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Let Us Make It Ours: Residential Mattering for Black College Students at a Predominantly White Institution

THERE ARE MANY FACTORS THAT OCCUR OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM TO IMPACT A STUDENT'S COLLEGE EXPERIENCE. In fact, positive residential experiences have often been linked to greater persistence and graduation rates. This qualitative study examined the experiences of Black students in residential housing. Unique to this study, a student of color, peer-to-peer interviewing method was utilized to ensure student-driven methodology and to support trustful spaces for Black students to share their lived experiences. This study compared the residential experience of Black students living in identity-based living-learning communities to that of their peers living in traditional housing. The conceptual framework included theories of Black college student cultural identity development, living-learning community development, and mattering and marginality, with a focus on the out-of-classroom experience for Black students at predominantly White institutions. Findings showed the continued marginality experienced by Black students within campus housing and revealed the importance of shared racial identity to their retention and persistence. This study also highlighted the supportive environments that identity-based living-learning communities provide for Black students and the disparities created for those living in traditional housing, who defined mattering in terms of the marginality of their experience. The definition that Black students had of mattering and marginality differed from those within the national literature, indicating critical opportunities for future research.

As populations within the United States continue to diversify, naturally so will that of the students who attend colleges and universities across the nation. Between 2000 and 2010 alone, Black college student enrollment in postsecondary education increased nationally by 73%. In fact, student enrollment in colleges and universities was expected to increase by 15% from 2014 to 2025, with students of color expected to be the largest of these increases (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). However, for many large public higher education institutions, attendance and

persistence to graduation have stalled or even declined for Black college students, and these concerning trends have only been exacerbated by the pandemic (Barrow, 2020). This data indicates particularly concerning outcomes for Black college students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Housing and residence life is well positioned to support Black student retention and persistence, and living-learning communities (LLCs) have often been viewed as a means to this purpose, both as a high-impact practice and as a critical bridge to support student retention and persistence. However, definitions of LLCs, while well researched for White-identifying students at predominantly White institutions, have long deserved interrogation to ensure that they best support the needs of Black students. This is particularly critical when considering the importance of student mattering on a college or university campus. For living-learning communities to effectively support student mattering, we must consider the unique needs of all students, not only majority populations. For students of color, this requires an open perspective on LLC structures that places identity development at the center of praxis. By placing Black students and their lived experiences within the center of research, much can be reexamined about what we believe we know and what may be required to support those students often pushed to the margins.

The impacts of living-learning communities on the collegiate experience have certainly been well researched for many years. Numerous studies have shown involvement, academic success, and institutional engagement to be significantly higher for students participating in LLCs (Kuh, 2009; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Participation in LLCs can also positively impact student involvement, another key element of student retention and persistence efforts (Pike et al., 1997). These well-researched outcomes have supported LLCs as a high-impact practice for college student persistence and retention to graduation (Kuh, 2008, p. 21).

Though there are many different LLC models and structures, the connection between cocurricular activities, academic services, and student experiences as part of a cohort is a consistent and important characteristic of the kind of student support they offer (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). In LLCs, cocurricular learning occurs within the residence hall environment, thereby blending the in- and out-of-classroom experience. Student-driven LLCs, on the other hand, have less of a focus on a curriculum driven by faculty and instead incorporate the interests of students in the design and implementation of a living-learning community (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). Identity-based living-learning communities (ILLCs), sometimes also called affinity communities, are more in keeping with the fundamental design of being student driven, with an additional focus on the shared identity of race, ethnicity, and culture.

Research on living-learning communities, while well supported in findings throughout the past three decades, remains wanting in its focus on Black college students. In fact, Black student racial and ethnic identity and its role within an LLC has not been significantly studied due to a lack of accessibility for underserved populations as a whole (Kuh, 2009). As Kuh and colleagues (2017) noted, “The sobering reality is that participation in high impact practices such as living learning communities remains

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inequitable, with first generation, transfer students, and African American and Latino students least likely to participate” (p. 12). Due to the lack of research on Black students participating in LLCs, not all researchers agree on the potential impacts. As some have suggested, it may be critical that we pause on assumptions regarding engagement methods for underserved and marginalized populations, due to the focus on majority populations that this research and theory were indeed based upon (Harper & Quaye, 2008; Kuh, 2009). Unsurprisingly then, research on living-learning communities that center identity as a guiding principle also remains quite limited.

