

Exploring HBCU Students' Interests in Pursuing Graduate Studies in Public Relations and Communication Programs

Damion Waymer, The University of Alabama
LaTonya Taylor, The University of Alabama

ABSTRACT

This research responds to calls to support diversity and inclusion within the academic discipline of public relations specifically and in the communication discipline generally by engaging juniors and seniors at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The authors conducted focus group interviews with students ($n=22$) at five HBCUs. This study addresses the extent HBCU students are aware of or are interested in pursuing graduate studies in the discipline, the barriers to application or entrance into public relations and communication graduate programs for Black students majoring in a communication discipline at HBCUs, and the strategies, tactics, programs, or initiatives that are useful for the successful placement of Black undergraduates into graduate public relations and communication-related programs

Keywords: access, black graduate student recruitment, social class, public relations education, hbcu

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Critical public relations scholar Nneka Logan (2021) argued that corporations have a responsibility, a moral obligation, to address race because historically they have profited from and perpetuated racial oppression. For example, some (Thomas, 2019, n.p.) have highlighted the hidden links between slavery and Wall Street, suggesting that large U.S. insurance firms such as New York Life, Aetna, and AIG “sold policies that insured slave owners would be compensated if the slaves they owned were injured or killed”; they “counted enslaved people as assets when assessing a person’s wealth”; and in an age of social awakening, some U.S. banks recently “have made public apologies for the role they played in slavery.” Thus, we see evidence that some organizations are making amends for their role in perpetuating racial oppression.

While we should view such advances as progress, Logan (2021) challenges us to only view such actions as preliminary. She argues that many more organizations must make amends, in part via their public relations and communication efforts, for the role they have played and continue to play in contributing to and benefitting from racial injustice. Logan’s corporate responsibility to race (CRR) theory answers an earlier question posed by PR scholars: Does public relations have a place in understanding and theorizing race? (Waymer, 2010).

Some might consider such critical race theorizing beyond the purview of this particular study because public relations educators tend to be more concerned with matters more closely aligned with their day-to-day professional lives: How do we make our classrooms more welcoming places? How do we recruit and retain more underrepresented students? How do we best prepare those students for the profession? We disagree that there should be a separation between critical race theorizing in PR education and practical strategies to further diversify the classroom. To the contrary, we argue that if scholars dug deeper, they would find that by addressing diversity issues in higher education, we are also heeding

Logan's call of holding organizations accountable for their racial-oppressive pasts—as historically, racial oppression and slavery were central to the founding, development, and intellectualism and norms of universities in the U. S. (Wilder, 2013). Any efforts to diversify the PR practice and the PR classroom can be viewed as efforts to combat the legacy that lingers from this complicated history. Thus, the connection is clearer, theoretically, between CRR and diversity as good business/educational practice than upon first glance.

From a theoretical standpoint, the link between diversity and public relations theory was established nearly three decades ago by L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Ehling (1992). They argued that requisite variety allows organizations to identify all groups and foster productive relationships with each group. The authors concluded that communicators from underrepresented and culturally diverse backgrounds can translate and intercede on behalf of organizations and diverse groups and vice-versa—thus increasing organizational effectiveness. Without said diversity, organizations are vulnerable—as they inadvertently can overlook, offend, or even alienate some publics and are likely to face repercussions for said actions. As such, without seeking and acquiring requisite variety, organizations can suffer immense reputational threats or outright be deemed illegitimate (Waymer & VanSlette, 2013).

The link between PR education and practice has always been strong, as some argue that the issue of a lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the industry begins in college—as college is the pipeline for preparing racially aware undergraduates for the public relations profession (Waymer & Brown, 2018; Waymer & Dyson, 2011). The PR education scholarly literature is replete with examples of how the lack of diversity in practice is a result of an educational pipeline issue; however, what is less explored is how the lack of diversity in the PR classroom is a bona fide educational issue in its own right. For example, researchers have found that African

American students want to see and be taught by at least one professor who identifies as Black American (Brown et al., 2011). So, lack of diversity can contribute to underrepresented student recruitment and retention challenges. Furthermore, most universities require at least a master's degree for faculty instructional status. We cannot hire underrepresented faculty if we do not have underrepresented students pursuing graduate degrees in the discipline. Requisite variety matters in higher education spaces, too; as diversity of thought and lived experiences greatly enhance the learning environment.

