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Football as a Catalyst to Illuminate Issues of Black Student Engagement

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Athletics has played an important role in the integration and connection students have with their college alma mater. However, research shows that Black students do not readily attend athletic games or participate in related events. Findings from this study indicated that Black students engaged in football-related activities and the campus community, but in ways that did not stimulate further or continued participation in the larger campus community. This study advances our understanding of how and why Black students engage in football games at Hartwell University, and to identify leverages to improve their success in addressing the social and communal needs of diverse students on campus.

Keywords: African American students; Black students, athletics, football, engagement

Black students who attend predominately white institutions (PWIs) received increased scholarly attention due to issues in persistence and degree completion (Baber, 2012). In 2013, Black students represented 14.7% of students enrolled in college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014a). Black undergraduate students were 12% of enrollment in public 4-year institutions and 13% in private (nonprofit) 4-year institutions (NCES, 2014b), while Black graduate students represented 11% at public and 13% at private institutions (NCES, 2014c). Black enrollment at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) represent about 11% of all Black college enrollment (NCES, 2013a, 2013b); therefore, the majority of Black students are enrolling at PWIs. While there has been an increase in the number of Black students at PWIs, engaging Black students in the campus culture has its difficulties (Allen, 1992; Baber, 2012; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998).

Research has shown that university life is as much about student life as it is about knowledge generation and dissemination (Toma, 1999). A campus environment influences the experiences of students, which impacts their learning outcomes and engagement (Rankin & Reason, 2005). A sense of community is defined as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). A sense of community requires members to have a sense of belonging. Hurtado and Carter (1997) described a sense of belonging as capturing an individual’s view of whether he or she feels included in the college community. A campus community should strive to be educationally purposeful, open, just, disciplined, caring, and celebrative (Boyer, 1990; Cheng, 2004). A sense of belonging interplays between the student and institution, where a student’s success is partly determined by the environment and climate of the institution (Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, Alvarez, Inkelas, Rowan-Kenyon, & Longerbeam, 2007). Black students at PWIs may experience forms of racism or discrimination, which can negatively impact their academic achievement (Allen, 1985, 1992; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Social integration influences student persistence among all students; however, Black students at PWIs often find it difficult to find and become a member of a supportive community due to their social norms being different from their White peers (Tinto, 1993). PWIs support limited opportunities for interaction and learning experiences across racial and ethnic populations (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998). Therefore, Black students have to learn to navigate activities of the dominant culture that includes activities such as athletics.

The presence of a strong athletic program, particularly football, builds a sense of community (Warner, Shapiro, Dixon, Ridinger, & Harrison, 2011), leads to an enhanced sense of individual and collective identity (Satterfield & Godfrey, 2011), and leads to greater integration into and connection with the college (Clopton, 2010). Warner et al. (2011) found that while football does not provide a greater sense of community among students, it does increase a sense of community among those who frequently attend football games. Wann and Robinson (2002) found there was a significant relationship between identification with football and men’s basketball and positive perceptions of the university. The study also revealed that fan identification with a sports team resulted in greater likelihood of persisting at the university (Wann & Robinson, 2002). However, Black students (non-athletes) are largely left out of the intercollegiate athletic community (Margalit, 2009), and thus may not identify with or benefit

from the advantages of having a strong connection with the athletic community (Clopton, 2010) or the university at large.

Using football as a catalyst to illuminate issues of inclusion, the researchers of this study used social construction theory and the tenets from intersectionality as the theoretical framework. This framework is used to advance understanding of how and why Black students engage in football games at Hartwell University¹, and ultimately to use that understanding to directly improve the overall experience of Black students at Hartwell, and to reap the benefits of an expanded, more diverse fan base. The researchers selected football because it's the main attraction to the university that comes with rich football traditions. Football not only brings together the campus community, but also the local Hartwell community. Therefore, football is the best indicator of Black student engagement over the other sports at Hartwell University.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the relationship between Black students' engagement in campus culture and football at Hartwell University?
2. What factors influence or impede Black student participation in college football events?
3. How can university administrators improve the engagement of Black students, including participation in athletic related events?

Hartwell University

U.S. News and World Report ranks Hartwell University in the Top 25 Public Universities. Hartwell University athletics compete on the Division 1 Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level with the football team regularly appearing in bowl games. Steeped in tradition, the university purports the OneHartwell ideal to all stakeholders as they are accepted into membership into the Hartwell family. The institutional brand buy-in required of students, alumni, faculty, and staff is a source of collegiality but also the site of dissonance when values and assimilation to the family ideal is not a proper fit for certain stakeholder groups. While the university boasts of academic diversity, Hartwell is more homogenous in the area of racial and ethnic diversity. Seventy percent of the nearly 20,000 undergraduate and graduate students are White. A little over two percent per racial-ethnic classification identify as Hispanic Latino, Asian, or Native American. Almost six percent (1200 students) of Hartwell's total student body is Black.

