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# The Voice of Reason: A Qualitative Examination of Black Student Perceptions of Black Culture Centers

Lori D. Patton

*Black Culture Centers (BCCs) represent safe and welcoming spaces for Black students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Resulting from the Black Student Movement of the 1960s, BCCs have become institutional mainstays that provide services and programs to the entire campus community. This study examined Black students' perceptions of the Institute of Black Culture at the University of Florida. The discussion and implications provide an in-depth understanding of the historical, current and future role, and mission of BCCs, as well as insights on the importance of BCCs as PWIs strive to better serve the needs of Black students.*

Staples (1987) noted, "The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s fundamentally altered the character of America's higher educational system" (p. 76). As a result of legislation stemming from the movement, the demography of predominantly White institutions (PWIs) changed drastically with the enrollment of Black students. Mingle (1981) described that, during the 1960s at southern PWIs, the Black student population leaped from 3,000 to 98,000 students, with similar increases in the North. By the latter portion of the decade, 8.4% of the total college-going population was Black students (Mingle). Despite the massive influx of Black students, PWIs were hardly prepared to handle the social, cultural, and academic needs of these students.

The Black Student Movement, led by Stokely Carmichael, and the powerful philo-

sophy of "Black Power" had already influenced the young generation of activists involved with the Civil Rights Movement. Rhoads (1998) stated, "Armed with the tools of civil disobedience and a spirit radicalized by witnessing the American dream betrayed, thousands of college students committed themselves to transforming campuses into sites of social and political change" (p. 2). Black students wanted their culture recognized and integrated into the academic, social, and administrative functions of their universities (Patton, 2004). Black studies courses, increased recruitment of and financial assistance for Black students, support for cultural activities, and establishment of Black culture centers (BCCs) or Black houses were among the many demands that Black students wanted met by university officials. By the mid to latter portion of the 1960s, several institutions including Harvard and San Francisco State University had introduced Black Studies into the university curriculum (Anderson, 1990) to meet academic demands, and advocacy programs and support services such as BCCs were established to meet the cultural and social demands.

Hefner (2002) suggested that BCCs are often historically viewed as the mechanism by which support is given to Black students to help them succeed at PWIs. Moreover, Young (2002) stated, "The cultural center was to be the place where attitudes, values, knowledge and skills could be compared, debated and shared" (back cover). For some students, it was a safe haven and a retreat from the perceived

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unfriendliness of the campus environment. Princes (1994) added that BCCs and houses were many times used as part of an admissions package to recruit students. Along with Black Studies programs, financial assistance, and minority admission programs, BCCs served as a major selling point. Once the centers were established, students used the facilities as the starting position for other protests that would take place on campus.

Aside from Bennett (1971), who offered general criteria for determining the potential of BCCs in meeting the needs of the Black community both within and beyond academia, and Princes (1994), who outlined the characteristics and services of ethnic culture centers, the majority of the literature details historical accounts of the establishment of BCCs, anecdotal writings of their existence, and general assertions of their relevance for Black students. For example, Pittman (1994) contended that BCCs facilitate the identity development process, enhance the campus climate for Black students leading to higher retention, and offer academic and social opportunities. Stewart, Russell, and Wright (1997) further purported that Black cultural housing, Black student unions, and traditionally Black fraternities and sororities can provide Black students at PWIs the necessary support and social interaction with students who have similar experiences, interests, and goals. Despite the positive nature of these and many other assertions about BCCs, none have been empirically substantiated.

Arguably, the student demands of the 1960s are the desires of students in contemporary higher education. Black students still face challenges at PWIs. Their historically perceived feelings have emerged in scholarly literature, which repeatedly has shown that Black students endure challenges related, but not limited, to college adjustment (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Hinderlie & Kenny,

2002; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993), retention (Bean, 1990; Cokley, 2000; Hu & St. John, 2001), campus racial climate (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Hurtado, 1992; Nora & Cabrera, 1996), and social support and integration (Brown, 2000; Constantine, Robinson, Wilton, & Caldwell, 2002; Gloria, Kurpius, Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001) at PWIs. These feelings, coupled with attempts to adapt to the university environment, are not uncommon characterizations of their experiences. Many Black students persist at college largely due to the social networks they build on campus. According to Brown, "social support is arguably the most important determinant of college success and satisfaction, particularly for Black students attending predominantly White institutions" (p. 480). Black students continue to seek out safe spaces on campus, a crucial factor in their success. Safe spaces may be offices, mentors, peer groups, or other support mechanisms, such as Black culture centers. Although anecdotal and historical examples lend support for BCCs, they offer little insight into the voices of students for which such centers were created.

The purpose of this study is to examine how Black students make meaning of their interactions within the BCC environment on campus. This study examines student perceptions regarding the physical space, location, size, programming, staff, and general atmosphere of the BCC and how their perceptions ultimately shape their benefit from this campus resource. Until now, there has been no published empirical research that has examined ethnic and multicultural centers, much less BCCs. More specifically, previous research has failed to address student perceptions of these facilities as they relate to their undergraduate experiences. Therefore, this study lays the groundwork for further research on BCCs,

provides a greater understanding of why BCCs exist at PWIs, and lends further insight into Black student experiences at PWIs that house BCCs.

