

## South African Seminar Report

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### Introduction

The study of a student's adjustment to college is an important aspect of research in the field of mental health. As a black female psychologist and adjunct professor of psychology for the last 11 years, the adjustment of black students attending predominantly white universities has been an interest of mine. I chose this as my topic when I applied to participate in the Faculty Seminar to South Africa. I spent 18 days in South Africa and visited six universities in the cities of Johannesburg, Durban, East London, and Cape Town. I had the opportunity to meet with psychologists, university personnel, students and university leaders in these various locations. The information I gathered from the people I interviewed serves as a core element of this paper. Also included in this report is a summary of the literature regarding issues faced by black college students at predominantly white universities in the United States. After reviewing the data from the interviews and meetings, I concluded that black college students attending white universities both in South Africa and the United States shared similar experiences of college that have been shaped by racial discrimination.

### Goals

I set three goals for my participation in the South Africa seminar. First, I wanted dialogue with college psychologists, counselors and student affairs personnel at universities about the social and psychological adjustments of black students. Second, I desired to conduct interviews with black students attending predominantly white universities about the issues they face in college. My third goal was to compare the experiences of black college students in South Africa with the experiences reported in the literature for African American students at historically white universities.

In terms of my first goal I met with staff members involved in providing counseling services to students from the six universities that we visited ( Witswatersrand, Pretoria, Natal, Fort Hare, Cape Town, and Stellenbosch). The staff was racially and ethnically diverse, comprised of two black psychologists, one colored psychologist, two white psychologists, one Indian psychologist, and two black counselors.<sup>1</sup> The data from the interviews suggested that black college students felt rejected and alienated from their campuses and that language differences and poor early education negatively affected their college experiences.

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1. Ms. Zena Richards, a black female head of the counseling and career development unit at the University of Witswatersrand; Ms. E. Moraka, a black female, head of student support services at the University of Pretoria; Dr. Ravi Naidoo, an Indian male psychologist, the director of the student counseling center at the University of Natal; Dr. Reedick, a white female psychologist from the University of Cape Town; Ms. Fredelene Elie, a Colored Female, Senior Educational Psychologist staff psychologist at the University of Stellenbosch, Ms. June Bam, a black female, student coordinator at University of Stellenbosch; Ms. Lulama Ngalo-Morrison, acting director, student counseling service, University of Fort Hare:

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Ms. Fredelene Elie, Senior Educational Psychologist at the University of Stellenbosch, presented findings based on interviews she conducted with 21 Black and Colored students from her campus. The themes that emerged fell into four categories: academic experience; faculty and administrative staff; inter-group contact; racism. For example, in the academic area, language was a major barrier because many of the undergraduate courses at the University of Stellenbosch are taught in Afrikaans. This is not the first language of the black or colored students, resulting in academic material being presented in a second or third language for these students. The majority of students felt ill at ease with faculty and staff and believed that the faculty held negative assumptions about their abilities. Furthermore, there was a lack of role models for the student's to identify with. Intergroup contacts were restricted to the classrooms with little social interactions between black and white students. Finally, most of the black students reported experiencing incidents of overt and covert racism and that the university officials did little to intervene to improve their predicament. In addition, Ms. June Bam, a black female, who serves as an advisor for post-graduate students for the Faculty of Arts at the University of Stellenbosch surveyed post-graduate black students and reported similar findings.

At the University of Natal, Dr. Ravindra Naidoo, an Indian psychologist, reported comparable concerns of black students attending his university. The majority of students were white and the black students struggled to find their place in the university. He also reported on the HIV infection rates for black college students, which he estimated could be as high as four out of every five students on his campus. Furthermore, he speculated that the fear of death from AIDS would lead to a loss of motivation

For my second goal, I had planned to conduct interviews with black students attending predominantly white universities about the issues they faced at college. Because of time constraints, my second goal did not come to fruition. However, I did talk to eight black students attending Fort Hare University, a historically black institution. Fort Hare is in a small rural town and has played a special role in South Africa's history being the *alma mater* of many of the country's leaders such as Nelson Mandela, President Mbeke, and President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe. However, with the ending of apartheid, Fort Hare like the other historically black colleges, is facing severe economic problems and the threat of closure.

In spite of Fort Hare's precarious financial position, the students I spoke with were optimistic about their futures. They reported feeling comfortable at their school and had good relationships with their faculty. They were aware of the AIDS epidemic, knew people with AIDS, but were not overly concerned. Their spirits and energy were high, they recognized the past, but looked toward a much better life in the future.

My third goal was to compare the experiences of black college students in South Africa with the experiences reported in the literature for African American students at historically white institutions. The literature on college student's adjustment reports that in addition to the normal transitional issues common to all students, black students attending predominantly white universities, face the additional burdens of isolation and

alienation from their environments (Kagee & Prices 1994; Pope, 1998; Schwitzer, et al. 1999; Sedlacek, 1999). Johnson-Durgans (1994) indicated that unwelcoming residence hall environments, less friendly peers, and racial problems are stumbling blocks to African American students' academic and personal adjustment at white universities. Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, & Thomas (1999) reported that college counselors face a special challenge in working with black college students at predominately white institutions because of these issues. Furthermore, traditional research methods have proved inappropriate in assessing the adjustment and developmental issues of African American college students. Methods such as face-to-face interviews and focus groups have been more useful in examining relevant questions of adjustment, retention and graduation rates of this population (Kasse & Harshbarger, 1993).

Consistent themes emerged from the various university personnel with whom I spoke. They were unanimous in their views that the first round of black students attending predominantly white universities would face enormous barriers that were the direct result of apartheid. For example, some black students were not adequately prepared for college coming from poorly equipped elementary and secondary schools. Others were being required to learn college material in a second language, and having to encountered students and faculty who were inhospitable. In contrast, the black students who attended Fort Hare, a black university were more optimistic. It may be that those students who had not experienced integrated life felt more hopeful and had a better college experience, than the students at predominantly white institutions, who had suffered the stress and trauma of integration.

### Summary

My interest in participating in this seminar was to explore the impact of apartheid on students of color who are attending predominantly white universities. I gathered information from psychologists and student affairs personnel at six universities and had conversations with black college students attending a black university. I found similar concerns of black and colored college students in South Africa comparable to those confronted by black students in the United States. However, there was a feeling that black South Africans had made more progress with race issues than the United States. My guess is that this is because of the recognition of racism in South African society. Unlike in South Africa, I think the reason that black students in the United States still report experiencing racial barriers is that a majority of our society continues to deny that racism exists.

Further study using methods that are more scientific are recommended to more fully explain the influence of apartheid on black students' adjustment to college. It would be interesting to join the faculty next year on its journey to Australia to explore similar issues for students of color in that country. I would like to examine the psycho-social impact of racial discrimination on the Aboriginal college community.

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## References

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