STUDY DESIGN

This study sought to better understand the mattering of Black-identifying students at a large Research 1 PWI and the impact that identity-based living-learning communities had on the Black student residential experience. Three specific questions were posed to support deeper learning:

1. *How did Black students define their mattering within college residential environments?*
2. *What barriers and opportunities within the residence hall environment did Black students identify that contribute to feelings of mattering and marginality?*
3. *What strategies, values, and coping skills did Black students employ to support their sense of mattering?*

More than 100 Black-identifying students were contacted to request their participation in this study, and 12 students volunteered to be part of this qualitative, partnered research study. All study participants self-identified as Black. To better understand the experiences of Black students within identity-based living-learning communities, two samples were created: students living in ILLCs and students living in traditional housing. Ultimately, of the 12 who participated, six students resided in ILLCs, and six resided in traditional housing.

Standard interview methods were employed; however, all interviews for this study were conducted peer-to-peer by two Black-identifying students. Peer-to-peer interviewers supported this study as recruiters, student interviewers, and fellow thought partners to the primary researcher. Both peer-to-peer interviewers were Black-identifying students and leaders within the Black student community, and both lived in on-campus housing at the time of this study. This unique, peer-to-peer design method was requested specifically by Black students as a way to counteract systems of power and White bias, both present and experienced within the institution and the study, and to

support trust building for study design. The peer-to-peer interviewers also supported the values-based coding method utilized for this study. This style of coding was particularly relevant to better understanding the sense of mattering as it connected to group membership, and units were coded as values, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as for meaning and interconnection (Saldaña, 2015). Validity through a double coding process and member checking ensured that themes and findings were accurately represented.

FINDINGS

This study revealed important findings connected to mattering and marginality, as well as key areas of understanding for better supporting Black college students within residential housing. The remainder of this article will discuss major findings of this study and implications for future research. Whenever possible, specific quotations from the students themselves were included to ensure that their voices were lifted and accurately represented.

Redefining Mattering

Thomas, a Black student living in an ILLC, described his experience in the community.

I saw hope. I saw hope for a sense of color to come in and actually have a place where they could be themselves. I know that living in their residence halls, they would always feel isolated, by their roommates, by their suitemates, by the people that lived in their wing, because they looked a different way than most traditional White kids looked like at a PWI. But I saw hope within the ILLC, and that's why I stayed.

Similar to other students who participated in this study, Thomas defined his experience within the ILLC not only for what it brought to his housing experience but also, more deeply, how it impacted his desire to stay at the institution. For students interviewed in this study, particularly those who lived in the ILLC, mattering meant more than what the current definition suggests; it involved others “depending on us, being interested in us, and being concerned with our fate” (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 165; Schlossberg, 1989). Mattering was directly connected to a shared identity, making current definitions of mattering representative of the majority population and thus not encompassing the Black cocurricular experience. For Thomas, mattering was defined as a feeling, as an incentive for hope. However, this hope was not for inclusion, as the current research would indicate mattering to be, but more so hope for the connection with other students who shared an identity and a mutual under-

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standing, as well as for the ways that this connection provided by a shared identity would inform his greater experience (Flett et al., 2019; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989).

Thomas was not alone in his perception of mattering. Out of the 12 interviews conducted, 10 Black students discussed a shared identity as being critical to developing a sense of mattering. This was a critical finding. Black participants in this study did not hope for inclusion within the greater predominantly White population; instead, they hoped for connection to other Black students who shared and understood their own experience.

More deeply, shared identity was defined in three ways within this study: shared race, shared ethnicity, and shared experience. This was a critical difference from the currently utilized definition of mattering. This theme was repeated throughout interviews, particularly when students discussed their reasoning for choosing to live in an ILLC. In fact, all six students who lived in an ILLC recognized shared identity as being critical to their definition of mattering. They also identified the ILLC as critical to their belief and value of investing in self and others, indicating a reciprocal contribution of shared identity.