This issue has now garnered attention, nationally, in the communication scholarly community. Two of the largest educational associations that have public relations divisions in the United States are the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) and the National Communication Association (NCA). Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)—the nation's leading professional organization for public relations professionals—has an active educators' division and offers accreditation of higher education PR programs. All organizations highlight diversity and multicultural competencies in their strategic plans (AEJMC, 2021; NCA, 2015; PRSA, 2020-2022). NCA specifically states that it “supports inclusiveness and diversity among our faculties, within our membership, in the workplace, and in the classroom; NCA supports and promotes policies that fairly encourage this diversity and inclusion” (para. 2). While diversity is a multifaceted concept that is used to discuss several aspects of identity including gender, sexuality, ability, age, and religion, in higher education, faculty, staff, and student body racial/ethnic diversity is arguably the primary demographic category institutions use to assess whether they are a more or less diverse and inclusive environment (Davis, 2002). Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that any effort to increase African American or other underrepresented graduate student enrollment in public relations and communication-related

programs across the nation aligns with the aforementioned educational associations' strategic plans—as enrolling more African American graduate students in these programs increases the likelihood of having more African American students participate in these associations, entering the profession as practitioners, and potentially increasing the size of the pool from which to hire African American faculty.

A recent Council on Graduate Schools (2018) report indicated that in 2017 (the last year of data gathered in this report), nearly 50,000 African American students were enrolled in graduate schools for the first time, and they constituted 11.9 percent of all first-time graduate students at U.S. universities. African Americans constituted 18.8 percent of all first-time graduate students in public administration, but only 5.7 percent of all first-time graduate students in engineering and less than 4 percent in physical and earth sciences.

Currently, first-time African American graduate student enrollment in communication-related disciplines is about 12 percent (NCA, 2018), which is consistent with first-time African American graduate student enrollment in the social sciences, education, and business (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2018). While this percentage is not glaringly low, on its face it appears that there is the potential of increasing African American public relations and communication-related graduate student enrollment if a well-crafted strategy and plan are put into place that explores students' interest in graduate study as well as barriers to access or other factors that might deter this pursuit.

This study, by strategically examining ways to increase African American representation in public relations and communication-related graduate programs, aligns directly with AEJMC's, PRSA's and NCA's mission to foster a more diverse and inclusive organization. Specifically, this study, in part, is a response to calls by scholars who are challenging public relations and communication to address the whiteness—both

demographically and intellectually— of the disciplines (Logan, 2021; Waymer, 2021).

Of the three organizations, PRSA was the only organization that provided concrete, measurable objectives in its strategic plan pertaining to increasing the number of African American and other underrepresented students in PR programs. Objective 4 of PRSA's (2020-2022) D&I strategic plan is clear: "Increase and retain the number of multicultural students in PRSSA and new multicultural professionals into PRSA by 15% by 2023" (n.p.). We use PRSA's ambitious recruitment and retention goals as impetus for this study. Further, in the spirit of Brown et. al (2011), we seek to find ways to broaden the pipeline of underrepresented students who can acquire teaching credentials.

Consequently, research questions that drive this study include:

RQ1: How do underrepresented students majoring in applied communication disciplines at minority-serving institutions describe their educational and work-preparation in the major and its related extracurricular activities?

Currently, there are just over 100 HBCUs in the U.S., and around half of them offer a graduate degree of any kind; only 10 HBCUs offer a graduate degree in journalism/applied communication disciplines, with Howard University being the only institution to offer a PhD in the discipline (HBCU Colleges, 2021). These facts compelled us to ask these research questions.

RQ2: To what extent are HBCU students aware of graduate studies in the discipline or are interested in pursuing graduate studies in the discipline?

RQ3: What barriers, if any, to application or entrance into applied communication graduate programs exist for African American students majoring in a public relations or another communication-related discipline at HBCUs?

Rationale for Choosing HBCUs as Investigative Site

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are chosen because they play a major role in producing college-educated African Americans, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Chiles, 2017; Nichols & Evans-Bell, 2017). Furthermore, HBCU supporters highlight that despite African Americans only representing 3% of all colleges in the United States, HBCUs enroll 12% of all Black college students, produce nearly a quarter of all Black college graduates (Waymer & Street, 2015, 2016), and they produce many professionals who have earned advanced degrees including “80 percent of the black judges, 50 percent of the black lawyers, [and] 50 percent of the black doctors” (Hill, 2019, n.p.).

Another reason we chose HBCUs as our scholarly investigation site is because HBCUs are diverse institutions that capture and reflect intragroup diversity well (Palmer, 2015). As Palmer (2015) noted, “there are black students who are first-generation, international, high-achieving, conservative, liberal, non-traditional, gay, straight, bisexual, and transgender” at HBCUs (para, 8). Therefore, if we want to identify those diverse African American students who might be potential candidates for graduate study in public relations and communication and better understand their graduate preparation and readiness, we can gain insights by strategically targeting large HBCUs in different U.S. states.