### Theoretical Framework

Burt and Halpin (1998) stated, “Unfortunately, the experience of African Americans was, and in many cases is, viewed through the lens of the dominant culture which has resulted in a consistent misdiagnosis or distorted interpretation of the African American experience” (p. 5). Moreover, McKwen, Roper, Bryant, and Langa (1990) suggested that African American experiences be incorporated into psychosocial theories of development. Due to the paucity of existing theoretical literature regarding the Black student experience in the context of BCCs, this framework uses critical race theory (CRT). CRT is used as an overarching explanatory framework, and psychological nigrescence and Lewin’s interactionist paradigm are used to supplement the framework. CRT and psychological nigrescence inform our understanding of the impact of race on identity development of Blacks in higher education. Lewin’s paradigm provides a foundation for understanding these students’ experiences and recognizing the role that race plays in the environment of PWIs and Black student perceptions of their BCC.

CRT is a body of scholarship that provides a lens for challenging the methods in which race and racial power are constructed in society (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1997). CRT does not have a standard definition, yet a number of scholars (Delgado; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Lawrence, Matsuda, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Solorzano, 1998) have offered basic tenets of scholarship that uses CRT as a framework. Although CRT is interdisciplinary in nature, it emerged from legal studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). First, CRT recognizes that racism is normal

and seeks to implement methods whereby racism is challenged (Delgado; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Parker, Deyhle, Villenas, & Nebeker, 1998). In addition, CRT recognizes interest-convergence, or the process in which the White power structure supports advances for Blacks and other persons of color when such advances also promote a White agenda (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2000). CRT recognizes the legitimacy of the lived experiences of people of color in working to eliminate racism (Delgado, 1995; Solorzano, 1998). Finally, CRT continuously critiques dominant ideologies that use neutrality, objectivity, and colorblindness to camouflage the socially constructed meanings of race and feed into self-interest, power, and privilege (Bergerson, 2003; Solorzano, 1998).

CRT serves as a perspective that can inform scholarly approaches to address the ongoing realities and struggles with discrimination that Black students encounter at PWIs (Parker, 1998). Cho and Westley (2002) contended that student-of-color activism was central to the rise of CRT as an intellectual movement because of the resistance against inequities in higher education and demonstrative, planned activities to bring about change. Furthermore, CRT is central to understanding the unique contribution of BCCs for a number of reasons. As mentioned earlier, CRT informs methods that challenge the ordinary nature of racism through the use of counter-storytelling, counter-narratives, and counter-spaces; thus the inception of BCCs and their establishment on campus emerged from Black students’ need to have a “counter-space,” or a safe place to resist the harsh racial climate on campus in the late 1960s and to tell their counter-stories. Second, the mere presence and structure of BCCs are positioned to tell the Black story of a particular campus. Ladson-Billings (1998) suggested that storytelling is a method of naming one’s reality and

giving voice to minority cultural viewpoints. Thus, in considering BCCs from a Black student perspective, these buildings, their programs, and services tell the Black story. If Black culture is at the core of BCCs, then it would logically follow that BCCs are cultural artifacts or symbols of culture (Kuh & Hall, 1993) that serve a purpose in sharing the story of Black culture. Third, CRT is central to realizing that from the mainstream perspective, the White power structure may outwardly support a BCC as a representation of the university's commitment to diversity and the Black student population. However, CRT cautions scholars to realize that the presence of a BCC may be deemed beneficial to the White elite because it projects a "better image" (interest-convergence), yet inwardly the BCC may be viewed as nothing more than a method of avoiding controversy and protest.

A supporting theoretical perspective relative to this study was Cross' model of psychological nigrescence (Cross, 1991). One particular challenge relative to Black students at PWIs is the development of a healthy racial identity or "the extent to which one's Blackness or race is central to one's sense of self" (Cokley & Helm, 2001). Formation of a strong ethnic identity is a complex process, and for Black students it can be overwhelming to face the challenges of racial identity development in an environment that is not equipped to assist them. Cross updated the nigrescence theory and placed an emphasis on race salience. According to Vandiver (2001), race salience refers to the amount of significance that a person places on race in his/her approach to life. The defining question of the nigrescence model is, "How does one maintain a sense of cultural integrity in a world that does not support and affirm their humanity as African American people?" (Parham, 2001, p. 163). When BCCs are recognized as a cultural

component on campus, they become important resources for helping Black students feel as if there is some portion of the campus environment that is relative to their culture. Furthermore, the presence of the center alone is helpful in providing a place where they can immerse themselves in their own culture and heritage, thus serving as a positive influence in their Black identity.

The environment at PWIs and the manner in which Black students interact with this environment also have an immense impact on their experiences. Lewin's interactionist perspective (as cited in Evans, Forney & Guido-Dibrito, 1998) of person-environment congruence serves as a guide to understanding how environmental factors combined with individual students' backgrounds and characteristics impact how they experience college (Evans et al.). Person-environment congruence represents the degree of fit between a person and the environment.

Strange and Banning (2001) acknowledged that, oftentimes, ethnic minorities may feel uncomfortable and unwelcome at PWIs. They note that although the seemingly separatist approaches, such as separate minority student orientation or the creation of ethnic minority centers (BCCs), could potentially lead to greater exclusion on campus, they also may be important for creating student congruence with the campus environment for a particular population. Strange and Banning argue that specialized offices (such as BCCs) can be supportive environments that provide security and serve as a foundation from which larger campus involvement can emerge. Thus, support systems, such as BCCs could be considered vital resources for making the campus climate more welcoming and ultimately helping Black students find congruity with the campus environment.

## Role of Researcher

As the researcher of this study, I went through a deep process of reflection on why I chose to pursue this particular topic. As I conducted this study, I needed to be aware of the multiple ways in which my experiences related to those of the study participants but be certain to avoid imposing my experiences on them. Many might consider my perspective as a researcher to be biased. However, “the point of the multiple consciousness perspective . . . is that scholars of color who have experienced racism and ethnic discrimination have a perspective advantage” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 271).