Literature Review

Kuh (2009) defined student engagement as the time and effort students give to activities that are highly linked to desired college outcomes, and what institutions do to incite participation in those activities. Student learning and personal development is associated with levels of student engagement on campus; as student involvement increases, so does their learning and personal development. Hurtado and Carter (1997) found students involved in academic discussions outside the classroom and students involved in social-community organizations were significant

¹ Pseudonym

to having a sense of belonging on campus. College experiences such as Greek affiliation, extracurricular activities, and intercollegiate athletics positively impact student development (Flowers, 2004), and involvement in student organizations also ties into academic achievement and persistence (Guiffrida, 2004). The academic and social engagement of a student in a college or university setting builds bonds that create informal and formal social networks that define the campus community.

Certain student background characteristics, such as race and ethnicity, perceptions of the college culture, and involvement in extracurricular activities interact in complex ways to influence student engagement and learning (Hu & Kuh, 2002). In a study aimed to understand how students and institutional characteristics encouraged or discouraged student engagement, researchers Hu and Kuh (2002) found students were more engaged when they perceived their environment more positively. However, engagement may look different when considered across racial-ethnic lines. Black students, for example, may face challenges in becoming engaged and socially integrated at PWIs due to their minority status in the student population (Guiffrida, 2003).

Racial Identity & Social Integration

Racial identity can influence students' levels of participation and engagement in college (Flowers, 2004). Taylor and Howard-Hamilton (1995) found a significant relationship between racial identity and student involvement among African American male college students. Taylor and Howard-Hamilton (1995) stated the following:

Many students of color find themselves either subverting their identity and becoming involved in the mainstream campus or assimilating as they struggle to maintain a strong cultural connection... Moreover, their lack of involvement in mainstream campus organizations may be due to the belief that the setting does not have enriching social and cultural experiences for them. (p. 330)

Research on social integration at PWIs suggests that Black students participate in campus activities but in a different way than their White counterparts. According to DeSousa and Kuh, (1996), students of color tend to benefit when participating in groups related to their ethnicity or culture. Social integration for White students primarily occurs informally with peers at events such as intercollegiate athletics, whereas Black students socially integrate through formal associations such as student organization affiliations (Guiffrida, 2003, 2007). Littleton's (2002) findings revealed that Black students participated in an average of three activities, where the most popular activities among students were social organizations, music or choral group, academic club or organization, and those who play intercollegiate athletics. Being in a numerical minority at a PWI, Black students may find it difficult to socially integrate in their campus community. Unlike White peers, who network through informal associations, these difficulties in finding a sense of place make it difficult of Black students to "become a member of a supportive community within the college" (Tinto, 1993, p. 74). Given that Blacks perceive campus climate differently and are involved in different avenues of social integration in PWI campus communities (Jones, 2010), this further limits the integration of Blacks into the campus community at-large.

Intercollegiate Athletics & Campus Community

Intercollegiate athletics plays a significant role in the overall identity and culture of an institution. By providing concrete means to make norms, values, and beliefs understandable, sports are a way to express institutional culture (Toma, 2005). Culture is displayed through symbols (e.g., school colors, logos, and mascots), language (e.g., songs, chants, and slogans), narratives (e.g., stories, legends, and myths), and practices (e.g., rituals and ceremonies) that become qualities of building a unique community (Toma, 2005). Institutions with high-profile sports, such as football and men's basketball, have evolved into key sources for the university to cultivate into campus life (Toma, 1999). Since athletic games, especially football, consist of diverse constituents, it can serve as a bridge to bring together a diverse campus (Clopton, 2009; Toma, 2005). However, there has been little research supporting the fact that bringing together diverse constituents includes a bridge across racial gaps (Clopton, 2010).

Intercollegiate athletics serves an important purpose within an institution through fostering a sense of community on college campuses (Clopton, 2009; Clopton & Finch, 2010; Toma, 1999). "High profile sports assume an often substantial role in the personal identity of individuals—particularly students—within the university community" (Toma, 1999, pp. 81-82). These sports serve as a tool in increasing student involvement. It increases campus spirit by instilling pride, strengthening morale, and energizing the community (Clopton, 2009). It also provides an opportunity to build friendships, connections, and share common interest. Intercollegiate athletics is valuable for student engagement and integration on campus through fan identification. Fan identification conveys a sense of unity by bonding with other fans. Through fandom, students attending the games build a sense of community through activities centered on sporting events (Clopton, 2008). This includes tailgating, parades, game-day rituals, and other athletic sponsored activities. Students who attend sporting games tend to also have high esteem for the institution, which results in a stronger association with the university (Clopton, 2009).