Even though there are around 100 HBCUs in the United States and the U.S. Virgin Islands (Anderson, 2017), only 24 of them have undergraduate enrollments exceeding 3,500 students (Affordable Schools, 2019). Communication faculty found that student participation in extracurricular clubs, and honor societies—especially those sponsored by the academic department—are vital to students’ academic socialization, success, and preparation for entering the workforce as a communication professional (Nadler, 1997; Waymer, 2014; Waymer et al., 2018). Thus,

students who are either involved with a Lambda Pi Eta chapter—the National Communication Association’s (2019) official national honor society at four-year colleges and universities—or a Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA)—“the foremost organization for students interested in public relations and communications [that advocates for] rigorous academic standards for public relations education, the highest ethical principles and diversity in the profession” (PRSSA, 2019, para 1), should be highly motivated, high-achieving students who have the acumen and might possess the drive to pursue graduate study. The five institutions included in this study meet the criteria above and represent the Mid-Atlantic region, the Southeastern region, and the Southern region of the U.S.

Methods

In this study, we visited, in-person, five HBCUs and conducted one focus group interview per site with 4 to 5 undergraduate students per group at each institution ($N=22$, 12 women, 10 men. We visited one HBCU in South Carolina, one HBCU in Alabama, one HBCU in Louisiana, and two HBCUs in the Washington, D. C., Maryland, Virginia (DMV) metropolitan area. In some instances, participants volunteered their classification year in school. These data were collected between January and February 2020. Nine other schools agreed to participate in this study, but travel plans were canceled due to COVID-19. While it may have been possible to conduct additional focus groups via Internet technologies such as Zoom, we deemed in-person visits to be vital because HBCUs have a unique culture all their own:

The Yard. For hundreds of thousands of folks who have attended HBCUs since the first historically Black college, Cheyney, Pennsylvania’s The Institution for Colored Youth, was established in 1837, the term evokes a myriad of images. The Yard is a celebration of unapologetic Blackness. It’s the gathering place on

campus where students can hang out, catch up between classes, break intellectual bread, get it in at the campus party or fall in love. The Yard helped fuel the Civil Rights Movement of the 50's and '60's. Here, Black lives have always mattered. (One Yard, 2020)

Zoom would not enable the researchers to walk across campuses, get first-hand looks at the classrooms, the facilities and equipment, or to experience, personally, the pride and culture exhibited at these institutions. One might argue that one cannot fully appreciate HBCU culture without witnessing it first-hand. Furthermore, if participants complained about lack of resources, we were able to verify those claims immediately. Students participated in focus group interviews which lasted about 1 hour each. All focus groups were transcribed by authors.

The authors conducted focus groups to examine HBCU students' knowledge and perceptions of graduate study in public relations and communication-related disciplines in the United States. Focus groups as a research method (see Goldman & Waymer, 2014; Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1996, 1997) is an optimal method for this study because this demographic is highly susceptible to peer influence. Often scholars who explore social influence and peer pressure among college-aged students do so as a means of examining students' willingness to engage in risky behaviors such as consuming too much alcohol or engaging in risky sex (Borsari & Carey, 2001; Fielder & Carey, 2010). We, however, believe that social influence and peer pressure also can lead to positive behaviors, such as encouraging students from underrepresented groups, in a group setting, to consider the possibilities of pursuing graduate education. As such, it is key to see how a group of college-aged students in the same peer group would view and discuss the potential of graduate education. Thus, this method allows the researchers to adequately address the research questions.

According to Krueger (1994) focus groups are "carefully planned discussion[s] designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest

in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (p. 6). Focus group methodological best practices suggest that participants are arranged in a way that they can provide and receive eye contact from the focus group moderator and each other, and these arrangements were adapted in this study (Krueger, 1994).

I, the first author, an African American man, post-graduate degree holder, moderated each focus group. While I had no formal relationship with the participants, I was welcomed as being a member of the community. Scholars have argued that for researchers to recruit and retain study participants successfully as well as facilitate group rapport, using team members who are recognized as welcomed members of the target population or community is crucial (White et al., 2019). I established rapport with both the participants and the administrators who granted access to the students by talking about my experiences—successes and challenges—of being a student-centered faculty member at a prominent HBCU from 2017-2019. I was able to draw from my prior published studies on HBCUs to demonstrate expertise on the subject matter. Also, my credibility was bolstered by my post-graduate degree, given the focus of the study centered on uncovering access, barriers, and opportunities for graduate study for HBCU undergraduate students. I represented an example, a different voice than their current professors, of what one could pursue with a graduate degree in the discipline.

