a professor of Social Work who studies mental health literacy, support groups, and the effects of social environments on Black communities, has identified Black college students as a group “at an elevated risk for depression due to racism, stress, sleep deprivation, and lack of academic and social support” (Stansbury et al. 2011, 497). Once Black students enter a PWI, they are immediately burdened with academic and racial stressors that temporarily bars them from academic success (Griffith et al. 2019). Compared to the majority of white students, they experience additional stress because of the prejudices they face as a marginalized group (CCP 2020). Black students who attend PWIs simultaneously experience hyper-visibility, invisibility, lack of belonging, and depression to name just a few issues. Altogether these stressors result in an uncondusive environment that prevents Black students from feeling a sense of belonging in the general college community.

In the context of my research project, I have found that Black college students do not utilize counseling resources on university campuses because they are unwelcoming. Black students often find that the psychological services on campus do not offer a satisfactory safe space to discuss academic and racial stressors. As a result, given that the University fails in being the primary provider of psychological resources, Black students are forced to take steps to create their own *inhabitable spaces of welcome* (Willen 2014) to maintain their mental health and well-being.

While UCLA has long sought to provide mental health assistance to its student body, it has only recently started developing programs addressing the psychological challenges faced by Black students. This was achieved mainly through the labor of Black students on campus. Through membership in various Black organizations on campus like the Afrikan Student Union (ASU), Black students can receive positive racial messages and experience the community support and sense of belonging for which they look. Thus, it is thanks to Black social networks on campus that Black students can excel academically, socially, and mentally (Griffith et al. 2019; Mushonga 2020). In this paper, I address four themes that have been consistent throughout my data collection. They are (1) fitting in, standing out, and the in-between, (2) counseling and psychological services vs. looking for communal support, (3) inhabitable spaces of welcome, and (4) the double-edged sword of advocacy and its burden. These four themes illustrate the diversity of the experiences of the Black student community and the ways they address the racial stressors encountered throughout their academic journey by continuously attempting to create and maintain safe spaces for themselves. By looking at their diversity, I complicate the concept of "safe space" by foregrounding the multiple ways in which Black students are existentially able or unable to always inhabit such “safe spaces” depending upon their positionality (i.e. their racial composition, gender, sexuality, etc.).

Mental Health in the Black Community

Black students experience a multitude of stressors that influence the way they navigate a PWI like UCLA. These stressors are often race-related and affect the way in which they view the mental health care services provided on campus. Although Black college students experience a variety of racial stressors that often lead to depression and anxiety, many do not seek support from their university. Black college students are less likely to seek mental health services compared to White college students and are prone to seek help from clergy, non-mental health professionals, family, and friends (Barksdale & Molock 2008). Black

college students' perceptions of mental health care are affected by cultural and familial norms regarding help-seeking.

Kevin Foster is an educational anthropologist interested in improving academic outcomes for Black students at the University of Texas in Austin. He admits that "less often acknowledged is the diversity of perspectives and experiences among Black students on any given campus" (Foster 2005, 34). Black students are a diverse group that is the sum of different backgrounds and experiences which should be acknowledged in the spaces they enter. As a community that makes up 4% of the student population at UCLA, Black students are at a disadvantage and are treated as such when they enter the classroom. They are constantly reminded of this fact when they enter a lecture hall and see that there are very few of them in bigger or smaller classes. Some Black college students experience *imposter syndrome* and believe that they do not belong at a PWI due to their marginalized identity. Coined by clinical psychologists, Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1970, imposter syndrome is "feeling fraudulent, inadequate, and incompetent among peers" (Plaskett et al. 2018). Clance and Imes first studied imposter syndrome with high-achieving women who felt inadequate despite the accomplishments they had (Robinson 2017). Since then, this mental health phenomenon has been studied among different marginalized groups or persons faced with competitive new environments from which they were previously excluded.

Researchers have highlighted how institutions in the U.S. reproduce racial bias in the medical treatment of people of color. For example, psychological and medical anthropologist Neely Myers has focused on how people overcome mental health crises in the U.S. In her work with institutionalized Black men, Meyers recognized that Black men are three times more likely to experience clinical bias when diagnosed with psychosis (Meyers 2016). Additionally, she highlights that clinical bias plays a central role in shaping the experience of the social defeat of Black men receiving treatment at such institutions. Race affects the way a Black person receives treatment and copes with their mental illness.

Meyers proposes "autobiographical power" as an alternative approach that has successfully improved the treatment and experiences of Black men in medical institutions. Autobiographical power is the ability to identify yourself in your narrative and tell your story without outside influence (Meyers 2016). This framework has improved the experiences of Black men within medical institutions. Rather than viewing themselves as "sick," they are able to share their narratives and empower themselves by becoming active protagonists in them. Taking control of their narratives and their lives is fundamental in shaping the recovery journey required of such individuals. The negative stigmas surrounding mental health often leave Black people with the idea that they will be called "crazy" or "sick" if they pursue mental health care. This is often also true in the way Black college students view mental health care and how they experience the resources the university offers.