Football, "an expression of the collegiate ideal," (Toma, 2005, p. 35) is a type of community available to students on a college campus. The idealized status of intercollegiate athletics, particularly football, represents not only a fan base, but also an embedded culture on a campus community (Jones, 2010). Fan identification has an impact on the academic and social integration of students, which impacts academic achievement and persistence (Clopton, 2009). However, this integration impact is usually higher among White students that are involved fans (Clopton 2009). Students who attend the games usually have a strong connection to the institution, which influences the identity negotiation of Black students attending a PWI. However, signals of disengagement and the lack of a supportive community on behalf of Black students, even with the presence of a strong football program, suggests that they may not benefit from the advantages that this ideal can bring to their engagement in the campus community or the university at-large. Disengagement has been shown to reflect indications of decreased student investment, interaction, and involvement around campus (Jones, 2010). Social integration differences among White and Black students can be explained through the traditional informal linkages White students develop versus the structured communities available to Black students seeking a community within a PWI. While campus involvement varies based on factors that extend beyond racial/ethnic identity, the integration and engagement of Black students is impacted by intercollegiate involvement on campuses in which football is embedded in campus culture (Jones, 2010).

Theoretical Framework

The theory of social construction is used in this study as a guiding framework for understanding the perspectives Hartwell students have regarding Hartwell football as a symbolic activity as well as their role (or lack thereof) as a fan. “Knowledge and social action go together” (Burr, 1995, p.5), so constructions of what it means to be a fan and participate in the university community shapes an individual’s understanding of what that university community is and the individual’s role within. This construction of the individual’s identity in reaction to participation in the college community, specifically their engagement in football and related fan activities, is a key in understanding how perceptions about the university community are formed. The identity, formed by social processes, is “maintained, modified, or even reshaped by social relations” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 173). Taking the idea that race is a socially constructed concept and our particular participant pool self-identify as Black, the framework of social construction is particularly useful because “identity is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 174). As Blacks at a PWI, the identity negotiation, construction, and reconstruction within a social reality provides a foundation for understanding the experiences and ensuing participation, or not, of Blacks as fans for football games.

As a second layer of theoretical guidance, tenets from intersectionality are used to unpack the multiple identity negotiations in concert and in conflict with the roles that Black students see themselves enacting and doing in campus life. Crenshaw (1991) noted the importance of race (and gender) on understanding how social worlds are constructed and for a Black student at a PWI where football is a part of campus culture, campus integration can become a multi-layered process with regard to identity. The layers of this process with regard to the campus community and athletic culture include elements of how students view their place and space on campus as a student, a young adult, and the exploration of their social identity through the lens of race and gender. Thus, the empowerment (or disempowerment) these students feel in relation to the activities they engage on campus are used to understand how inclusive or exclusive the realm of fan identification is a Black student (Crenshaw, 1991). The identity of a student at a PWI, as Black, a football fan, and the multitude of other identities create a set of complex processes of simultaneous tasks and challenges (Poynter & Washington, 2005). While some of these challenges may not be as tangible as others, student development is tied to their ability to manage and understand the impact that multiple contexts and positions have on the social life of the individual—here being, students and their campus engagement. Anthias (2012) helps situate intersectionality “as a range of positions, and that essentially it is a heuristic device for understanding boundaries and hierarchies of social life” (p. 2). The approach of the study is used to inform how students view their multiple identities and how these identities impact their engagement. In particular, how participants understand their place in the campus social hierarchies and the relative value their fan status (or lack thereof) provided them as they navigate campus life. Therefore, using social construction as the conceptual framework alongside intersectionality, the researchers are able to understand and analyze the ethnic and racial implications of football engagement and student engagement within a university community.

Method

This study is rooted in the interpretive research tradition (Sipe & Constable, 1996). The use of qualitative research was the most appropriate because it allowed for the use of thick descriptions in the data collected, and to understand the meanings people ascribe to their experiences (Charmaz, 2006; Patton, 2002). Six focus groups were conducted to capture the voices of the students in order to understand the dynamic between the university, Black community, and their engagement in Hartwell football.

Participants

Participants for this study were students at Hartwell University that comprised of 23 undergraduates: five freshmen, nine sophomores, seven juniors, and two seniors; and six graduates that consisted of two masters and four doctoral. Participants were identified through student organizations and directors of university-sponsored cultural programs. In order to participate in the study, students self-identified as African American or Black during focus groups. All participants were involved in at least one cultural student organization (e.g., Black Student Union). Some participants were also involved in academic student organizations that are culturally-based, but related their major (e.g., National Society of Black Engineers). Participants also attended at least one Hartwell football game.

Procedures

IRB approval was received from Hartwell University. Following the IRB approval, the researchers continued with the data collection process. The data sources for this study were focus groups and field notes collected by researchers. Focus groups typically bring in people with similar backgrounds and experiences to participate in a group interview related to a certain issue (Patton, 2002). Focus groups were selected because a greater number of participants could be interviewed within a limited timeframe than with one-on-one interviews. Furthermore, focus groups allowed the perspectives of the different participants to emerge, while stimulating the group process (Patton, 2002). More importantly, because football games and related events occur in group settings, focus groups provided a means for the researchers to stimulate and capitalize on group dynamics. The researchers attended cultural events and student organization meetings where they recruited students to sign-up for focus groups.