All sessions were audio recorded. After participants were introduced to the study and topic and completed the consent forms, the first author asked the participants a series of questions about their view of graduate education in public relations and communication-related disciplines. All comments made during the sessions and the moderator notes counted as data.

After the data were gathered, we began analyzing data. We each read and analyzed the transcripts of participants. The multiple readings

ensured that our potential different perceptions would be addressed via reading and discussion, as the second author is an African American female. As the reading and rereading of transcripts occurred (stopping the recordings frequently to discuss the meaning of statements), we began the process of memoing, comparing and interrogating categories using generative questions, and developing themes using grounded theory (see Charmaz, 2005; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001). We used inductive analysis. This prescribes linking and relating sub-categories by denoting conditions, context, and consequences, based on the structure of the interview guide. We examined interviews to answer the research questions by identifying repetitive themes and concepts that addressed the questions until the list became repetitive and exhaustive (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process allowed us to analyze the data without making assumptions; additionally, it involved paying close attention to the data beginning at the point of data collection. Throughout the iterative process of analysis, we wrote memos that summarized relationships between codes, captured insights and impressions into the data, and elaborated on key conceptual issues (Glaser, 1978). The themes of responses manifested through a method of constant comparison and evaluation of the transcripts, looking at causal conditions, context, and interactions. Finally, we examined the central ideas that emerged from the aggregate of concepts and made inferences and recommendations based upon them.

Results

In response to RQ1, students shared a variety of reasons for choosing their majors and talked about their preparedness via the curriculum in several ways. Four dominant themes emerged. These themes are as follows: How do students choose their communications major? What are their exploratory experiences during college? What are their post-graduation career plans? What are their perceptions of their job preparedness on the market? Each of these themes is discussed in greater

detail below.

Selection of Student Majors

First, many mentioned that their majors aligned with their interests and talents. Several told the moderator that they enjoyed speaking and were good at communicating, excelled in writing, considered themselves vocal, or had been told they had a good or unique voice for careers in television or radio. Some students were driven by a desire to help others and felt that studying communication would allow them to fulfill that desire. Students also mentioned lifelong goals of being on TV or the radio. Others recalled admiring media figures on news or sports broadcasts or discussed interests in social media, trends, image, and branding that drew them to study communications. They also identified the influence of others who enjoyed studying communication. One student shared that her goal was to increase the representation of African American women on television.

Several students perceived communication to be a field that would give them the freedom to be creative, express themselves through their work, or develop their own career paths. Some were drawn to the breadth of the field. Others described a desire to use their skills behind the scenes. “My biggest goal is to...portray people’s dreams the way they wanted them to be portrayed,” one student said.

Students talked about choosing communication majors through a process of discovery after trying other fields. Some mentioned not liking math, struggling in their original courses of study, realizing they lacked passion for their original area, or simply evaluating their strengths and weaknesses, leading to another choice of major. While some students changed their majors, others changed their emphases within a communication program. For example, one student realized that she liked journalism but did not want to become a reporter. She found that she enjoyed devising communication strategies. As a result, she changed

her emphasis from journalism to public relations. Others spoke about discovering that they preferred PR to marketing. Students talked about the influence of parents, members of a parent's network, or a professor in helping them decide to study public relations or communication.

Post-Graduation Career Plans

Some students shared that they planned to go to graduate school to pursue careers in media or film. Media and film were a popular option for a couple of reasons: first, at two of the smaller HBCUs we visited, the schools did not have the resources to have an exclusive public relations curriculum; thus, students enrolled in other classes such as media and film to complete their degree requirements. Second, students wanted to be famous and be on television as indicated above, so they assumed studying media and film could prepare them for fame and acclaim. Thus, while students overall expressed some interest in graduate school, their plans were not well-articulated. In fact, several shared the fallacious sentiment that the master's degree is the "new bachelor's" degree, so they knew they needed to go back to school eventually to "stay ahead," earn their desired salary, or achieve other long-term goals. For many, this was the extent of their reflection on graduate school. Several expressed a desire to take a semester or a year off before returning for a graduate degree, and some hoped to attend schools that are closer to their families. Many saw graduate study as a way to broaden the range of opportunities available to them and had researched them. Samantha stated: "I feel like I need to master more skills, and grad school will definitely help me do that."