In addition to shared identity, mattering in this study was described as an institutional commitment, which was defined by students in two ways: (1) support for the spaces needed by Black students to develop their shared identity and (2) the institutional understanding that Black students had an experience different from that of their White peers, shown by the institution centering Black experiences within their decision making. Often, there was little differentiation between housing and the greater institution in these descriptions, showcasing the blending of life for students in and outside of the classroom.

In Alissa's experience, the existence of ILLCs was one important part of the greater picture of mattering: "Things within housing, it's a space for us. I think creating a space for our ILLC, specifically for people of color to fill those spaces and feel seen, that is mattering." For Siarah, mattering meant more than having shared identity within a community space; it required active institutional commitment: "I think it should be more of an active thing rather than passive because passive means it's just non-existent. It should be active engagement and active action to change a system. Engagement tells us that we matter." This sentiment about institutional commitment was shared by Ace:

Mattering to me means that your perspective or opinion is taken into consideration when a decision is made. Having our opinions matter as a society, having our views and our perspectives and our opinions put into consideration, not just by staff, but the university as a whole, that would be what it means to matter on campus.

This is an interesting finding in that it shows the importance of "by whom" and "for whom" within a greater definition of mattering and highlights the differences between Black students and their White peers. Black students within this study fully understood

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that they may not be accepted by nor matter to their White peers, which is why they felt they needed their own spaces where they can matter to each other and can also feel supported by institutional commitment through structural and systemic change.

Inequities Within the Housing Experience

Another important part of this study was comparing and contrasting the experiences of students who lived in an ILLC to those of students in traditional housing. For the six students living in traditional housing, similar patterns emerged showing a deep and concerning understanding of their marginalization, and mattering was most often defined through this lens. It was not what they received but what they did not that most deeply informed their housing experience. Roselyn discussed her wish that the housing community would recognize the additional challenges faced by Black students at a PWI. In her housing community, she was one of only two Black-identifying students, and in her interview she discussed at length the marginality she experienced as a result. Monique also indicated the challenge of lacking a shared identity based on race; though she described herself as an outgoing student, unafraid and excited for the journey that lay ahead, she also described her transition to the on-campus housing community as an isolating one:

There were so many kids who were White, which was really hard when I first got there. I didn't really meet any of the other Black students at first. I felt like, oh my gosh, I look so different than all these other people.

Monique went on to discuss the alienation she felt as she walked the halls looking for other Black students. She eventually found a few students with a shared racial identity, but they were mostly in communities outside of her own hall.

When asked how they defined mattering, responses from Black students in traditional halls were lacking in detail. However, when asked about the barriers or opportunities experienced as well as suggestions for improvement, responses were rich with specific examples. This indicated that they had personal experience with marginalization and acknowledged a much deeper connection for marginality than mattering. Additionally, those who lived in traditional housing revealed troubling concerns about their safety. This issue involves many layers of concern beyond physical safety; these students also confronted microaggressions, racism, and discrimination. Lack of safety was experienced personally, through interactions with peers and institutionally. Five out of six of the traditional housing students interviewed discussed a deep, personal experience regarding concern for safety, which was vastly different from experiences shared by other students living in the ILLC. Roselyn described feeling frightened by what might happen if she were to live and express her own identity and culture:

I'm very aware that there are people who have a problem with me or other people of color. You look around and people will be playing rap music for example. But if I do the same thing on this campus, they will think I'm a thug. I can't go playing around; it's not safe.

Throughout her interview, she shared multiple experiences of microaggressions and racism, in addition to the threat of being harmed simply because of her race. The sense of threat and exclusion informed these students' need to feel a shared identity based on race, ethnicity, and experience.