Autobiographical power is a helpful framework to explain Black college students' attempts to construct safe spaces free of racial conflict or tension that are racial affirming. At UCLA, examples of such spaces for Black college students are the African American Studies department, the Afrikan Student Union, the Afrikan Diaspora residential community, and recently, the Black Community Center. These social spaces have a strong emphasis on community and advocacy, especially when encountering harsh political climates. Jennifer Nájera, an Associate Professor and Department Chair of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Riverside, mentions that there is a third space dedicated to the politicization of Black college students that is faithful to organizing "civic engagement and advocacy on behalf of the [migrant] community" (Nájera 2020, 2). Although her work is dedicated to the Latinx undocumented community, it aligns with Black students' resilience in creating spaces where they can identify as themselves with full autobiographical power. Safe spaces are created to align with the identities of Black students as they continue to navigate predominantly white spaces. They are a space free from judgment that fosters growth as a community and at an individual level.

Despite the availability of mental health services on the UCLA campus, do Black college students experience discomfort when participating in these services due to racial or cultural mismatch? The "Diversity of Psychology Workforce," an article published by the American Psychological Association (APA), states that in 2015, 4% of all psychologists in the United States were Black and 86% were white (Lin 2018). White therapists often lack the cultural understanding of the challenges faced by Black students which are cause for mistrust and a lack of commitment to mental health care in the community. William M. Banks, an educational anthropologist, has stressed that school counselors must be knowledgeable about Black culture to serve Black students (Banks 1978). This ties back to the statement Foster made when understanding that the Black experience is not homogenous. The lack of understanding warrants various coping mechanisms among Black college students that do not always include mental health care. Banks further concludes that the purpose of school counselors is to help students adjust to their environment while considering the influence their cultural background has on their behavior. He furthers this conclusion by stating that "ethnic minority counselees perceive minority counselors as being more similar to themselves" (Banks 1978, 144). The availability of Black psychologists creates safe spaces for Black students to share their experiences that will guarantee them validation as they navigate foreign environments. The main purpose of having Black psychologists available for Black students is to create a safe, therapeutic space of shared cultural experience without any judgment. When this is not available, Black students often do not feel welcomed or safe when seeking mental health care. Banks mentions that "ethnic minorities received a lesser quality of service from ethnically dissimilar counselors" (Banks 1978, 145). The poor quality of mental health services can be a final straw from seeking mental health care because, on top of negative stigmas and race-related stressors, a Black student can experience invalidation.

Racial stressors stop Black students from seeking mental health services because Black students are focusing on dispelling stereotypes

that limit other people's perceptions of Black college students as a whole. Aisha Griffith is an educational psychologist who focuses on supportive relationships between adolescents and non-parental adults. She conducted a study to interpret Black college students' experiences at PWIs and race-related stressors that develop their coping responses. Black college students experience psychological distress when they enter spaces where there is a limited amount of them in class. Additionally, Black college students endure discrimination, microaggressions, imposter syndrome, and isolation when they are the minority, which is the case in most spaces at UCLA. This becomes emotionally taxing as Black college students work harder to not only prove themselves in predominantly White spaces but to represent all Black people. Griffith et al. emphasizes that "while race-related stressors have been found to negatively affect academic performance, research on Black students in science, technology, engineering, and math fields suggests those who persist cope with race-related stress by working harder to disprove or circumvent stereotypes" (Griffith et al. 2019, 117). Mental health does not become a priority for these students. Therefore, mental health services unconsciously become inaccessible because Black college students are attempting to take advantage of the opportunity structures that they need in order to excel academically in preparation for their future. In pursuit of academic success, Black college students develop coping responses that include self-concealment, talking about their experiences with other people, and developing behavior strategies such as working twice as hard as the average white student to disprove stereotypes (Griffith et al. 2019). Furthermore, Black college students enlist Black mentors for support because they "are more experienced and knowledgeable than peers; and emerging adults can seek their advice without the same threats to autonomy present when seeking advice from parents" (Griffith et al. 2019, 117). Black mentors hold familial relationships, are peer and academic advisors, former residents, and neighbors to Black mentees (Griffith et al. 2019). Having a shared experience with their mentors diminishes the racial distress Black college students experience when actively

participating in spaces not made for them. Mentors become unofficial psychologists since they share a similar race which removes the fear of judgment based on race stereotyping and they can provide advice that showcases the support they have for Black college students.

While the main focus of this research is to understand the effects of academic, social, and race-related stressors, it is also important to consider how Black college students combat such stressors in order to succeed academically and socially. Earlier, I mentioned the importance of safe spaces for Black students to practice autobiographical power. These spaces are integral in the Black college experience because Black students are often in spaces that make their academic and social journey difficult. Safe spaces are spaces that all Black students are welcome to enter. *Inhabitable spaces of welcome*, a term coined by Sarah Willen, refers to a “small zone of familiarity, comfort, meaning, and safety in the shadow of laws, policies, and practices explicitly designed to make people—in this case, unauthorized migrants—feel unwelcome” (Willen 2014, 86). Sarah Willen stresses how migrants construct such spaces for themselves to sustain their existential imperatives despite the abjection they experience in their everyday lives.