Other students hoped to go directly into the field, working as publicists or in corporate marketing communication departments. Many said that they already had strong connections with potential employers. Some of these students planned to pursue additional study but first wanted to work in industry. They felt unsure about the timing of a return to school, wanted to gain job experience, or hoped to work for major media outlets

or leading PR firms. Many wanted to get a sense of what to specialize in before returning to school.

Financial concerns factored into students' decision-making; for example, some students were interested in online graduate programs that would allow them to study while building their careers, noting that they were expected to become financially independent after graduation. Some expressed a desire to earn good salaries. Others said they planned to pursue a master's degree eventually but would need significant financial support.

Exploratory Experiences

The students who participated in the focus groups had a broad range of experiences related to jobs, internships, and other preparation to enter the field. Some students mentioned having more than one internship, which allowed them to talk with professionals about their education and career paths. Several made inroads at large companies, including IBM and BET; one had written bylined articles for the food section of a local newspaper. One student observed that her internship "reinforced what I learned in class" and "made the experience better. I was actually going out on assignments and having to shoot, edit, and all that kind of stuff." Another found that her internship opened her eyes to the 24/7 nature of some jobs in PR. A student who gained experience at a firm owned by an alumna of her school had significant responsibilities for social media but realized she eventually wanted a broader portfolio of projects. Another learned that she preferred PR over broadcasting as a result of her experiences. One did an internship at a local nonprofit organization. Some students mentioned opportunities in campus media, including newspapers, radio, and TV stations. Others gained professional experience by using what they had learned in the classroom to promote student clubs.

While some students felt that their departments had made valuable connections, others wanted more variety in their options for internships.

Some students in the DMV felt that “It’s either Capitol Hill or pretty much nothing.” Some sensed that there were many resources for internships but that the information wasn’t communicated well or was limited to select students. Some felt that local Black-owned businesses were not helpful to students seeking internships. Others mentioned having personal or mental health struggles that prevented them from pursuing internships.

Several students mentioned the effect that finances had on their ability to pursue internships. Students who had greater financial responsibilities often could not afford to take unpaid internships and felt at a disadvantage. One student noted that she had worked at restaurants and was good at marketing, upselling, and customer service. She wanted help to represent her experience in ways that would be viewed favorably as she applied for corporate jobs. Another student, Denise, was fearful because she hadn’t been able to do an off-campus internship for financial reasons:

My little—my resume is built on things I’ve done on campus.

[There’s] nothing that I have done outside, with a company, things that somebody can vouch for me...I’m very afraid because I don’t think my resume and my experience is going to get me to where I want to be and what I can imagine.

Preparation for the Job Market: “Networking Center” vs. A Place to “Get It out the Mud”

Students also reported a range of experiences with preparation for the job market. Students at a DMV, higher-resourced HBCU comparatively viewed their department as “a networking center.” Students at this institution said their school had a reputation for helping students find internships: “They put us on with so many internships and opportunities and they make sure that we’ll at least be in the right track to have a job by the time we graduate.” Students observed that their department held frequent career fairs and internship fairs—some specifically for communication and PR students—and that many of their

professors are well-known, work in PR, and own consulting firms. They felt that they were receiving an experience that was better than students at some PWIs and other HBCUs.

At other schools, students expressed that their professors provided training, prepared them to compete with students from larger schools, and often e-mailed information about local jobs. One student observed that professors played a significant role in preparing students for potential challenges they may face as Black professionals: “They...encourage us to keep going because of the lack of representation...they keep it real with us...they try to encourage us to keep going and to just do as much as we can.”

Conversely, some students at lesser-resourced HBCUs expressed deep frustration with their institutions, observing, for example, that their software and equipment—some of which had been purchased by a professor using personal funds—was severely outdated. Maxine lamented: “it’s no reason why we’re still doing Photoshop from 2002, why we’re still doing InDesign from 2000, like, we need to be evolving with it too, like our cameras, our equipment, the photography room, like stuff that’s just so old.” Michael stated: “y’all know, we go to [this school] like we’re under-resourced and everything like that. So we got to grind a little bit harder.” Claire stated:

There is a lack of resources, a major lack of resources... But see, this is media, right? Media is changing every day. We’re not changing with the media every day. So we’re learning stuff. Absolutely. But we’re learning stuff that is already setting us behind. This is--everybody says, well, I don’t know if everybody says but I say, me and my friends say, this is a get-it-out-the-mud school, [sound of students agreeing] because you literally have to go that extra mile and get it out the mud.”