The factors of my multiple consciousness, which include being a Black woman, a former student, a former administrator, and one who has experienced BCCs, etc. all prompted me to conduct this study. Although the reasons are many, at the heart of this study is my concern about Black student experiences at PWIs and the importance of having a safe, supportive environment in college.

As I reflected on this topic, I was increasingly aware of my beliefs in the value of BCCs. I believe the BCC is more than just a building. It is a home, a safe space, and an academic and social outlet. In addition to the physical space, the programming, staff, and amenities can have a very positive impact on student adjustment and students’ sense of inclusion and comfort. In believing all of these things, I was also well aware that although a BCC may be effective on one campus, it may not be as effective on another. Thus, I set many of my assumptions aside in order to allow the findings of this study to emerge without placing my beliefs at the center.

I did not approach this study assuming that every student had a negative experience at this institution, nor did I approach this study with the assumption that every student had a positive experience with the BCC. It was

more important to provide a story. CRT has a foundation in storytelling, which is a method of giving voice. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1997) contended, “The ‘voice’ component of critical race theory provides a way to communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed . . .” (p. 59). This study was designed to tell the story of Black students and their experiences with the BCC on their campus. The student voices emerged within this study and guided the data analysis and results. Hopefully, a greater understanding will be gained regarding the experiences of Blacks at PWIs and will do justice by accurately sharing their experiences.

## METHODS

The findings reported herein were derived from data gathered in a larger study. A phenomenological case study approach was employed to complete this qualitative study. Phenomenology is used to gain a solid understanding and to grasp the meaning of research participants’ “lived experiences” (Creswell, 1998). The goal was to clearly understand how the participants experienced and made meaning of the BCC on their campus. Case study methods allow the investigator to uncover the centrality of a phenomenon within particular or multiple contexts (Yin, 1993). The research examined how BCCs were experienced by Black students who used and interacted within the facility. The question framing this study was, how do Black students make meaning of their interactions within the BCC environment and in what ways do their perceptions regarding the physical space, location, size, programming, staff, and general atmosphere of the BCC ultimately shape their involvement with their culture center?

The site that was selected for this study was the Institute of Black Culture (IBC) at the University of Florida (UFL). The establishment

of the IBC was precipitated by a number of events on the UFL campus. In November 1969, the Black Student Union (BSU) was formed. Shortly thereafter, the students voiced several concerns, among them being the need to see more Black students on campus and allocation of funds for increased recruitment. Later memos demanded a senior-level administrative office be created to deal with Black student issues, recruitment resources and more Black faculty and staff, fair and equal treatment of Black university employees, and the creation of a BCC. After several months of inactivity, Black students went to the president's office making additional demands, specifically a BCC. The president initially refused and the students conceded. The students returned, this time refusing to leave, despite threats of suspension. The students eventually left and returned once more blocking the entrance to the president's office. Although asked to leave, the students refused and were eventually arrested. This sit-in is historically referred to as "Black Thursday."

President O'Connell later met with Black students and faculty explaining the strides that had been made by the university to improve the Black student experience. Yet, he opposed the idea of a BCC stating that such a structure would be racist and was unnecessary. As a result of his refusal to meet student demands, members of the BSU threatened to withdraw. When the demands were refused, 123 of the 250 Black students, two Black professors, and the university's only Black administrator began the withdrawal process on Tuesday, April 27, 1971. By June, a group of Black students went to Washington, DC to meet with members of the Civil Rights Commission and Black senatorial aides placing in motion a federal racial probe of UFL to investigate the long-standing grievances of the Black students.

By mid June, charges had been dropped against some students involved with the April

15th sit-in, and others had been given probation. By September, a majority of the students who had previously withdrawn from UFL were headed back to campus. The university succumbed to mounting pressures and committed to establishing a BCC. On February 11, 1972, the IBC was dedicated on the UFL campus. The IBC is the "Black House" of the campus and has been on the UFL campus for over 30 years. The IBC has remained in its original location since its inception.

In order to identify potential sites for this study, I first explored the websites of BCCs affiliated with the Association of Black Culture Centers (ABCC) and spoke with colleagues at a variety of institutions to learn about culture centers that met the following criteria: established in the late 1960s to early 1970s as a result of student protest, led by a professional staff member, existed as a stand-alone facility. Through website exploration and in depth conversations with colleagues familiar with BCCs, the IBC at UFL emerged as one of three information-rich cases selected for the larger study due to its longevity on that particular campus, cooperation from the UFL institutional review board and the IBC Director, and the wealth of information and carefully kept archival records that could inform this study. Chain and opportunistic sampling were applied in this study. The IBC Director served as a key informant by identifying potential participants for the study. During the fieldwork phase of this study participants and IBC staff members identified fellow students who had some involvement in the IBC. In the larger study, 31 semi-structured individual interviews were conducted. This article highlights the 11 (6 males and 5 females) interviews conducted at UFL. This sample consisted of Black undergraduate students ranging from their first year to their senior year who had involvement or interaction with the IBC.

Data collection in this study involved

semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 1 to 1½ hours in length. I conducted semi-structured, open-ended individual interviews to gather information on how these students constructed meaning of the culture center on campus in their own terms. Notes were taken during and after each interview to assist me in formulating emergent questions and to assist with later analysis (Patton, 2002).