Focus groups lasted for 60-90 min and were held on campus in locations that were power-neutral and accessible to both on- and off-campus students. Focus groups were used to learn, in the students' own words (Creswell, 2009), their opinions about their connectedness to and the relationships between the university and the African American community, and their engagement in Hartwell football and related activities. Open-ended questions were used during the focus group interviews. Using a general interview guide approach allowed the researchers to establish a conversational style approach (Patton, 2002), while having questions that needed to be explored about their engagement with Hartwell football. During the focus groups, questions were asked about how often they attended the games and participated in football-related activities such as tailgating, travel to away games. However, to get a better understanding of their engagement, students were asked about their experiences during the games, what it means to be a Hartwell fan, and how that impact their experiences and perspectives on Hartwell's campus.

Data Analysis

Saldaña's (2013) codes-to-theory model was used to analyze data to look for patterns and themes among the responses. According to Saldaña (2013) a theme "is an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection" (p. 13). In order to generate themes, each researcher read through the two sources of data independently to conduct two levels of coding: open and axial (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2009). Initial coding consisted of selecting and highlighting relevant text and grouping together related passages. During the axial stage of refining codes, the researchers looked for emerging categories based on relationships to one another. The three researchers then came together to identify common themes that were present across the data. After completing the data analysis process, researchers discussed the need to contact and interview more individuals but found they had reached saturation with the data collected (Charmaz, 2006).

As with most qualitative research methods, the data generation and analysis phases were co-occurring and reiterative (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Wolcott, 1999). During the initial coding the researchers separated the responses of the undergraduate and graduate participants. However, during the axial coding, patterns emerged where the same themes were occurring in both groups. Participants had similar responses, regardless of their classification. As a result, participants' responses are reported as one --to do otherwise would have been redundant or unnecessary and against the authenticity of the coding process (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2013). The analysis process of coding and categorizing led to three themes.

Findings

Findings from the focus groups indicated how Black students engaged in football and football-related activities at Hartwell University. While participants were asked to report about their general experiences regarding football, the tone and nature of their comments were steeped in racial overtones. Participants discussed their experiences through the lens of the dominant campus culture from which the following overarching themes emerged: (a) The Football Hype (b) Theirs vs. Ours, and (c) I Know I'm Black.

The Football Hype

The theme, *The Football Hype*, explained the perspectives of how Black students viewed the Hartwell football culture while expressing reasons for attending and not attending the games. Focus groups questioned participants' levels of participation and comfort in attending football games, and the connections between football and engagement in the overall Hartwell community. All of the participants attended at least one Hartwell football game, because it's the main attraction of Hartwell University. Participants, whether they loved football or not, had to experience what the football hype is all about. The theme is separated into two sub-themes to distinguish why students attended or not attended the games after attending their first game.

All-in. Black students' reasons for attending football games included "hanging out with friends," "getting free tickets," and "It's the thing to do at Hartwell." Participants took advantage of free tickets and participated in tailgating to experience what Hartwell football is all about. Despite being "in a sea of White people," as one student lamented, some students found the atmosphere at Hartwell football games welcoming. Participants who came from high schools

where football was the predominant social event for the community—whether it was a predominately White or Black school—all indicated their high school experience provided some insight into what games at Hartwell would be like. This sentiment resonated in multiple comments:

Although my high school was all Black, football was big there like it is here. So I knew about being a fan and being comfortable in large crowds.
It's a different dynamic from back home now that the crowd is White, but because I had that experience, I knew what to expect coming here so it doesn't bother me.
I went to a White high school. I was a cheerleader and my dad was a coach at another school, so I knew about football culture.

Participants, whose high schools had a predominant football culture, appeared to be better prepared for the football culture at Hartwell, regardless of the type of high school attended was predominately Black or White. If they attended football games at their school, they knew to expect large crowds, so it was not a surprise to them. However, even if they are used to large high school sport programs, it does not mean they totally understand the hype that surrounds big-time college sports, as one participant alluded to:

Basketball was big back home, or hockey was big for us. So I get the big time sports thing, but I don't get the whole football thing and why the whole community shuts down. I'm just not here for that.

While high school experiences may better prepare students in what to expect in college football, the findings revealed that it did not have an impact on students deciding to attend the games.

Not all-in. Reasons why Black students did not attend football games, included, “it's too hot just to be sitting out” and “too many drunk and loud people.” The weather and the number of drunken people at the games outweighed the hype of continuing to attend the games. Furthermore, students who sat in the upper deck of the stadium did not have the same experience as those who sat in the lower decks, where most of the crowd interaction is occurring. In the earlier part of the football season, afternoon games are not appealing to some of the Black students, because it is so hot, especially if students are sitting in the upper deck. While these factors can apply to any student, the findings revealed how the multiple identities of the participants influenced or impeded their participation in football-related activities.

While participants described reasons why they did not attend football games, one reoccurring comment was, “school is first, I have to study.” Many of their comments surrounded their need to focus on their academic work, such as the following statements:

Well, a lot of people say that Hartwell doesn't care about [African Americans]. I don't think about it and I don't go to games, because I'm here just to get my degree. It doesn't bother me if they don't care about me. I have to study; I'm a Black student trying to get a degree. I have to work harder than the White people, so I can't afford the luxury of taking three hours to attend a game.