Similarly, I argue that Black students at UCLA construct inhabitable spaces of welcome where they are able to satisfy their existential imperatives of belonging to the UCLA community. Belonging plays a central role in how Black students are able to process the imposter syndrome, racism, and mental illness they experience on campus and how they are able to discuss it with their peers.

Methods

This project focuses on Black college students at UCLA and their perceptions of mental health services on campus as they experience stigmas, stereotypes, and other race-related stressors. I employed a mixed-methods approach that included participant observation, surveys, and interviews to provide a more in-depth response to the research questions. This study sought Black or African-American undergraduate students who currently make up 4% of the total UCLA undergraduate population.

Participant observation took place at four events. The first event was the Black and Blue Mental Health Project hosted by UCLA Residential Life. This event was specifically for Black college students and had many resources present to share what the Bruin Resource Center, LGBTQ+ Center, CAPS, ASU, and the Academic Supports Program (ASP) offer. The second event was the UCLA Town Hall Meeting with the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor regarding the creation of the Black Resource Center and the steps the university will be taking to provide more support for Black college students. The third was the Black Resource Center Focus Group which provided a space for Black students to share what they wanted to see in a center dedicated to their needs and wants. Last, Conversations with Dr. Green, the Executive Director of CAPS. This event focused on the responsibilities of CAPS, funding, and what is currently being done to continue to support the mental health of college students. All events were public, and the target audience was Black college students.

In addition to participant observation, surveys were disseminated via social media (e.g. Instagram, Twitter, and GroupMe) and convenience sampling was used to obtain a dataset consisting of 84 responses from Black undergraduate students. The survey responses served as a tool to recruit interview participants. 81% of Black students who responded to this survey identified as female and 18% identified as male. In terms of academic breakdowns: 8% are freshmen, 14% are sophomores, 37% are juniors/first-year transfers, 39% are seniors/second-year transfers, and 1% are fifth-year students. Nine Black students were randomly chosen for an interview from the surveyed participant pool. They were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. This was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Three participants have graduated, four are currently enrolled as seniors, and two as juniors. Recruited participants were asked in-depth questions relating to their survey responses via Zoom. The director of CAPS was also interviewed, given her experience as a former UCLA student and her expertise as Executive Director of mental health services directed to students.

Fitting In, Standing Out, and the In-Between

In his paper titled, "The Politicalization of Black Students," James Pitts (1975, 283) discusses the integration of Black students at Northwestern University, a PWI. He points out that "this nascent group [Black students], not simply individuals, became politicalized in their attempts to cope with the campus environment." Black students enter a PWI feeling isolated and have difficulty using their past experiences to negotiate their identity with the university climate. Pitts argues that this occurs because Black students come from a background of similar socio-economic status unlike their White peers (Pitts 1975). This, on one hand, allows Black students to celebrate one another and share similarities in their upbringing, but, on the other hand, this makes it difficult for them to acclimate to the university. Feeling a sense of belonging on campus is an integral part of the college experience. In their research article, "Minority-Related Stressors and Coping Processes Among African American College Students," Tawanda M. Greer and Kathleen Chwalisz discuss the person-environment incongruence Black students experience at PWIs. As a result, Black students experience emotional, psychological, social, and academic disadvantages. A change of environment that introduces race-related stressors impacts the psychological and emotional welfare of Black students as they find ways to navigate an environment where they are the minority and therefore, can hinder their academic performance. I found a similar pattern at UCLA with several Black students that I surveyed and interviewed.

Leanne Stevenson is currently a senior at UCLA majoring in sociology and double minoring in African American Studies and History. Leanne struggled with her academics. Before her current major and minor, she was in a major she did not like and did not know a lot of Black students on campus with whom she might build camaraderie. The feeling of isolation, imposter syndrome, and anxiety was internalized, therefore, affecting the way Leanne viewed herself as a Black student. She explained her struggles as a Black woman and a student on campus:

My first year I felt like I didn't belong and then when I was struggling with my mental health my second year, I thought 'should I transfer to my community college and then come back or like what should I do?' It was just a lot, and I was like, I don't know if I made the right decision, or I don't know.

I was definitely struggling from imposter syndrome. Um, and then obviously looking around and not seeing a lot of students that looked like me or getting, you know, funny faces or, you know, seeing certain remarks on the internet from people I know or in regards to Black students or overall students of color on campus. I was really disheartened. At the end of the day, no matter where I go or transfer to, I'm still gonna be a Black woman in America.