In order to conduct data analysis, all interviews were transcribed, compiled, and analyzed. I followed a phenomenological approach to analysis, which consisted of epoche, bracketing, and horizontalization (Patton, 2002). Using epoche, each interview was examined without placing bias and preconceptions on the data or the findings that would emerge. Instead, through hand coding, I searched salient quotes that when interpreted, were reflective of the phenomenon (the IBC). Next, I bracketed statements made by participants. This involved taking the identified quotes, interpreting their meanings and examining the meanings in terms of what they revealed about the phenomenon, and defining the actual quotes. Horizontalization involved assigning equal value to the data during examination and organizing the data into meaningful clusters. Through clustering, I removed any repetitive categories. NVivo, a computer-assisted software tool, was used for additional analysis and was helpful in locating quotes and categorizing them in a pattern that was used to discuss the research findings.

As I analyzed the data, the experiences of the participants remained central, as I also attempted to present their experiences in a context that would inform other institutions of the unique experiences of Black students relative to BCCs. Thus the goal was not to generalize, but to consider the transferability of the study. This study was not intended to be applicable to all Black students at PWIs that

have BCCs. Its transferability is contingent upon fellow practitioners and scholars identifying findings and conclusions that may be relevant for their particular BCC.

As a result of analysis, four major themes were identified: (a) a climate of covert racism, separatism, and apathy; (b) learning about the center and student impressions; (c) using the center; and (d) why we need the BCC. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, member checks were conducted with 6 of the 11 study participants. These participants were asked to review the findings of the study and to verify whether or not I had accurately and completely captured their experiences (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 1999). During this process, they offered additional insights, clarified meanings, and verified their comfort with the information being reported in the study. Peer-debriefing strategies were also implemented. Six peer-debriefers, each having vast familiarity with BCCs, reviewed the compilation of findings, critically analyzed them, offered suggestions, and challenged findings to help me address unanswered questions and to ensure the findings addressed the stated research questions.

Although every effort was made to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of this study, there are two limitations that must be addressed. The first limitation is nominator bias. Although the director of the culture center was asked to identify a variety of students involved with the IBC, it is possible that students who would speak highly of the center were nominated. Even though this did not seem to be the case, it is certainly a possibility. The second limitation deals with the challenges I experienced as a researcher in identifying potential centers. There were a number of instances when BCC directors and staff members were uncooperative or simply disinterested in this study, citing a lack of trust. In essence, they feared that any emergent finding that was perceived to be negative could



have an adverse effect on the status of their center. Surely, several other reasons underlie the lack of participation by some cultural centers, but their perspectives and further investigation might have added greatly to the larger version of this study.o

## FINDINGS

### A Climate of Covert Racism, Separatism, and Apathy

Prior to discussing the BCC on their campus, the students were engaged in a conversation about the campus climate at UFL. As with many student experiences at PWIs, the students discussed the realities of race on campus. The racism that they experienced was often covert and at times easy to forget. Yet, the moment they forgot was also the critical point when racial realities emerged. For example, on this campus, the majority of the custodial workers were Black. Aaron shared how he believed that Black students were perceived. He explained:

So every once in awhile, you get reminded that you're Black. People don't see you for the person that you are. They don't see your education or your level of intellect, they just see you from the outside as the Black people that they see maybe around campus, the physical plant workers.

In later comments, he suggests that there is nothing wrong with the physical plant workers. The problem rested within the White majority mindset that all Black people are a monolithic group, have the same intellect, and should be treated the same. The covert racism described by Aaron played a major role in how students related to one another. For example, Epitome talked about the "divide" and how students rarely stepped beyond their comfort zones to attend events. They preferred to stick with those most like themselves. Nona shared

how things were hardly what they seemed on campus:

I would describe it [the campus] as gilded. It's like it looks like it's really, really good and you see people intermingling, but I think that below the surface, there is a significant amount of racial and social tension. There's a lot of ignorance on this campus. . . .

The most covert, but perceived overt, form of racism took place during Homecoming. The events during this particular year marked a bittersweet moment in Black history. The second Black woman in UFL history had been crowned Homecoming queen. This event took place exactly 30 years following the crowning of the first Black Homecoming queen. *The Alligator*, although independent of the university but considered the first source for UFL student news and information, failed to provide sufficient news coverage of the Homecoming queen. Given the historical nature of her crowning and the newspaper's annual major coverage of the Homecoming queen, the Black community was highly upset. Sasha avidly stated:

So we just had Homecoming weekend the weekend before last, and the Monday after, because the crowning of the Homecoming queen and the Gator Growl, that's on Friday. The Monday after, they always publicize who the queen is. They haven't said anything at all. So within that time and like now, there's just been this major rallying of African Americans together, like that have really recognized the fact that this is racism. A lot of people say it's an oversight or whatever. It's racism.

The Homecoming issue was mentioned in almost every interview and clearly served as an indication of how these students recognized incidents of hidden racism. Although hidden forms of racism were noted, the students at

UFL also commented on issues that plagued the Black community on campus. In some of the interviews, students discussed instances when Black students contributed to or helped to perpetuate the campus climate. With regard to the Homecoming incident, Princess referred to the students as “reactive instead of proactive.” She thought that the students’ desire to protest was understandable, but also believed that had Black students gotten involved with the Homecoming Committee and written for *The Alligator*, the Homecoming incident might not have happened. Another student shared, “We tend to react to what we don’t like, but we don’t try to make suggestions or recommendations to change things for the future.”