Study participants who lived in traditional housing often mentioned the risks of being Black at a PWI, and these concerns included fear of being placed in spaces where racial differences shape the greater environment, fear of not being believed when a racist incident occurred, and concern about the undue burden placed on Black students due to their race. Five of the six participants living in traditional housing described the ILLC as an environment critical to support Black student safety due to the feeling of a shared identity it provided. Sadly, none of the six students living in traditional housing found significant shared identity within their own housing experience, and the hope of finding it outside of housing proved to be a strategy for their mattering.

Self-Motivating Factors

Within coding based on values, how participants found their sense of mattering was also defined very differently by students living in an ILLC than it was by those living in traditional housing. This cross comparison served as a helpful guide in analyzing differing self-motivating factors. Findings showed that students living in traditional housing placed greater emphasis on self-motivation, while those living in an ILLC felt that mattering occurred in the context of the greater community. In other words, students who lived in traditional housing looked at self as a motivating factor to their success and felt they could not depend on their fellow students within the housing community to support their success; in fact, four out of the six students living in traditional housing felt they needed to look outside of housing to find spaces of shared identity.

Student Involvement

Not only were there key differences in motivation between students who lived in traditional housing and those who lived in ILLCs, but these differences were actualized within the context of decision making; for students in traditional housing, involvement was key to develop a greater sense of mattering. Out of the six students living in traditional housing, four passionately discussed the many ways that involvement impacted their sense of mattering. This generally meant joining clubs or organizations outside of residential housing. Siarah, a student who lived in traditional housing, emphasized the importance of involvement in opening doors to future opportunities:

I think the reason why I felt so connected to this place was because of my leadership position. I think a lot of Black students don't feel that same connection. I think it was that specific position that made me want to stay in college. Then later on, I wanted to find my way into student government. Having the gateway opportunity gave me the courage to do student government as well.

Roselyn also discussed the importance of involvement as a way to strengthen mattering. In her experience, mattering was found in academically connected clubs and organizations, specifically those that provided connection through shared racial identity. In comparison, of the six students living in ILLCs, only one discussed involvement as a key factor, indicating that the ILLC environment provided shared identity and therefore did not require students to seek it out for themselves.

The Power of Mentorship

Shared identity involves a direct connection to fellow peers. When identity was shared through mentorship within the housing community, mattering was deepened even more greatly. Resident assistants (RAs) were specifically referenced as critical to this shared mattering. Nine out of twelve students interviewed (all six students living in the ILLC and three students living in traditional housing) mentioned the importance of having a shared identity within residential leadership.

Thomas, a student living in the ILLC, discussed the powerful influence of RAs in his residential experience: "It was just amazing that I could talk to someone that had gone through a similar background for the past 4 years as me and helped me navigate all the things that I may face as a Black man." For Ace, access to a shared race and ethnicity with his RA was critical to his sense of mattering in housing. "I think for a person of culture or a person of a different ethnicity, finding a space where they can talk about that difference is important." Roselyn, a student living in traditional housing, discussed being the only Black-identifying student in her housing community, except for her RA. This shared identity was critical to her, not only in not feeling alone within her residential community, but also in having an advocate within her community. As she noted,

I think as a Black student just to have someone that you know who acknowledges race and creates a space so that you can talk is so important. I don't know if the people in my residence hall are cool with me being here, but my RA isn't going to take that if it does happen. I like that we are straight to the point where we don't stand for that here and that's not what our school is about.

In Roselyn's example, having an RA on staff who shared the same racial identity was critical. This need for shared identity was present even though her housing community was reportedly quite ethnically diverse, indicating that diversity alone cannot substitute for the power of shared racial identity.

Additional interviews included many references to the importance of having housing staff of shared identity serve as their mentors, support systems, advocates, and resources. In each example, the shared identity of race, ethnicity, and experience was highlighted as being key to mattering, in addition to institutional commitment. Of the three students who did not refer to shared identity within housing leadership, none reported having access to this within their housing community due to a lack of diversity in leadership.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ILLCs as an Impactful Practice

When more deeply defining mattering and marginality, this study found that identity-based living-learning communities are critical to improving the sense of mattering in housing for Black students. ILLCs not only provide shared mutual identity, but their existence also demonstrates an institutional commitment to providing a space for Black students at a PWI. Research shows that affinity spaces based on race and culture serve as important grounding support systems (Hilton & Ray, 2015), and identity-driven spaces not only contributed to Black student engagement but also provided safe spaces for students to connect, learn, and build meaningful peer relationships (Brooms, 2019; Strayhorn, 2010). However, while many PWIs provide affinity spaces within campus equity and inclusion offices, few capitalize on the impactful environment of housing and the cocurricular learning of a residence hall. Much has been learned through this study, not only about the importance of ILLCs, but also how they can be formed with purpose and meaning for the students they work to serve.