Leanne's experience with imposter syndrome and navigating the campus as a Black woman is a result of her internalizing racial stigmas projected onto her. These racial stigmas affect the ways Leanne tried to fit into the university climate and seek belonging with her peers, but her race and gender disrupted that. Her identity as a Black woman did not allow her to navigate the campus as a regular student. Her Blackness is hyper-visible to racial criticism and tokenism while it is also invisible and open to dehumanization.

University campuses are a microcosm of the wider world. Just like the real world, racism exists on college campuses and prevents Black students from solely identifying as students. When Black students enter a PWI, their racial identity is challenged because they are outside what they may have once considered their norm, and now are forced to reconstruct their racial identity. Black students have a double consciousness that works extensively on college campuses as they struggle to forge their identity in non-Black spaces. W. E. B. Du Bois defines double consciousness as a psychological struggle with Black identity where Black people see themselves through the racial stereotypes projected onto them by society (Du Bois 1903). On PWI campuses, Black students experience a double consciousness that targets

their identity as a Black individual and a student. Both identities create an overwhelming burden that affects their academic and social life. Upon arrival, Black students experience culture shock, anxiety, and depression but on top of that, they experience “racism, discrimination, undereducation, and acculturation” that feeds into the imposter syndrome they embody (Mushonga 2020, 1). The overwhelming identity as a Black student begins its effect when Black students enter a lecture hall where they are one of few Black students present in a room where other racial groups are more represented. The visual representation in the lecture hall, and now Zoom, acknowledges the hidden expectations of the university and the explicit expectation from the Black community.

Another Black student interviewed, Isaiah Jones from Fontana, California, fourth-year Biology major and African American Studies minor recalls his academic journey:

I had a group of Black people I knew but a lot of them were in the same boat. We're all just First-generation, low-income students so we're all just trying to pull resources the best way we can together and make the best of it. So sometimes I sit here and think, 'dang, if we had an equal playing field, how far would we really go?' Because I think about how far we came with living on less than the average student. If they really nurtured and funded our education, how far would I really go? We do what we could without help and our own intuition.

Black students are not expected to succeed and that is shown by the lack of adequate support and resources from the university while they represent the Black community in uncharted territory. Double consciousness addresses Black students' struggle to maintain a positive image of themselves while navigating negative perspectives from their White peers. They begin to see themselves as racially excluded from a university that was not made for them. As students like Leanne and Isaiah enter UCLA, they become more aware of their Blackness which forces them to self-monitor

themselves in their day-to-day lives on campus. As the saying goes, “you gotta work twice as hard to get half as much” to maintain retention and even sanity.

While struggling to find resources that cater to the needs of Black students, Isaiah Jones found ways to fit in. Isaiah found that support through the UCLA Black community and the Black fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha:

I really gained a lot of social confidence once I joined my fraternity. So when I joined that, it allowed more confidence about being a Black man and being a Black student leader and just still using my senior year to influence more Black students.

Isaiah found a place where his Blackness was not ridiculed but appreciated. His fraternity instilled the confidence he needed to be visible in his community. Instead of standing out and being isolated, he found a space where his identity as a Black man became a vehicle for uplifting his community and lone students who walk similar paths. Although Isaiah found comfort with his peers, it is not always easy for other students.

While identity is a negotiation, that negotiation is not always simple and clear-cut. There is an in-between struggle between fitting in and standing out that affects how Black students see themselves in their community and outside their community. This in-between struggle emphasizes the struggle of double consciousness among Black students whose Blackness is not necessarily a one-and-done category. There are categories within Blackness that can overshadow being Black. David Crowder, a fourth-year majoring in Labor Studies mentioned his experience with being Queer and being Black:

The Black students on campus go through a lot more race-related stress but I feel like I went through sexuality and gender stress. I identify as a cisgender queer male, but I don't really go through racism the same way Black people go through racism. When you're queer, it eliminates from maleness and Blackness because it goes hand in hand,

so I don't think it was hard to be a Black man at UCLA, I had y'all [his friends]. But what I think was hard is being a queer student because I didn't have nobody but a few friends. I think being a Black student was easy. But I feel like my queerness made other nationalities see me as more approachable and more palatable.

Another student, Ariana Roberston, who is currently a sophomore with a major in Economics and minor in Spanish Linguistics, highlights a similar experience but as a biracial woman.

I wasn't raised with Black culture as much as other people. And I think I've seen it with other people, especially biracial Black people. I find them not being as active in ASU [Afrikan Student Union] especially, you know, the jokes about the "White mom, Black dad." I feel like people tend to stray away from ASU and Black orgs because it kinda centers around Black culture. And if you've never been around that, being around Black people can be overwhelming and suddenly you're questioning your Blackness.