### Learning About the Center: Student Impressions

The various perceptions regarding the campus climate and the need for more community among Black students on campus provided a context for the presence of a BCC. During the interviews, students shared their stories of how they learned about the IBC. A large number of the students were introduced to the IBC during summer programs, freshmen orientation, or welcome week programs. One UFL student shared that he had participated in the Achievement in Mainstream (AIM) Program over the summer and the additional fall welcome week programs, which exposed the students to the IBC and helped them get acclimated to the campus. Paul entered the university geared up for involvement. He, as did many others, learned about the IBC through flyers that advertised a “Black Welcome Week,” during which students visited the center, learned the history from a professor who had participated in the student protests of the 1960s, and were introduced to the BSU. Each year, a Black student orientation and other welcome week events were hosted at the IBC, and this was how most students learned

about the IBC. However, some came to know about the IBC as a result of seeking out resources or to fulfill a need. For example, Elizabeth had been trying to find a specific book, *The Coldest Winter Ever*. Her search for one book opened up a door to the IBC where she found additional resources, social opportunities, and a cure for her homesickness. Penny was not exposed to the IBC until her sophomore year. She learned about the IBC while seeking a job. She acquired the job and, as a result, instantly got involved with the center. This was an especially important step for her because she was a commuter student who had previously worked off campus.

As the students discussed their first contact with the IBC, it was clear that their first impressions were guided by numerous factors, including the people that they met, the actual structure of the building, the resources provided, and the overall feeling that they got when they entered the building. Many expressed pleasant surprise with the facility and what they thought it represented. Aaron, who learned about the IBC through his brother, a past IBC Emissary (student ambassador) explained:

I thought it was a nice place to come and kind of be at home and relax. It was a nice place to lounge in between classes and sleep, because I’ve never lived on campus and I couldn’t just go back to my dorm room. Mostly, everybody that came in here was pretty social and you know when you came into the house, it wasn’t just like you came in, walked in, sat down, and not said anything. Everybody was just nice. So that was a nice experience.

Penny gave a different take on her impressions of the facility. In her opinion, the institute definitely needed to be “remodeled and updated.” Many commented that they expected the building to be larger and more centrally located. Such was the case with Princess’s who reported:

I thought it was small. I thought it was nice that they had an IBC. I mean, I thought it was a wonderful home away from home for Black students, but I thought it was just really small and I was very shocked. That's the first thing that came to mind, why was it so small? Why was it so far away from the actual campus? Like, it's on the other side of campus.

Princess's comments were not isolated. As students discussed their impressions of the IBC, the issue of size and location resounded in their voices. They wondered why it comprised so little space and why it was marginally located on the campus.

Although size and location were viewed as problematic, students at UFL often referred to the IBC atmosphere as a relaxed and comfortable place for students to chill. In several instances the IBC was preferred over other campus facilities. Sasha shared:

I can't think of any other place where Black people can go and just chill and just sit and not have to worry about . . . not moving out of people's way as they're walking. It's a really comfortable laid-back atmosphere. . . . I've never come in here and someone had an attitude. I've never come in here and people were arguing or yelling. Every time I come in here, people are taking care of business, talking, laughing, you know, just a very cool environment.

The atmosphere did more than just provide relaxation and comfort, it incited feelings, which the students openly expressed, many of them referencing feelings of belonging. One student discussed how the atmosphere made him feel, having visited the IBC often, when he said,

Now, I don't feel that I'm coming into somebody else's house and they're making me feel welcome, but now I feel that I'm actually a part of it. And that's a big

change, you know, when you can actually feel a part of the . . . IBC.

Moreover, Monica stated:

It's good to be together and actually feel like you're wanted somewhere. . . . Because there are so many things for everyone else. It's good to just feel like you have something that you belong to, something for yourself.

Jason described a family atmosphere at the IBC, "It's like a family here. . . . We treat each other like brother and sister . . . like in the beginning, I didn't know these people, and now they're like my family." An overwhelming majority of the students spoke about the IBC as friendly and comfortable and alluded to the open-door nature of the facility. Rarely did the students feel as if someone was going to tell them, "Hold on a second, wait outside." In contrast, the doors of the IBC were always open. The IBC was an atmosphere that promoted student networks and interaction.

A major factor that determined the atmosphere of the IBC was the staff of the facility. The Black students viewed the IBC staff members positively. The staff consisted of a director, an administrative assistant, a graduate assistant, and several student workers. The staff members, namely the director and administrative assistant, seemed to be attuned to students' emotional well-being. Elizabeth shared how they were there anytime she was upset. It meant a great deal when they would notice she was upset and ask her how she was doing. Epiteome's comments expressed that he found a "support system" in the staff at the IBC. He also alluded to the level of trust that he found in the staff:

I have a late class . . . on Thursdays, and parking on campus is impossible during the day . . . so I'm able to come over here and park my car, and just with the help of Miss [staff member], like she looks out

for my car. I leave her my keys. So I'm able to have a parking space.

For Penny, the staff at the IBC served as a referral source. She explained, "I feel like this place and talking to the director and talking to the secretary, they really know which direction to go . . . what person to talk to and everything." Elizabeth's comments were quite notable as she explained how the staff "keeps it real" and makes students feel comfortable. She said:

There's always somebody here, you know, because students work here. And then they can help you with the different, I mean, because they're students and they're Black, you know, they got you . . . it's like, don't join that club or don't do this or whatever. They keep it real. They keep it real. You don't have to be, like, how was your day, or have a nice evening. . . . You don't have to put on a front, you don't have to put on your formal, you know, a façade, you don't have to do all that, You can go other places to get that information, but . . . you feel a little more comfortable coming here. Because sometimes when you go into other places that might have the same information . . . you don't feel as comfortable asking questions. You might ask stupid questions, but here you don't mind asking what some people might call stupid questions, but they don't make you feel stupid like some other places on campus can.