Suggestions for ILLCs

ILLCs are often structurally developed as student-driven living-learning communities, but they must also focus on the shared identity of race, culture, and experience. Repeatedly, students interviewed in this study who lived in the ILLC requested additional opportunities for cocurricular engagement that could address all the elements of their shared identity. This was an interesting finding, and one that highlighted an important recommendation. For ILLCs to further develop and grow, they should create a symmetry in the power of shared identity, student involvement, and student learning. It is not only the space of connection to other Black students that deepens mattering; it is also the cocurricular experience that we provide which deepens their mattering.

Student learning does not have to occur within the classroom, such as in a linked course, although this was certainly something several students requested; it can also be created as part of an intentional residential and curricular design. Additionally, a shared model between residence life/housing and a university office of diversity, equity, and inclusion was fundamental to supporting strong curricular development, ensuring that resources were available to better support community growth. This requires a shared model of structural design between residence life and a second department or college for deeper LLC growth and improvement (Hurd & Stein, 2004).

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FURTHERING THE ILLC EXPERIENCE

The disparities between Black students living in traditional housing and those living in ILLCs reveal a deep and concerning divide, as well as a propensity for greater marginalization for students living outside of an intentionally designed cohort with shared housing experiences. The existence of ILLC communities, while incredibly important, does not by and large change the residential environment for all Black students living within a housing model, though the housing environment should be fundamentally changed. In line with feedback and suggestions from students interviewed in this study, it is recommended that each housing community support tenets developed within ILLCs in three specific areas: the creation of spaces where shared identity can flourish (affinity spaces), deeper curricular design and development, and deeper institutional commitment to increasing Black student involvement in university decision making.

Affinity Spaces

Throughout this study, both students living in the ILLC and those living in traditional housing shared recommendations for additional affinity spaces within residential housing. To be clear, students were not requesting additional ILLCs; they were requesting spaces within housing specifically for Black students. This request was both structural and community driven. Structurally, the request was for physical space to be provided in each building or residential neighborhood. Affinity spaces are meant to be environments for cultivating feelings of connection, safety, and shared identity. Multiple students in this study mentioned having to find these spaces outside of the residence halls, which reinforced the marginality they already felt in their housing experience. Providing spaces for Black students to build connection and community takes the pressure off students to create it themselves.

Curricular Design and Development

Another central commitment to Black students when considering residential programmatic design is to utilize a curricular approach to student learning, which aligns the mission, goals, outcomes, and practices of a department with the education occurring outside of the classroom (Edwards et al., 2020). Each curricular approach provides sequenced learning opportunities designed specifically for the needs, mission, and goals of a particular institution. This makes curricular approaches obvious inroads to impact the student experience, due to their deep reach to all students in campus housing.

While curricular approach strategies often include a focus on social justice and/or identity development, they may be utilized primarily for the learning and development of White students and thereby do little to improve the sense of mattering for Black students. It is therefore recommended that strategies for a curricular approach must

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be created specifically for Black students to support their growth, development, and connection. Strategies could include encouraging shared identity meetups within affinity spaces, creating connections back to affinity groups on campus, highlighting Black clubs and organizations within newsletters and publications, or even providing a linked course for Black students within a residential neighborhood based on the shared identity of race, culture, or experience. This strategic focus on the Black student experience within a curricular approach provides an inclusive experience.