Both David and Ariana inhabit an in-between identity. While attempting to fit in, they still stood out. David's racial, gender, and sexual identity was visible and invisible in different spaces. When he was with the Black community, he was seen as a cisgender Black man. But when he was with other communities, he was seen as a queer man. While his Blackness does still put him at the forefront of racism, his gender and sexuality sets him apart and provides him with a different experience. This double consciousness he was experiencing was a psychological struggle between his sexual and gender identity and how others viewed him. His Blackness became emasculated by his sexuality because his sexuality affected how he was viewed by other people and how he navigated those spaces. His identities were situationally based on the spaces he occupied and the spaces where he found belonging. In spaces where he found belonging, his Black queer identity was externally legitimized by his

peers and did not need validation to justify his existence because all of him was accepted. But when David said, "*my queerness made other nationalities see me as more approachable and more palatable*" it speaks to the idea that identity is a performance that situates an individual in the in-between. David was isolated and rendered invisible because only parts of his identity were acceptable. This forced him to internalize the negative perception he was receiving about himself. It made it difficult for him to seek belonging the same way cisgender heterosexual Black students sought belonging.

Ariana, on the other hand, is a biracial woman. Her in-betweenness is placed between being Black and White. Oftentimes, biracial individuals are characterized as not being Black enough, and, sometimes, they are forced to choose one side. You are either Black or you are White. Ariana mentions having a space where she feels safe which is with other Black students but because she has a White mother and was not immersed in Black culture growing up, she questions her Blackness by asking herself, "where do I belong?"

Both experiences speak to how Blackness is not a monolithic experience and there are other ways in which Black students can feel a disconnect with their racial identity that are not perpetrated by the university. There is much more to being Black that affects how students navigate the university and try to find safe spaces where they fit in instead of standing out. Both Ariana and David's experiences speak to how marginalized identities can still be marginalized within a marginalized community. Kimberlè Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to describe how identities like race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect with one another (Coasten 2019). Therefore, highlighting how people with different identities experience discrimination. The discussion surrounding intersectionality first started to illuminate the oppression Black women experience in America. But now this discussion has expanded to include identities that place people within in-between spaces where they are both visible and invisible. This forces people to check their privilege and acknowledge the way they take up space forcing out individuals with little-to-no power out of the conversation.

Ariana and David did not experience discrimination per se, but a loss of power when they entered Black spaces that did not acknowledge their biracial and queer identities. Crenshaw explains that “intersectionality is a theory for addressing identity and power as broad and systemic (Stenberg and Hogg 2020).” Which speaks to how Ariana and David felt when they entered Black designated spaces that were not always welcoming to everyone within the Black community. They lost some power in these spaces and were rendered invisible because they did not fit the ideal image of a Black student, which the majority of Black students do. In conclusion, there will always be Black students who fit in or stand out which affects how they navigate their racial identity but also how they navigate UCLA and Black designated spaces.

Counseling and Psychological Services vs. Looking for Community

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) is UCLA’s primary mental health resource on campus for undergraduate and graduate students. The services they offer are crisis counseling, individual counseling and psychotherapy, group therapy, psychiatric evaluation and treatment, psycho-educational programs, and workshops for students, staff, and faculty. According to the Executive Director of CAPS, some of the typical issues students experience are anxiety, stress management, trauma, and depression. On top of the typical mental health issues experienced by students, Black students seek help for the racial oppression they experience on campus.

In a survey I distributed in the Black undergraduate community, Black students were asked if they had ever been to CAPS. 55% responded yes, while the other 45% responded no. Leanne was among the 55% who have gone to CAPS. When Leanne visited CAPS, she first felt welcomed by the environment. Her therapist was White, but she acknowledges that maybe if her therapist was Black, she would have had a different experience. One thing Leanne noticed when she attended her appointments was the lack of Black students utilizing the services that CAPS provided. In an

interview, the Executive Director of CAPS admitted that Black students had a lower utilization rate of 4% in comparison to their peers. This confirms what is revealed in other studies stressing the underutilization of mental health services among Black students, with only one-third of them seeking counseling (Mushonga 2020, 5). The negative perception of mental health services among Black students is affected by stigma and limited access to Black psychologists. Georgia Thomas is a UCLA undergraduate alumnus, former chair of the Afrikan Student Union, and current UCLA Law Ph.D. candidate. She delves into what she has heard about the issue with CAPS:

I think CAPS comes from a reactionary approach. For me, I was only able to get an appointment when I asked for it because CAPS moved to telehealth, right? But a lot of people talked about how when they went to just talk to somebody and it wasn’t an emergency situation, they couldn’t get an appointment. It could be week one, week two, they’re trying to talk to somebody. They couldn’t get an appointment until week ten. So, I don’t know. I don’t think they are meeting the needs of Black students. They just so happened to meet my need and I don’t think it relates to my Blackness. CAPS only became noticeable to Black people recently.

Black students know where to seek help; the issue is if help is readily available to provide resources for them? The issues Georgia listed in the beginning are typical issues all students experience with CAPS. Georgia’s perspective regarding CAPS’ “reactionary approach” comes from their recent establishment of Black Bruin Therapy Groups, and Black Bruin Healing spaces. These new programs are a reaction to the national protests as a result of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and police brutality in America. While the actions of CAPS are reactionary and can be seen as performative, CAPS’ funding plays a role in how they provide resources for students, especially Black students.