## Using the Center

The participants of this study shared their thoughts about the usefulness of the IBC. Aaron described the convenience of the facility stating, "It's convenient, a lot of the Black students, they choose to have their meetings here and also they go on the computers in the back and use that for research and printing homework and typing papers." One student talked about a variety of uses that he found

in the IBC:

I don't think that I could get all of these, I mean, you can go to a public library, or you can go to the library on campus and you can go through the card catalog or the computer system to look for history of Blacks, but you can come here and just come upstairs and come to the library and you have a lot of books. You can go downstairs, you can look at the movie library, you can check out games. I mean, it's all here

The facilities were useful for locating books for African American studies courses. The IBC facilities, although not new, were compared to other buildings on campus in Jason's statements. He said:

They may not be up to the scale of like the bigger or vast complexes like the computer labs in the library, but it's more a convenience where you won't have so many people if you need a nice quiet spot to get a book or go on a computer. You can come here if you don't want the vastness and all the crowd of the main computer labs or the main libraries. Also if you want to watch TV, you can come up here and watch TV.

The IBC was also useful in providing support for the various Black organizations on campus. The students described their use of the facility for hosting organizational events. The IBC was useful in serving as and providing resources for students. This was particularly true for instances in which students could find information at the IBC that was not available elsewhere on campus. One UFL student shared,

I call it an information center for Blacks or Whites. They can find out about classes here, Black organizations, how to get to different things on campus or how to find different things. I think it's a great resource for that.

## Why We Need the BCC

A number of participants discussed the role of the BCC and how it met their needs. For Penny, the IBC was a comfortable and personal place. As a result, she did not want to see it merged with other culture centers to create a multicultural center, a rumor that had surfaced among the students. She stated,

Because, to me, it would just take away the personal feeling of how, you know, you come to the IBC and feel very personal. It's a house, you know . . . so it's very easy to feel very personal here and I just think that moving over there, you just lose some value and people would be less likely to come because it's so, you know, not comfy.

Paul commented that if the IBC were not on campus he would not feel accepted as a Black student. He said, "I think that I would have a feeling that the university didn't care and . . . didn't try to acknowledge at all that I was of African descent and I was a student at the university. . . . I just wouldn't feel as accepted." The IBC was significant in serving as an "identifier" according to one student who noted:

I think that if the IBC wasn't here, people would feel, and I'm just judging because it is here, but I think people would kind of feel a sense of disassociation from the university, because in reality there is nowhere for Black people to really go . . . so I think this is, it's like a staple for the Black community.

The participants often discussed the IBC in terms of feeling ownership of the BCC. It was "their" place. In this place, they could network with others and have a social outlet on campus. One UFL student shared that the IBC was the place they knew they could go and that it was like the Black campus union.

The IBC was also a historical symbol on

campus. It represented a historical and current presence of Blacks on the campus. Having a historical symbol on campus was important at the time interviews were being conducted because of the rumored possibility of the IBC merging with other culture centers to become one large multicultural center. The students commented that taking the center would invalidate and ignore their experiences and presence. One of the students commented, "It's very important . . . if you take IBC away, you're taking a piece of the Black history away from UFL." Aaron, a student worker at the IBC also stated:

Just the history behind this place alone, you'd be taking away from that history, you know, it would be kind of putting like a null and void stamp on what went on, which is actually just like 30-something, 40 years ago. You know, people tend to think that's long ago, but it's not even like a century ago that all this was going on, that people hated Black people so much. . . . So I believe to take the center and for it not to be here, it would really be doing an injustice to all the history behind it as far as the struggle that Black people had to go through, I mean they really had to go through a lot, a lot, just for, not to get some stuff done, but just being in their existence, just for living, they had to struggle just for being a Black person in America. That was a struggle in itself. So I believe it would be taking away from that.

The BCC was also central in the transition for first year students. The centers often held special programming in addition to the university freshmen orientation to help students get acquainted with the campus and to meet new people. Penny briefly stated, "You know they have programs for freshmen to give them study skills and meet higher-up students." Jason expressed that the IBC was extremely necessary for first-year students. He

shared that having the center helped to alleviate some of the awkward feelings that he had as a Black freshman in a predominantly white environment. One UFL student shared her personal experience as a first-year student trying to transition into the university. She said:

I think it'd be a little more depressing because, again, I was having a hard time adjusting and I still am getting through that because I still am a freshman, I still am trying to get through this semester. I don't know what I'd do, really, because there is no other place for me to go. I don't feel there's any other place for me to go . . . it's the whole social thing.

Another need that the IBC served was its ability to bring together students throughout the African Diaspora. The IBC promoted a unified identity among Black students. The existence of this facility marked the Black presence on campus historically and in the present. It seemed that although other facets of campus may or may not have espoused Black cultural values, the IBC was the central representative of Black culture on campus. Many of the students did not identify with being African American. Instead they associated themselves with Haitian, Jamaican, Trinidadian, and other Caribbean cultures. However, when the issue became skin color, these students identified with being Black. The IBC was representative of all Black students, not just African Americans. Therefore, it was viewed as the place for all peoples of the African Diaspora, and it was a place where these students learned African American history. Penny shared:

I mean I do feel there's a difference between African Americans and Haitian Americans. I think there's a big difference. But in the whole scheme of things, it's like we're all Black. We look Black. So that's my thing on that and I can identify with

them, you know, with African Americans. . . . But I identify more with the Club Creole because it's closer to me, it's the same food and, you know what I mean? And African American is not like, we don't have the same culture I don't think and the same food and the same language.