The students on more than one occasion referred to these schools

colloquially as “a school where we have to get it out the mud.” According to Urban Dictionary (2018), “Get it out the mud, refers to someone who only had themselves to rely on, to become stable, financially, physically and mentally. They drug themselves out the mud, with no help from family and friends.” In this instance, the students feel that any job they might land or opportunity they might come across is exclusively their responsibility to make happen. These students worried that they would not be as prepared for the workforce as their competitors. Others felt that they were being taught material that had not evolved alongside the changes in the industry. They saw little value in parts of the general studies curriculum and felt that they had to fend for themselves when finding internships. These students were concerned by a perceived lack of movement or progress since their arrival on campus as first-year students. They wanted more guidance that felt relevant to their career goals.

Considering Graduate School

In response to RQ2, it was evident from these data that many of the students who participated in the focus groups had considered going to graduate school in communication after graduation. Students gave a variety of reasons for this consideration. Some students had been advised that an undergraduate degree would not be sufficient; others felt that they had received a solid foundation but needed to continue to develop their skills. Many saw graduate school as potentially providing a competitive advantage, resulting in better jobs or higher compensation. A student stated: “it seems like a lot of people, the higher up you get, of course, it seems like the more probable it is that you attained a master’s degree. So--and I want to be high up...” One student felt that having more education would increase her credibility and competitiveness among White co-workers; another expressed that adding diversity to her resume by attending a predominantly white institution (PWI) would make her a more marketable job candidate. Another indicated that she wanted to work

for large corporations; she expected the competition to be more intense in the larger cities where she wanted to live. Some students were considering graduate school in business or law.

Some students were motivated to continue their studies by being the first person in their family to attend college; others wanted to continue a family legacy of pursuing graduate education. Students also mentioned being influenced by professors and family members. While most of the students were considering graduate school, many were trying to decide whether to go immediately or take a break after receiving the BA. Others questioned whether an additional degree is needed in the field or felt that networking was a more impactful strategy for future career success.

Factors that Convince Students to Pursue Graduate Study

In response to RQ3, a dominant theme emerged: financial considerations could both “convince” students to pursue graduate study immediately or deter students from pursuing graduate study if they are provided no or scant financial support. In fact, students in all five focus groups identified financial considerations as critical in considering whether they would pursue graduate study. They frequently responded to the question, “What factors would convince you to pursue graduate study in communications?” with comments like, “If it was being funded...and I was not paying, I would definitely just go right ahead.” Several students were opportunity-oriented in addition to being financially motivated. These students said that having a guaranteed opportunity for a job or placement at the end of the program would be a motivating factor. They expressed a desire for stability, and some were concerned about the potential opportunity cost of going to graduate school after graduation rather than entering the workforce immediately. “[I want] something that makes it seem like I’m getting closer to my job instead of just, like, a stalling point to get into my career,” one student said.

Some students were skeptical about whether a graduate degree

would provide the advantage they sought. Others were concerned about whether to choose another HBCU or a PWI for a graduate degree, or wondered if earning an MA would cause people to view them negatively: “You’re uppity,” one student said, expressing this concern. Another questioned the value of earning a degree in environments that are not diverse: “The big companies [are] not diverse; they obviously don’t want us there. So how can that benefit me, getting the grad degree to fight for a spot that I’m unwanted in? I just don’t understand.” Others were concerned that their schools had not provided them with the education or exposure to equipment to give them the drive to go to graduate school. They felt that they were teaching themselves in the undergraduate setting and feared that they were not prepared for further study.

Factors that Prevent Students from Pursuing Graduate Study

Students in the focus groups stated that financial considerations could also be a critical factor in preventing them from pursuing graduate study in communications. Allyson said, “So, I would say money, number one” why she would not go to graduate school. Many were prepared to postpone graduate school if their “dream job” became available: “If it offered both money and opportunity,” one student said. Interestingly, many of these students expressed confidence that they would eventually attend graduate school—it was just a matter of timing. Others shared that not having tuition would keep them from considering graduate programs in communication. “I’m barely making tuition here,” Kyla said, explaining why she would need funding. Another student, Melissa, explained that she already carries loans from her undergraduate experience, saying money concerns are “taking me out the game, ’cause...loans are cool and all, but you have to pay them back.” Several students shared a similar aversion to debt, particularly if they didn’t yet have a strong sense of career direction.

Other students shared concerns about whether they could compete, identifying fear and self-doubt as obstacles. Some mentioned

mental fatigue and the desire to rest after the undergraduate experience. Students shared that receiving rejection letters would affect them, recalled earlier difficulties with learning or standardized tests, or feared that their undergraduate education was inadequate. Students also mentioned not understanding the application process and timelines and fear and stress related to taking the GRE. Some expressed a belief that companies value experience over education and that a graduate degree may not be necessary if certifications and licenses are available. Others felt that they could work their way up within an organization or would be able to pursue their goals through networking and their natural abilities.