Mental health is stigmatized and, because it is stigmatized, it is underfunded. CAPS is funded through permanent dollars and temporary dollars. According to the Executive Director of CAPS:

The difference between perm dollars and temp dollars, for those of you who don't know. Perm dollars are dollars I get, same dollars year-to-year. It's allocated to me regardless. Temp dollars are like SBAC dollars. Like you get it, you have to apply for it, you may not get it again. Grant money is like that, SBAC money is like [that], donor money is like that. It can be a one-and-done, that's considered temp dollars to me.

The permanent dollars that fund CAPS predominantly comes from student fees and sold university insurance policies (\$51 per sold policy). The same perm dollars that CAPS receives are used to pay for the unionized clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, and Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists they have on staff. With an increase in individualized sessions during COVID-19, CAPS needs more staff members which, in turn, calls for more perm dollars. There is a disproportionate ratio between staff and students at 30:46,000 students. This disproportionate ratio highlights the growing need for more CAPS clinicians to support the growing numbers of UCLA's population.

The right ratio is supposed to be 1:1,000. I need 12 more positions honestly. And now I have the space for it, so I'm gonna keep advocating for 12 more positions to match UCLA.

CAPS cannot create a safe and welcoming space if it is underfunded and understaffed, and this alone plays a role in how mental health stigma is perpetuated. Mental health is not a priority. If mental health was a priority for UCLA, and arguably for the nation, it would be well-funded and properly staffed. Black students are seeking consistent, reliable, and stable care. But if CAPS is not able to be what Black students need, then they have to look to themselves to provide the support they need.

Inhabitable Spaces of Welcome

One of the questions I asked in the survey distributed among Black students was "Do you feel safe on campus? Why or why not?" Sussan Okoye, a senior double majoring in Sociology and American Literature & Culture, responded that she does not feel safe on campus. When asked to explain, she responded:

I'm a Black woman. This school gaslights our grievances and Black students do the real work of protecting and looking out for one another. If it weren't for ASU and all the other Black-run organizations, I wouldn't be at this school.

The Afrikan Student Union, founded in 1966, serves as a cultural, social, and political space for students to embrace their identity without any conflict. This space was primarily founded to increase the retention of Black students because, before its establishment, the Black student population was made up exclusively of athletes (Agembah 2018). ASU continues to supply spaces for safe identity formation. They became a space for "mental distraction," "social support," and "spiritual activities" (Greer & Chwalisz 2007, 390). Without this organization, there would be no way for Black students to discuss the multitude of stressors they experience on campus because of their minority status. Many Black students who completed my survey and were interviewed commend ASU for being the supportive space they needed to connect with their Black identity and feel safe on campus. Georgia testifies,

There were definitely instances of microaggressions that I didn't know how to handle until I got more deeply ingrained in the Black community and understood my place. I kinda knew after those things that the Black community is where I'm gonna go because that's what I know and I know they're gonna welcome me and accept me and that's what ends up happening. A lot of my development as a leader, and a person, I owe to different engagements with the Black community whether that be ASU, CurlsU, ASP was a really big one. I don't

think my UCLA experience would be the same without them if they didn't exist. I don't know where I would be.

Before this statement, Georgia disclosed that she lived in Black and Brown communities her whole life. Her first time stepping away from those communities was when she started attending UCLA; that is when she started feeling like the minority and that is when the microaggressions began. Georgia understood her place on campus as a Black student and she was constantly reminded of that as she was one of the few Black people in her lecture and was often mistaken for other Black women on campus. This alone made her more aware of her Blackness but negatively. Her Blackness was a constant reminder that she did not belong on campus and the racism and microaggressions she experienced were designed to shatter her and take away any motivation she had to succeed. As she navigated campus, she was coming to terms with that until she stumbled upon ASU. ASU served as an “inhabitable space of welcome” (Willen 2014) for not only Georgia but for the 4% of Black undergraduate students at UCLA.

While ASU should receive credit for maintaining community support and retention, ASU is not able to be an inhabitable space of welcome for everyone. Ariana Robertson said, “ASU does a good job representing the community but there’s a lot of community that they aren’t able to reach.” Similar to CAPS, ASU is only noticeable to Black students who attend targeted events for Black students such as Black by Popular Demand Admit Weekend or live on the Afrikan Diaspora Living Learning Community. ASU only has so much reach and while they are aware of that, they still do what they can to advocate and be a resource for all Black students.