Among participants, the idea of the IBC being "a home away from home" was consistent. Most students shared sentiments similar to one student, "It was kind of a home away from home, because I was really missing home. . . . There's no other room, there's no other place . . . and this is ours, this is my house. So, you know, it's just my place, my place to be. If I don't have anywhere else to go, I know this is it. If it was open on weekends, I wish it was open on weekends, I would be here.

## DISCUSSION

There were six key findings that emerged from this study: (a) the staff members of the BCC are extremely influential in how students perceive the BCC; (b) BCCs are beneficial in helping Black first-year students become acclimated and adjusted to the campus environment; (c) students perceived that the merging of BCCs into multicultural centers would be counter to the role initially intended for BCCs; (d) location, size, and available resources of the BCC influence Black student perceptions of the usability of the center; (e) BCCs provide a sense of historical and personal identity for Black students at PWIs; (f) Black students perceive the BCC as "home." The findings of this study offer a number of implications.

### BCC Staff

First, BCC directors and other staff members played a vital role in the experiences of students at UFL. To a large extent, these individuals helped create the positive atmosphere that

many of the students mentioned while using the IBC. Moreover, the welcoming demeanor of staff members made the IBC feel like a comfortable environment where students could chill, study, use resources, and ask questions. This is particularly important given students' discussion of how other offices and spaces on campus made them feel unwanted and uncomfortable. In addition, students' references to the administrative assistant were important, because she had been at the IBC from the period of its inception to the present. Thus she was deemed as "knowledgeable." She provided a great deal of continuity at the IBC. She, along with a professor who served as the BSU advisor and had participated in the student protests of the 1960s, was crucial in keeping the history alive. Recall that during the IBC welcome week activities, this professor shared the story of Black Thursday with the students so that they would have a clear understanding of the historical and current presence of the IBC. This form of counter-storytelling relates directly to CRT and the importance of constructing and telling one's own story as opposed to allowing others to tell the story.

The findings of this study clearly indicate that the knowledge, skills, abilities, and awareness of BCC staff cannot be underestimated. Sound decisions regarding BCC staff must be made. Staff must be friendly and welcoming, especially considering the fact that many of the study participants felt most comfortable coming to the BCC instead of other offices on campus to seek help and refuge. The people who are hired to work at BCCs, whether in leadership roles or as support staff, must demonstrate a commitment to creating an atmosphere that makes students feel at home. The person who assumes a leadership role should be capable of handling the tasks associated with creating, maintaining, and implementing a vision for the BCC. Such

leadership involves awareness of the Black student experience in higher education, knowledge of mechanisms that are necessary for providing ample support to the Black student population, and knowledge of the historical and present relevance of BCCs. BCC directors and other staff members should also have a defined presence among the Black student population. Increased, positive communication between the BCC staff and students is crucial in creating positive perceptions of the center among students. BCC directors should also assess Black student needs on campus and evaluate the various programs and services that are offered. This is vital to helping the BCC keep pace with the changing needs of students. Moreover, evaluation is necessary in terms of validating the necessity for the continued existence of the BCC. Currently, budgets are tight and funds are limited. Thus, BCC directors must go beyond providing anecdotal information toward laying out clear evidence that the BCC is serving its purpose on campus.

### First-Year Student Transition

This study demonstrates that the IBC was crucial in first-year student transition. The students expressed feelings of homesickness and being lost on a huge campus. However, their participation in the welcome week activities sponsored by the IBC helped them adjust to their new environment. They learned about the IBC and its history, met new friends, learned about opportunities, and received advice as a result of their participation in the program. Thus, the continuation or, in some cases implementation, of welcome week or orientation programs that do not usurp the university's programming are essential in enhancing the student transition period. Moreover, they provide information that students want to know but would not necessarily receive from larger university programming.

Because first-year programming is so critical to student adjustment, BCC directors and staff should work toward fostering collaborative relationships with other campus offices for programs and services that would enhance the overall mission of the BCC. Collaboration with the orientation office could assist with the first-year transition, and teaming up with the student activities office could enhance some of the programs such as Homecoming. The ultimate goal of the collaborative efforts should be increasing the satisfaction of Black students with their undergraduate experiences at the institution and providing exposure of the BCC to other students on campus.

### Multicultural Centers

BCCs are on a list of endangered programs to be cut from universities or merged into multicultural centers. Multicultural centers are all encompassing facilities that are often established to cater to the needs of historically marginalized students. However, merging individual culture centers to bring underrepresented groups under one roof has the potential to undermine the rich history that each of these groups brings to the campus. The students in this study argued that merging the IBC would invalidate their individual experiences as Black students. In many ways, forcing a merge between culture centers to create one center not only dilutes history, but submits to the “melting pot” theory (Femminella, 1976). The melting pot assumes that all differences among people disappear and are replaced by one all-encompassing definition. It assumes that underrepresented populations have needs that should be met in the same way. Despite having experienced similar historical and present day racism and discrimination, each group has individual differences that merit celebration through the existence of programs and services, such as culture centers.

This recommendation should be taken within the context of the institutional culture. Consistent with Princes (1994), it is recommended that campuses having implemented separate facilities (i.e., BCC, Latino Culture Center) should keep them that way as opposed to merging them. However, campuses that have multicultural centers should begin to assess whether the facility as it stands actually meets the needs of a diverse student population. Campuses that lack culture centers or multicultural centers should consider establishing these facilities given their past and current relevance.