Institutional Commitment: Staff Support and Student Investment

In this study, mattering was defined as the power of shared identity based on race, ethnicity, and experience and was highlighted by Black students in the ILLC and those in traditional housing. Seeing themselves within the leadership of their residence hall created a sense of safety for Black students, demonstrated institutional commitment, and provided an outlet to discuss their experiences. For Black students living in ILLCs, having staff with a shared identity was fundamentally important to help them with coping and success strategies. This study also showed that hiring White allies was simply not enough to support Black student mattering, since shared identity was a baseline need. This likely requires fundamental changes within hiring and retention staffing practices, including an intentional and proactive approach to hiring staff at all paraprofessional and professional staffing levels.

Black students participating in this study also discussed the importance of their voice within decision making. This was vital for two reasons: to increase student involvement, giving them a voice within university decision making, and to provide open lines of feedback between Black students and university administration. A student advisory board for Black-identifying students to provide recommendations for improving the on-campus housing experience is one way to meet this need. For many institutions, this advisory board could be housed within the Residence Hall Association (RHA), since this organization works and interfaces with other student leadership boards and with housing administration. Placing a Black student leadership board within the RHA can provide an important symmetry in the connections to housing leadership, collaboration with other student leaders, and increased opportunities for Black student leadership. This recommendation is also very much in keeping with this study design, which called for Black students to have direct decision-making power within their own student housing experience.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Findings within this study showed that the recognized definition of mattering in the literature was representative of majority White populations and did not fully encompass Black college students' experience. Further, utilizing current national definitions to define mattering for Black students could create a greater sense of marginality because it would involve power being given to majority populations to define the Black

student experience. Therefore, a new, more inclusive definition of mattering for Black students is important to consider. Based on findings within this study, the definition should include consideration of the importance of shared identity based on race, ethnicity, and experience as well as institutional commitment. This commitment involves not only creating physical spaces in which this shared identity can exist and be celebrated but also investing in the Black student experience, ensuring the recognition, representation, and inclusion of Black students in decision making.

Developing this research into a replicated study design could be highly beneficial since research on the student housing experience often utilizes belonging, not mattering, as a leading framework. While mattering and belonging are certainly connected within research, they are not the same. If mattering is to be lifted up as a key theoretical framework within housing research for Black students, there must be further testing and replication to better understand the differences between student groups found within this study. In all instances, additional movement for research should include qualitative approaches to research in addition to the quantitative measures currently employed. The Black student population has repeatedly been lost within quantitative measurements due to the size and breadth of the White student population at PWIs, and if we truly wish to better understand Black students, then lifting their voices through qualitative approaches can serve as a better and more meaningful method design.

CONCLUSION

This study may serve as a helpful bridge to understanding the residential experiences of Black students, but it is only just the beginning of the work that must be done. Black students must be placed in the center of both research and institutional commitment, instead of at the margins, and this applies both to the research being completed and the methods and design of the studies themselves. This requires a focus on study purpose, design, and implementation, one that places student voices at the heart of design and not on the fringes. This will not only help administrators develop understanding but will also allow Black student voices to articulate how housing systems can best meet their needs. Black students can and should be contributors to the development and implementation of ideas to improve their own residential experience. When we neglect to include Black students in the process, we miss the beauty of what the outcome could be. In this way, “Let Us Make It Ours” is then not only the title for this study, but a continual call to remember our purpose and an opportunity to support the collegiate experience for all students. The student experience is made by students for students. Let us listen. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. With enrollment rates continuing to fall for Black college students at predominantly White institutions, how might student affairs professionals change their structures of support within the cocurricular experience to strengthen Black student mattering?
2. How can higher education professionals more deeply center the Black student experience and student voice within methodology, design, and research practices? How can they center Black student mattering within residential housing?
3. What differing structures of living-learning communities exist at your institution, and how might centering identity change implementation and support frameworks?
4. What are the key differences within literature of mattering and marginality and belonging, and how might these differences inform practice?
5. Considering that curricular approaches strive to support student learning and development, how might the curriculum need to be reconsidered to more deeply center the experiences of Black college students?
6. While the creation of identity-based living-learning communities (ILLCs) may be one important call to action to improve Black student mattering, what other opportunities exist for the creation of and connection to affinity spaces on campus?

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