While the academic obligations were a reason for not attending the games, the prior comments are steeped in racial overtones. In the last statement, the participant mentioned as a Black

student, she has to work harder than her White peers, so she cannot afford to lose so many hours of studying attending football games. In the Black community, there's an aphorism that you have to work twice as hard to get half as far as Whites (DeSante, 2013), which is reflective of some of the comments. Participants revealed they have to work extra hard at Hartwell because they are Black and they are here for the degree, not to engage with dominant cultural activities. Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) described that Black students "strive to maintain good academic standing while negotiating the conflicts arising from disparaging perceptions of them and their group of origin (p.69)." Black students at PWIs put extra pressure on themselves to perform better than White students to prove their belongingness and to be successful (Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio, Thomas, & Thompson, 2004). As a result, some of the participants decided not to engage in activities such as football because they felt they had to focus on their academics to prove they can be successful at Hartwell.

Comments from other participants about why they did not attend football games also highlighted racial implications. One participant's sentiments were captured in the following statement:

I think football is a snapshot of campus: I think it's a completely different phenomenon and football was a big part of the community back home too. But, I felt like there were feelings or mistrust of White people instilled in me at a younger age. I can do business with you, but I can't hang out with you.

This participant emphasized feelings of mistrust of White peers (Nickerson, Helms, & Terrell, 1994; Terrell & Terrell, 1981; Terrell, Terrell, & Taylor, 1981). While the participant felt he could interact with his peers on a professional level, there was not any interest to engage with his peers on a social level.

Participants throughout the theme, *The Football Hype* described their prior experiences attending football games and how those experiences were similar or different than Hartwell games—particularly in light of being Black among a mostly White crowd. The demographics of the participants' high schools did not have an impact in how they participated in Hartwell football, however, those whose high schools had major football teams, felt more prepared on what to expect from college football. Participants also described reasons why they did not attend football games, mainly because they were studying and felt compelled to do better than their White peers.

Theirs vs. Ours

While the theme, *The Football Hype*, detailed reasons why participants attended or did not attend football games, the theme *Theirs vs. Ours* explained the differences in how participants perceived how Black and White students experienced Hartwell football games. Sub-categories were created to capture how this theme impacts not only Black students' football experiences but also their experiences on campus.

White hype vs. Black chill. This sub-theme referred to how the behavior, attire, and culture differ between students at the games. When asked to describe a typical fan, participants described someone "painted [blue and red], wearing an [blue] t-shirt, [red or blue] dress, cowgirl boots, loud, relatively drunk," and typically a White student. None of the participants described Black students, let alone themselves, as typical fans.

There were also differences in how White students and Black students participated on game days. According to the participants, White students tend to be more “die hard” fans than Black students who are fans. “I love football, I feel they put more into it...a bit more hype. I’m not arguing with a fan from an opposing team. I don’t care enough,” mentioned one participant. Participants also commented on how Black and White students’ football experiences differ as well as the differences between predominately-White and predominately-Black schools: They are just different, they are really out there, really hype and happy, mostly because they are drunk, but the Black experience, lets watch the game, win or lose, we are gonna have fun...I would say the Black setting is more relaxed and the White setting is go all out.

A culture thing, it’s our culture, the band is what made our football games, and you would have a crowd interaction...we come from a small community, so that is what gives us that closeness. We may not know each other but we are at the games to support each other.

While Black students enjoy football, they are not as die-hard as their White peers. They go to the games to watch and have a good time. While winning is great, they do not take the football team’s losses as hard as their White peers. Attending the games is an opportunity to socialize and engage with others.

Black football players vs. Black students. Participants indicated differences in how Black and White students interact with the football players. White students give more attention to the football players than Black students. The findings also revealed the interaction between Black student athletes and Black students, was a reason to why some Black students do not attend the football games, as one participant discussed:

They don’t go to anything that we do—step shows or anything. Only hang out with each other. I feel like they don’t deal with certain stuff that we deal with because we aren’t athletes. The Whites put them on a pedestal...but to me he’s just another guy. I’m not gonna support people that don’t care about me.

There was a lack of support from both the Black football players and the Black students. Black students felt that if the Black football players supported their activities on campus, more students would be supportive of them on game day. In particular, a discussion emerged of the divide between Black football players and the general Black student population.

I don’t think that they face the same struggles as we do. They’re going to major in something really simple. They can mess up. They have that margin for error. They can get an F on an exam and still make an A in the class. Whereas me, an African American and a woman, two strikes are against me. I have to work twice as hard and put in twice the effort to get the same thing they are getting...they are not held to the same standards as us. Even though we are Black, their struggles are different than ours. Their struggle is getting out of here and getting to the NFL. Ours is graduating and getting a job because that’s how we make it. They may not want to be held to different standards but I think they don’t realize that we all are struggling. We just don’t connect. We should, but we don’t and it’s unfortunate.