The Double-Edged Sword: The Burden of Advocacy vs. Resilience and Community Building

Professor Jennifer Nájera conducted a study on the creation of safe spaces for undocumented students in higher education. In her study, she highlights that safe spaces are “for students to cultivate a sense of belonging” as they seek to

create a refuge from the outside world and can “vent frustrations and cultivate friendships with people who share many of their experiences” (Nájera 2020, 2). Similar to inhabitable spaces of welcome, safe spaces constitute a racial-affirming space where Black students can create a community and be vulnerable. ASU sought to be Black students’ “refuge from the outside world.” Yet, it is hard to maintain that refuge when it is Black students seeking and maintaining resilience and support on their own. Georgia discussed her struggles as she prioritized community building and support within the UCLA Black community. She became the face of the Cultivating Unity for Bruins (CUB) Referendum, which called for students to pay a \$15 increase in student fees to fund the Black Resource Center, pay rent for the Transfer Student Center, meditation space for Muslim students, and provide funding for underrepresented groups (Fredburg 2020). She was also involved in ASU as Administrative Coordinator and Chair. Although she helped to establish a community for Black students on campus, Georgia was still experiencing imposter syndrome and carried a burden that disrupted her academic and social balance. She did not feel like she was good enough as a student or a leader. In Georgia’s words,

I think a lot of student leaders, especially student leaders of color, especially Black student leaders, feel like they have to do so much for our community that they forget about being a student. There’s a saying that says, ‘there’s a reason student comes before leader.’ I had a hard time balancing all of that because I felt like the weight of the Black community was on my chest. And that could’ve been me taking all that on but that was my leadership role.

Black students establish their organizations to counteract the oppression they experience on campus. There is a double-edged sword that Black students experience as they find means of resilience and means of leading their community. The means of resilience for Black students are often found within their peers and their organizations which Georgia found when she first entered UCLA. But to maintain those

connections and their organizations, Black students experience a form of double consciousness that derives from seeing themselves through the white gaze. This external pressure pushes them to become leaders and provide for their community while also setting an unwarranted standard that Black students have to be leaders to enact change for themselves. Black students merely want to be seen, advocated for, and included in discussion with university administration so the burden of student advocacy does not always fall on them. This is a shared commitment. The Executive Director of CAPS recalled her undergraduate journey at UCLA and noticed similarities in today's student advocates:

In my mind, you know, I've lived in this mother org for a long time. 19 meetings a week, 3-hour meetings, procrastinating on the weekends, and all that stuff that goes into 'I'm a student activist and I forget to put myself first.' It's a problem. So the more that student activism can be infused with self-care, the better off we're going to be. And so one of the main things that could be done is really address that issue. I think the culture around student activism is one that is about others and not-self. And while I don't think it should all be about self, I do think we could do a better job with the balance. It's nonsense and that does not really help mental health in any way and we could do a better job.

While ASU is a safe space for Black students to gather and support one another, it is difficult for Black student leaders in this space to infuse their student activism with self-care. Their form of self-care is providing resources and reaping the benefits of their success with their community.

Teary-eyed, Georgia felt, "As ASU Chair, I wanted so much for the Black community because they deserve so much." A lot of hard work goes into maintaining retention and the constant reminder of the small Black population at UCLA makes it difficult for Black student leaders to stop and practice self-care. There are Black students that need outreach and support to prevent them from experiencing

isolation and culture shock. ASU is the damage control for Black students. ASU is the organization that Black students use to form race consciousness and constitute themselves as a political force able to challenge and change the structural inequalities which construct them as a disadvantaged group within the university. Race consciousness is defined as "behavior addressed to maintaining advantages or overcoming disadvantages accruing to one's racial group. These advantages and disadvantages are the product of structured inequality." (Pitts 1975, p. 281).

As her decisions were constantly questioned, Georgia continued to pressure the UCLA administration to provide spaces for Black students on campus. When I asked her if she felt seen by the university, Georgia responded:

I feel seen but not heard. That's how I felt for most of my time. Like y'all [UCLA administration] saw me in these meetings constantly and y'all heard me say the same things and the struggles but y'all didn't do anything for a long time or until y'all thought the time was right. Which is why I feel like it was very inconvenient that it happened because these calls for Black Lives Matter and different things like that.

While the Black community is struggling between being hyper-visible and invisible, Black student leaders like Georgia fight for Black students to be recognized as students without any racial criticism assigned to their race. The Black Lives Matter Movement and the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor placed a magnifying glass on the mistreatment of Black people which resulted in UCLA committing to fund the Black Bruin Resource Center after several years of Black student advocacy. Under her chairmanship, Georgia was able to acquire the Black Community Center and the Black Bruin Resource Center. On July 1, 2020, Chancellor Gene Block and Vice-Chancellor Monroe Gordon Jr. hosted a Town Hall with 419 Black staff, faculty, and students present. In this town hall, they openly committed to finding a space to house the Black Bruin Resource Center by Fall 2020 and ready for use by Winter 2021. They also said the funding will be provided

through Student Affairs. The Black Bruin Resource Center began construction Spring 2021 and was finished by end of August 2021. On Monday, September 27, 2021, the Black Bruin Resource Center had its grand opening featuring a mural designed by a fellow Black Bruin. The Black Bruin Resource Center is located in Kerckhoff Hall where other student-ran organizations hold their student offices (e.g. Afrikan Student Union office) and has become a space where Black students can experience Black culture and feel safe.