Discussion

The interviews we conducted with students in communication programs at HBCUs reveal a group of emerging professionals who are bright, ambitious, and realistic. Many of these students are planning to attend graduate school or are open to considering it. They have also sought out experiential learning opportunities to prepare for work in industry. However, the data show that lurking beneath the surface of whether these students will pursue graduate education or even feel prepared to do so is a considerable matter of social class. According to Waymer (2012b), social class is a tough concept to understand fully, but it is one that is highly relevant to public relations. Further, Waymer (2012a) argued that public relations scholars, practitioners, and organizations must grapple with issues of social class “because of the determining role that social class status has on persons’ life chances” (p. 5). Waymer continues:

If organizations via public relations activities have the potential to address large social issues and achieve other social goods, then it appears reasonable to expect that these organizations address at least a portion of the needs of lower-class citizens—who tend to be some of the most vulnerable publics in any society. (p. 5)

At some of these institutions where faculty are purchasing equipment and

resources from their own pockets, or where students are using outdated equipment and are learning skills that are no longer relevant in industry, or where students feel that every internship, everything that they learn they are doing on their own and for themselves, we have clear issues of social class that are furthering the divide in our society between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Even the statement by a student that pursuing a graduate degree might lead people to perceive her as “uppity” is a telling aspect of class identity negation (see Waymer, 2011). In the African American community, being uppity is often used as a pejorative term to denote someone who is “taking liberties or assuming airs beyond one’s place in a social hierarchy. Assuming equality with someone higher up the social ladder” (Urban Dictionary, 2007). While recruitment of underrepresented students has been a focal point of public relations researchers for years (Brown et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2011), for a student to dismiss the furthering of her education because of the perceived negative consequences about how she will be perceived (as uppity) in her workplace—and by extrapolation her community—reveals that social class considerations are critical and must be factored into any efforts designed to recruit underrepresented students. There is a legitimate belief among some members in Black community, even among those who are pursuing graduate education, that acquiring education is no “magic bullet” that will ever affect a Black person’s upward mobility, station, or lot in life (Sanchez et al., 2011).

While it is always important to discuss the intersectional aspects of identity when conducting identity-focused, qualitative research in public relations (Vardeman-Winter et al., 2013), gender did not reveal itself as salient in these data. While it is possible that the moderator’s gender being that of a privileged man could have led to gender not emerging as salient from these data, the fact that women constituting nearly 60% of all U.S. college students at the close of 2020-21 academic year (Belkin, 2021),

and nearly 70% of first-time African American students pursuing graduate degrees (Council on Graduate Schools, 2018), indicate that in terms of access to college and graduate school, gender (unless we are seeking to address men's underrepresentation in the classroom) is a less salient consideration than race or class (Mintz, 2021) or the combination of the two (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2021). What is more, social class also shapes the career preparedness of students. Claire stated:

I haven't really had an internship at all. So when I got here, I pretty much--my parents are once you're 18, you got to take care of yourself. So...I immediately started working on top of going to school full time, I was working like 40 hour weeks. And to me during the summer, it's either you work to support yourself, or you get an internship that's not going to pay, then how am I going to get around? Where am I going to live? So I haven't been able to actually do an internship because I've had to work.

Our dataset included students from one of the wealthiest, urban HBCUs as well as students from one of the most rural, Southern, economically challenged HBCUs. With this knowledge in mind, and if we are going to actively address issues of social class via pedagogy, research, and practice, we must ask ourselves as educators the following: what role are our institutions and educational practices playing in “enacting social class norms, reinforcing social class norms, and even masking... [our] role in the continuation of rigid social class stratification” (Waymer, 2012a, p. 7)? Mintz (2021) highlighted how “the concept of merit, now equated with test scores and academic credentials, has been defined too narrowly and has become indistinguishable from social class, denying opportunity, far too often, to outsiders” (n.p.) from lower socioeconomic classes. If we are not critically asking ourselves these questions, then we and our universities are not living up to our social responsibilities—that is to play a constructive role, through community engagement, research, and

outreach, to elevate CSR standards with purpose of growing social impact through constructive change (Heath & Waymer, 2021).

Based on the aforementioned findings, we provide four potential suggestions for PR and communication educators for the purposes of increasing the number of students from HBCUs who attend graduate school in public relations and communication.