It appeared that Black students and Black student athletes do not understand each others' struggles and experiences on the same campus (Melendez, 2008). Cooper and Dougherty (2015) found that Black students athletes at a Division I PWI have lower levels of engagement than their non-Black student athlete peers at the same institution. While there is intergroup conflict, both Black students and student-athletes deal with similar feelings of isolation due to perceived norms and shared beliefs from the dominant culture (Bimper, 2015). The problem inherent is that there is a lack of Blacks in professional roles across the university by which they could model themselves or seek support and facilitation in how to mediate these differences (Gay, 2004; Melendez, 2008; Young & Brooks, 2008).

Throughout the *Theirs vs. Ours* theme a common thread emerged that described differences in how Whites and Blacks experienced football games. Participants felt that Whites took games more seriously—even personal—than Blacks and were driven by the competition between teams and fans. In contrast, games were more about support and having fun, a means of a pass-time, win or lose for Black fans. Furthermore, participants reported feeling separate from and held to different standards academically and socially from Black football players. Furthermore, they felt their White peers put the Black football players on a high pedestal, something they would never do.

I Know I'm Black

Beyond the differences participants illuminated about football games, an undercurrent in the students' voices was the awareness that they were "Black" and how that was a marker of difference on the university campus as a whole. This sentiment was reaffirmed through participation as a fan for activities related to football games (e.g., preparation and travel to the game, tailgating, watching the game in the stadium). When probed for how the Black community relates to the larger group, a participant responded:

All in—I don't feel all in. I'm just one of the few Black people at the game," and "Solid [Blue] [a tagline of the University], I can be a part of that. One family, *OneHartwell*—that's a little more personal, I feel like a bunch of White people and Black people together is a little fake.

Other participants shared the same sentiments. Even though they felt as one in a few Black people at the games, they felt they could still participate in the athletic activities, such as wearing school colors to the game, chanting, or wearing all blue on campus the Fridays before gamedays. However, they did not feel part of the Hartwell family as a whole. Due to issues of race on campus, participants did not believe the campus was one family as the university claims. The limitations mentioned in their description of the fan dynamic and relationship to a community of Black students illuminate the difference felt and reaction to the campus climate that is predominantly White.

Sentiments differed in how far these articulations of difference impacted their engagement in athletic activities. Participants shared their thoughts with regard to football activities:

I think that your color, race, all that stuff doesn't matter [when it comes to football]. The one time it doesn't matter is on gameday. People invite you to tailgate. Everyone is

generally very friendly. I'm used to being a loner. So when I go the game, it wasn't about Black or White, it was about me rooting for the team that I wanted to win. It actually brought the Blacks and Whites closer together because we were rooting against a common enemy. I've seen Blacks and Whites interact at football games where they would not interact normally.

The participants shared that the football environment is welcoming. They emphasized that football is the one thing where people of all races can cheer on the team and celebrate together. While some of the participants may agree that race is not a major factor when attending the games, they all agreed race plays a factor in their campus experiences. Beyond game day, participants shared how the campus climate impacts their daily lives. A participant stated:

Why is there a separation between Saturday and the rest of the week? Why is that when [Stephen] walks into the physics building, his academic building, someone thinks he's in the wrong building but when you see him at the game, you want him to do the Hartwell chant with you. It's very completely opposite mentalities to me.

This student's response resonated with the other focus group participants. The same White students that the Black students are cheering with at the games will treat them differently in the classroom or other campus activities, where more negative racial experiences occur (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000).

"I definitely feel Black here" was a statement made that seemed to capture the voice of all students, particularly when they rationalized their support of the football team at football games when it came into dissonance with a negative campus experience. Overall, students seemed to articulate that there was an attempt to be involved and supportive of the campus football community, but mediated their supportive comments with a critique of campus efforts of inclusion and representation. "I don't believe everybody knows what is going on," said a participant. "Being underrepresented you see both sides of the story"—a story that unfolds six days a week and is displayed on the seventh.

Discussion

This study aspires to understand complex dynamics between Hartwell University, Hartwell football, and engagement among Black students. Football served as a microcosm of their college experience, as students discussed their relationship with Hartwell University and Hartwell football through the lens of the dominant culture. Identification with the university at-large was an emergent theme expressed throughout the students' involvement as fans and students of color on a predominately white campus. Furthermore, the findings reveal differences among the participants in perceptions of value in attending football games and what influences or impedes their decisions to engage in the activities around football fandom.

The theoretical framework consisted of social construction theory and tenets of intersectionality to understand how Black students' identities and experiences impacted their engagement in football activities at Hartwell University. Reality is socially defined and identities are maintained and reshaped by society (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), therefore participants' realities differed based on the intersection of their identities of being Black, a Hartwell student, and a Hartwell fan. Participants' identities are also indicative of their experience on campus, both

football related and non-football activities. Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, and Smith (1997) define racial identity salience as “the extent to which a person’s race is a relevant part of her or his self-concept at a particular time” (p. 806). Participants’ racial identities became salient in how they constructed their perceptions and experiences at Hartwell as the findings revealed. For example, students said while watching football games at home, all they saw were a sea of [blue]. However, upon enrolling the university, they realized [blue] is not the only color that stood out; their blackness against the whiteness was an overwhelming event that caused their disengagement. There were differences in how students’ blackness impacted their engagement in Hartwell football.