### Location, Space, Resources, and Management

BCCs are a major piece of the university fabric. Therefore, the institution should provide necessary support for the maintenance and upkeep of the facilities. As universities construct or renovate BCCs, the student voice should be well represented in these decisions. Clearly, adequate programming space, convenience of location, and relevant resources shape students’ perceptions of use. If these factors influence involvement and student presence, universities can gain a great deal from supporting these endeavors. Moreover, the physical architecture of a facility (i.e., house vs. building) influences student perception of the BCC as home, further indicating the need to have student representation on every level with regard to the centers. BCCs obviously play a significant role in the undergraduate experiences of many Black students; therefore, every effort should be made by the institution to support the presence of such facilities.

As the participants in this study reflected on their interactions within the BCC, each shared comments that underscored the importance of having a space on campus. The IBC was the Black students’ space, thus giving them a sense of ownership, association, and belonging



on campus. In many of the comments that students made, references to “my” space and “our” space were prevalent. Again, these comments did not come across as ownership where no one else from the campus community was welcomed. Instead, it was more reflective of the studentser:’ desire to have something on the campus that recognized and celebrated Black culture. It was the one place where they could go to see Black artifacts and artwork. It was also the space where they could find resources that were not available anywhere else on campus. They could rent Black films, find books that focused on Black people and issues, read Black magazines, learn about Black student organizations, etc. Not only was the BCC the space for finding resources, it was the place to go and ask for these things and not feel as if they were asking for the impossible or were in someone’s way. They could go to the BCC, and someone there would know the resource they were trying to find and have some familiarity with it.

The space was also important for student organizations to have a meeting place. Often the BSU and other like-minded organizations found the IBC accommodating to their spatial needs for meetings and programs. The space was not difficult to reserve and, when it was unavailable, the staff was willing to assist them in finding other locations if needed.

The feature that stood out most with the IBC was the traditional nature of the center. Historically, many of the first BCCs were houses. The house that holds the IBC continues to stand and resembles the quintessential BCC. Participants were honest in sharing their thoughts about the facilities of the IBC. They said it was old and needed renovation. Even in visiting the center, it is obvious that much work needs to be done to enhance the facility. However, the lack of these repairs, the antiquated furniture, the outdated carpeting, and hanging window treatments consistently

communicated one central message to students: You are welcome here; this is your house. It became easy to forget about the needed renovations once students felt comfortable with the atmosphere that was created. Additionally, the space provided at the IBC was functional for students. This allowed the organizations to have a space to do the things that were necessary, including meetings and gatherings. The house, crowded with various artifacts, was hardly reflective of a museum. Instead, the students viewed it as a welcoming environment.

The location of the IBC made it very difficult at times for students to get to the facility. Students at UFL said they believed location impacted the number of students involved with the IBC, particularly first-year students. Due to the IBC’s location on what they considered the outskirts of campus, it was not easy for students to find when they arrived on campus. This in turn took them longer to find out that the IBC existed.

## Identity Matters

Students in this study expressed that they felt a sense of identity when it came to the IBC. The existence of this facility marked the Black presence on campus historically and in the present. It seemed that although other facets of campus may or may not have espoused Black cultural values, the IBC was the central representative of Black culture on campus. At UFL, many of the students associated themselves with Caribbean cultures, yet through the BCC they learned African American history and identified with being Black.

Identity also was prevalent in student responses about being able to go to the BCC and identify with others like themselves. These statements did not seem separatist in nature as if Black students did not want to relate to others. Instead these experiences were vital for students who had dealt with the whiteness of

campus for so long, that it was a relief to go to a place where they could talk to others and relate to them without having to put on a façade. The ability to do this made a difference for students who chose to go to the BCC rather than another support office on campus, the counseling center or, the residence hall.

### Home Away From Home

The idea of the BCC as a home resonated in many of the participants' statements. The IBC was seen as the home away from home on this campus. It seemed almost intuitive for the participants to view the BCC in this regard once they had contact with the people and the facility itself. The BCC at UFL was indeed a house that had been dedicated for that purpose in the 1970s. So when students came to campus and saw the BCC in the form of a house, it seemed like home to them. At the IBC, home represented the students' ability to do things such as come and go as they pleased, place food in the refrigerator, study or just chill out. They could come to the IBC and watch television or listen to music. They could hold meaningful conversations or take a nap on the couch. Home at the IBC was being able to order lunch and catch up on daytime television. Overall, home was the sense of community and familial ties that the students felt when they visited the BCC. Moreover, it was the at-ease feeling that made students feel comfortable and invited without the stress that they found at other places on campus. This supports the assertions of Strange and Banning

(2001) and provides evidence of how Black identity can be enhanced through association with BCCs.

### CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study have allowed students to express the importance of the BCC on their campus. Moreover, it has provided clear evidence to support many of the assertions regarding the significant role that BCCs play. The physical presence of the buildings along with the human aspects represent recognition of Black culture, people, and history and provide positive interactions for those who visit the center. These factors provide a context for students to learn about themselves and feel appreciated and supported at PWIs. As campuses grow increasingly diverse, so do the needs of college students. BCCs represent a space that has the potential to address these needs and many more. The benefits of BCCs are reflected in the voices of students who wish to have a safe space of refuge, comfort, and support. These voices of reason indicate that BCCs contribute greatly to student experiences and make the difference for Black students at PWIs.

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