First, find the funding. Traditionally aged students in undergraduate programs are in the Gen Z age cohort—a group that experienced the 2008 recession during their formative years (How the Great Recession Shaped GenZ, 2017, p. 3). These students are concerned about student loan debt, and they are “pragmatic” about earning and saving money (Data reveals GenZ’s pragmatism about the job market & student debt, n.d.). College financial aid offices should explore ways to help students at HBCUs avoid the kind of debt that limits their future educational prospects. Additionally, graduate programs need to consider how to offer attractive financial packages to potential students. Specifically, PWI institutions with robust internship and industry immersion programs, top-notch equipment and curriculum, and financial resources for graduate assistantships should partner with HBCUs to create joint BA/MA degrees with partner HBCUs whereby students spend their last year(s) at a PWI, earn a Master’s degree, and receive high-quality, practical experience to land top, paid internships and full-time jobs with agencies, corporations, or NGOs. So, partnership with PWIs can be deemed a solid strategy; however, we believe fervently that this strategy should not be used to thwart the continued development in and advancement of HBCUs nor should this strategy be viewed as a rationale for states and federal government not to address the long-standing inequality between HBCUs and PWIs. In a recent article (Wilson, 2020), the president of Morgan State University (one of the nation’s largest HBCUs) lamented the fact that while some HBCUs have R2 doctoral university (high research activity) status based on the Carnegie

Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, no HBCUs are among the top research universities (frequently referred to R1 doctoral university (very high research activity) status):

If we are to address the systemic barriers put in place over many generations for America's communities of color, we must empower America's highest performing HBCUs to become pillars of America's research enterprise, just as we did for today's elite research universities over the last 70 years. While many of those have built massive, successful research programs, they oftentimes produce research with only tangential value to Black and marginalized communities. (Wilson, 2020, para. 3)

Additionally, industry leaders and nonprofits should explore creative partnerships with educational institutions, such as the LAGRANT Foundation, to provide students with incentives such as guaranteed job opportunities or resume-building experience to potentially overcome the perceived opportunity cost of attending graduate school rather than immediately entering the workforce.

Second, be consistent with career development. Career development offices remain critical to students' vocational growth. They can guide students to think carefully about their skills and interests early enough to avoid costly dead-ends on the road to declaring majors. They can also find ways to enhance partnerships with professors and marketing initiatives to ensure that students know about available opportunities—both vocationally and at the graduate program level.

Third, join the “GRExit” movement. Graduate schools can drop the GRE requirement, removing an often-onerous burden that creates socioeconomic barriers, “disadvantages applicants from underrepresented groups,” and does not accurately predict a student's ability to succeed in graduate school (Hu, 2020).

Fourth, refresh curriculum regularly if possible. We recognize that

this is dependent upon resources available, but if partnerships from PWIs, nonprofits, and industry are in place, the HBCUs of lower social class status would have the resources and support to ensure that students have access to updated equipment and curriculum that reflect current issues and trends, providing students with confidence in their education, momentum for the future, and a return on their investments of money and time.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Even though we feel we have a good mix of HBCUs (large vs. small, rural vs. urban, Southern vs. Southeastern vs. Mid-Atlantic) represented in this study, we still only conducted five focus groups. COVID-19 severely limited our ability to conduct further focus group interviews on HBCU campuses, and we felt that given the nature of the topic, it was paramount for us to be present on those campuses, for us to walk and tour the campuses and their facilities, and for us to meet with students on their campuses in spaces that were comfortable to them. Even with this limitation in mind, we reached saturation with the themes that emerged and feel our findings are representative of the feelings of current HBCU students and their interests in pursuing graduate education and the barriers they perceive are present to this pursuit. Future research should explore other potential challenges that should be lessened to increase the number of HBCU students who attend graduate school in public relations or other communication-related disciplines. Additionally, future research should ask HBCU administrators what strategies, tactics, programs, or initiatives do they believe to be useful for the successful placement of African American and other underrepresented undergraduates into graduate public relations and communication-related programs.

Conclusion

While progress has been made over the past two decades in terms of increasing (doubling) the number of underrepresented racial and ethnic persons practicing public relations (see Nguyen, 2015), industry

professionals and academics alike have lamented and continue to lament the lack of racial and ethnic diversity amongst public relations—both in the classroom and in industry (Berger, 2012; McGirt, 2018; O’Dwyer, 2018; Waymer & Brown, 2018). Stated simply, despite the fact that industry leaders have prioritized diversity in public relations (O’Dwyer, 2018), progress in the area of increasing the number of underrepresented racial and ethnic persons working in the profession or even majoring in the discipline has been slow. We offer this study and its findings as a contribution to the existing vein of research designed to add further racial, ethnic, and class-based diversity to the profession and our academic institutions.

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