In applying intersectionality, participants viewed their identities of being Black, a student, and a fan, in recognizing there were differences in how they experience the cultural experience of football games versus their White peers. The undercurrent derived in the student voices were assignments of value or worth attributed to their experiences. White students were die-hard fans that took the game very seriously, while Black students were just fans that attend to just enjoy the game. Black students are not going to get into arguments and fight with others or talk trash to the opposing team. By being “just fans,” the sense of belonging to the athletic, and thus, campus community was absent. For example, being able to discuss the game but not what happened at a tailgate insinuates a social barrier in conversation and activity. The salience of their racial identity, as understood through the lens of intersectionality and informed by social construction, appeared to be a primary factor that shaped how students behaved at the games and how they perceived the appropriateness of the behaviors of their White peers.

While the experiences at the game impacted whether participants continued to attend or not attend the games, the findings revealed there was a deeper reason for disengagement that was steeped in race, which is viewed through social construction. Students who did not attend the games mentioned they needed to focus on their academics, over attending the games. However, whenever they mentioned they were here for a degree, they also emphasized their identity of being Black in that they have to study to perform better than their White peers. While they said academics was more important than football, these students were also involved on campus organizations, so they were not always spending their time studying. However, these organizations were cultural, so it supports the literature that Black students may feel more comfortable participating in student organizations that are related to their culture (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Guiffrida, 2003, 2007; Littleton, 2002). These students’ perceptions of the campus climate can impact their disengagement (Jones, 2010) when it comes to participating in activities such as attending football games.

Black students face challenges to integrate academically and socially at PWIs because their norms and values may be incongruent to those of their White peers (Tinto, 1993). Participants, whether frequently or rarely attended the games, agreed the Black experience at the football games was different from the White experience. Some students were able to embrace the Hartwell football experience while others could not or did not understand it. Wann and Craven (2014) found that having a strong attachment to an athletic program provides a valuable sense of community. However, this value and sense of community, also understood as a sense of belonging, is different for Black students. The findings revealed Black students do not value Hartwell football the same way White students do. This is due to the norms and values of Black students, which often differ from White students at PWIs (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Black students that considered themselves Hartwell fans embraced the football culture, yet when they described a Hartwell fan they never described themselves. While they enjoyed participating in

the football activities, they still felt separated from idea of being part of the Hartwell family. These sentiments represented a sense of not belonging—not seeing oneself as part of the school, a feeling many Black students deal with at PWIs (Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003; Sedlacek, 1999). As a result, these feelings impact how Black students engage in campus activities primarily dominated by their White peers.

The researchers did not distinguish the participants in reporting the findings because their classification or type of campus involvement did not impact their perception of the football culture at Hartwell and or how they engaged in football activities. All of the participants were engaged on campus in some capacity because all of them were involved in at least one cultural student organization. Campus involvement did not impact their athletic engagement. Campus involvement did impact how they developed a sense of a minority community—not necessarily larger community overall. The voices of the participants were in agreement and their voices further bolstered what was discussed in the literature about how formal networks were more influential avenues in helping Black students acclimate to college culture (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Guiffrida, 2003; Littleton, 2002; Tinto, 1993) than the informal "let's all go to the game because we are Hartwell" that other students have the luxury of engaging in since race/ethnicity is not a primary concern of their White counterparts.

The findings not only referenced the physical presence in attending a football game or a PWI, but also the nature of one's presence when they are the only representatives of their racial group, and how being a part of the few raises the level of discomfort in attending these events (Margalit, 2009). Students were not interested in being targeted, but desired to be made comfortable by efforts of the university leaders. Furthermore, while the students' individual Black experiences were constantly referred to, the nuances of that experience, particularly the lack of cohesiveness among the students, illuminated that there are deeper, race-related issues that impact engagement (Flowers, 2004). These issues also impacted their connection and loyalty to the university by limiting their membership with the Hartwell family, and even their desires to return as alumni to athletic events, outside of the Hartwell Black Alumni annual homecoming event. Students acknowledged that they were aware that the campus they chose to attend is a PWI, but wished that the campus environment was one they were safe to be themselves (Tinto, 1993). The results from the study support research regarding the importance of creating an inclusive campus for Black students at PWIs (Rankin & Reason, 2005; Solorzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

Limitations and Research Implications

There were three noted limitations in this study: low participation rates in the focus group, the narrow focus on fan participation on Black students, and the limited scope of questions related to other activities participants were involved with on or off campus. First, the low focus group participation rate limits the generalizability across the Black student population at Hartwell in how they engage in Hartwell football games and activities. Given the nature of the qualitative work, the transferability of this this research should prove helpful to campus and community leaders at Hartwell whose primary concern is the student body. Concerted efforts were made to reach all Black students throughout the time frame of the study. However, the study does provide narrative depth into the individual perceptions and constructions of Black students' role and identity within the larger campus community.