Only six University of California (UC) campuses provide Black Resource Centers for their Black students, UC San Diego, UC Berkeley, UC Santa Barbara, UC Santa Cruz, and UC Irvine. As of the 2019-2020 academic school year, Black students made up below five percent at each campus, yet these campuses were able to fund a safe space that ensures the academic and social success of Black students (UCB 2016; UCSC 2018; UCR 2019; UCSD 2019; UCLA 2019; UCSB 2020; UCD 2020; UCM 2020). UCLA's Black Bruin Resource Center will serve as a hub for Black students who currently make up 3% of UCLA's undergraduate community. The hub will house activities and resources for Black students which will inherently improve the academic and social experiences of Black students as they continue to face racism and discrimination from a university predominantly made up of White, Asian, and Latinx students. This is a monumental step moving forward when exploring the emergence of mental health care among Black students as they do experience more stress than any other race on campus (Greer and Chwalisz 2007; Stansbury et. al 2011). This space can be an additional mental health resource along with CAPS because it will uphold a more culturally conscious space that specifically serves Black students with no room for judgment or lack of cultural awareness. Into the bargain, Black students want the Black Bruin Resource Center to coordinate with CAPS to provide mental health services with Black mental health professionals explicitly for them. This will then bridge the gap and diminish the negative stigmas that prevent Black students from seeking mental health services.

Conclusion

How can a university be inclusive when its allocation of resources is not inclusive? Why do Black students have to do additional labor to build community resources when it should be down in partnership with the university? UCLA's Equity, Diversity & Inclusion statement reads:

The Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion is committed to fostering an inclusive campus community and advocating for equitable programs and resources — to provide pathways of success and dignity for all.

While the UCLA administration has declared this as their statement, UCLA has remained complicit in the racial violence Black students continue to experience on campus. Releasing a statement in solidarity with Black students and the Black Lives Matter movement is not enough. While UCLA has finally committed to creating a Black Bruin Resource Center as a step in the right direction, many Black students find this action as performative because it came as a result of the untimely death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.

Dr. James Pitts, a Northwestern alumnus, wrote "The Politicalization of Black Students" in 1975. He recounts that, when Black students integrated Northwestern University's predominantly White campus, they advocated for themselves while White students threw "beer cans at them from upstairs windows" (Pitts 1975, 295). The maltreatment of Black students is an act that has not changed and has permeated the walls of higher education. From White students scattering cotton balls outside of the University of Missouri's Black Culture Center in 2010 to the Blackface parties at UCLA in 2015 or White students singing songs about hanging Black people at University of Oklahoma in 2015, Black students have experienced blatant racism from their peers, and their respective universities have remained complicit in this. Black students should not have to ask for resources. Black students should not have to ask for support and validation from their university. Black students have an average population size of 4% which should speak volumes especially when a

university prides itself on diversity and inclusion.

Additionally, mental health is heavily stigmatized in the US which speaks to how underfunded and inaccessible it is for all people. But the negative stigmas surrounding mental health care within the Black community stem from 400 years of oppression and discrimination from white supremacy that has infiltrated the healthcare system. This prevents Black people from being vulnerable and dismantling generational trauma. The ongoing stereotype that “Black people have been hardened by certain life experiences, that they can deal with more pain, or they feel it less intensively, and therefore, they’re forced to endure even more” is visible in the healthcare system and solicits limitations placed on the social equity of Black people (Silverstein 2013). This then becomes difficult for Black people to seek the care they need to maintain their mental health because the proper resources are not present in predominantly Black areas. Most important, these resources are not present in universities that “promote” diversity and inclusion. This is a systemic issue that continues to affect the academic, social, and psychological well-being of Black students who simply seek to pursue higher education.

The goal of this research has been to start a dialogue between the university and Black students on how the university can actively and intentionally provide an inhabitable space of welcome for Black students to practice mental health care. For decades, Black students have been exploited and forced to create spaces for themselves when the university should be the primary provider of what they need to pursue academic and social success. Although CAPS has recently taken initiatives to properly serve the UCLA Black community, these are only recent actions implemented in light of the current climate of the United States. I hope UCLA administration will actively listen to Black students and their needs. I hope UCLA will take our concerns seriously and act in a timely manner when we express that our safety has been compromised by racism. I hope UCLA will be an active member in a partnership between them and Black students when strengthening and uplifting our community. There must be

more acknowledgment centered around the holistic needs of Black students that caters to their diverse backgrounds and honors the diversity of their experiences. This acknowledgment can be done through a university-created safe space, where different intersectional positionalities are at play in the lives of Black students.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my faculty advisor, Dr. Jason Throop, the Lemelson Anthropological Honors Program, the McNair Scholars Program, and C-BLAAC for their support during the completion of my project. I would also like to acknowledge the Black Bruins for consistently fighting for what they deserve and never forgetting that they belong at UCLA; they simply belong, despite the color of their skin. I am grateful to have experienced a campus with Black students who are fearless and dedicated to building a safe community for each other.

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