Second, fan participation is not a singular activity consumed by students of Hartwell University. Just as Hartwell University is comprised of students, the school is situated in a community whose Black population also has perceptions and constructions of engagement apart from or similar to student perceptions. Therefore, in future replications of this study, the broader ethnic community should be considered. A third limitation is the level of engagement of the participants in campus activities. At the time of the study, the researchers did not ask participants to talk about the number of cultural or non-cultural organizations they were members of because it was out of the scope of the study. Future studies can look into whether certain organizations and activities result in engaging more in football activities. Also, students who are not involved in any campus organizations or activities should be considered in future studies, since the participants in this study were all involved in at least one campus organization.

In addition to being more inclusive, future research in how and why particular cultural groups organize and induct members into the campus community may be of value because it frames how students see themselves in relation to others on campus. For example, the researchers observed a difference in engagement among Black students who were involved in student-led cultural organizations versus university sponsored cultural programs that had consistent support and built-in access to university personnel and resources beyond a campus advisor. Furthermore, future research should consider replicating this study with a larger sample. Such a study should include Black students from all FBS member institutions to test the claims of the preliminary research findings. A second study could account for potential regional and racial composition differences in the triangulated relationship of sport, fandom, and participation.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

With regard to understanding and improving engagement relative to football and other campus events, the researchers recommend several approaches to assist universities and their athletic departments in better serving Black students. These approaches include ways to engage and encourage participation in Hartwell University football games as well as marketing and branding techniques to make Black students feel welcomed.

The literature is consistent with Black students having to face feelings of isolation and alienation at PWIs (Allen, 1985, 1992; Baber, 2012; Benton, 2001; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Students reiterated across focus groups the need to be made to feel comfortable. Inclusion and becoming more visible could assuage feelings of discomfort as well as help Black students understand the nature of the campus demographic. When students are seen as individuals, rather than just their race, they become more comfortable in engaging in activities (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Within university campaigns that purport the family identity, students mentioned that they felt they had no priority within publicity and branding schemes. This relates to a study by Alessandri, Yang, and Kinsey (2006), who suggested that athletic departments would have a more favorable reputation regarding inclusion if they have a stronger visual presence on campus that clearly communicates the athletic identity. Thus, athletic departments would be understood as distinctive units and just one part of the university community. Therefore, students understand that while athletics shapes the overall campus identity, their participation as a fan (or not) does not interfere with their sense of belonging or feel that they are less part of the university family.

Furthermore, athletic departments should modify and adjust current practices in order to increase Black participation at athletic events. Some of the suggestions participants made were to

consider playing a variety of music including urban, hip-hop, and R&B during time outs and band performances. Also, if athletics encouraged Black student organizations and historically Black fraternities and sororities to participate in blocked seating that allows students to sit together, more students may attend the games because of the ability to sit together as a group, rather than being isolated. Furthermore, athletic administrators should reach out to Black students and community members to engage in dialogues about strategies to increase Black fan base. With the information gathered, athletic departments could intentionally target the Black community to demonstrate their awareness of and willingness to create an inclusive sporting environment. Athletics could also collaborate with other entities and groups, such as alumni associations, former Black athletes, and university development offices in developing campaigns to ensure diverse audiences are aware of opportunities and perks of being a fan.

Universities that have a mission committed to diversity can create a positive racial climate (Solorzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002). Universities are encouraged to conduct internal audits (Harper & Hurtado, 2007) to assess how institutional units are engaging Black students. Evaluating each unit's stated goals, objectives, and initiatives is one method by which institutions can measure success. Benchmarks are important in noting how these are units are fulfilling their mission. Equally important is who is involved in the decision-making and how data is shared with constituents across the university. These tools lay the foundation to support excellence in practices geared toward the creation of an inclusive campus community.

Conclusions

This study represents a bold self-assessment about how far and what measures have been taken to include and engage historically underrepresented populations as the university recently celebrated their 50th anniversary of integration. When the first Black student enrolled at Hartwell University, it was celebrated as 'integration with dignity' amid the difficult years following the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Although integration occurred on this campus and across the United States, the campus climate of inclusivity and the reality that Blacks currently live and operate within is what our study sought to investigate.

The researchers aimed to understand how Black students socially constructed their identity and connectedness to the university in order to identify leverages that universities may use to further improve their success in addressing the social and communal needs of diverse students on campus. Due to the high visibility of football at Hartwell University, the researchers investigated how Black students engaged in football to illuminate issues of engagement overall on campus. Many of the tactics that can help engage Black students at football games can also be applied to the larger campus community. If athletic departments can successfully engage Black students, that may drive other departments and units to find successful ways of engaging these students. Given that football is the pulse of campus, athletic leaders can be an integral voice in leading conversations about diversity and inclusion on university campuses. University and athletic leaders have a pivotal role to play in establishing a campus climate of inclusivity that builds relationships across cultures and fosters overall satisfaction at Hartwell University.

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