

Summer 2017

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Recommended Citation

Kaplan, Rebecca Grace and Potvin, Ashley Seidel, "Belonging, Staying, Making it Better: Underrepresented Students Create Space for Student Voice in an Educational Opportunity Program" (2017). *Scholarly Publications*. 1.

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Belonging, Staying, Making it Better: Underrepresented Students Create Space for Student Voice in an Educational Opportunity Program



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Abstract: *This paper highlights the importance of centering student voices in the design and implementation of educational opportunity programs, and demonstrates that participatory research methods are a productive and powerful way to do so. We met regularly with a group of students within an educational opportunity program, to discuss tensions they were experiencing and support them in strategizing to address the tensions. Students created a space for student voice and organizing to push their program to incorporate students' skills and experiences in a way that would value students beyond grades and test scores. The students envisioned the student group as an integral part of programs designed to support and retain underrepresented students in higher education institutions.*

Keywords: Student Voice, Participatory Approaches, Engineering

The hot room is filled with exhausted new education researchers getting ready to showcase their qualitative studies to a public audience for the first time. Former middle and high school teachers, we are two white women learning how to support teachers to create equitable and democratic educational experiences with their students. We nervously stand by our poster, making small talk and checking the tape for the third time. A burst of energy interrupts the palpable anxiety as five undergraduate Men of Color pile into the room, dressed in ties and slacks. These familiar young men greet us with smiles and handshakes, clearly excited to be here. These students gather around the poster, which displays our research on our participatory work with them, and they laugh as they recognize their words in the quotes. The group becomes quiet as they read through our claims, and Jackson exclaims, "It's perfect, we couldn't have said it any better!" The rest of the guys nod in agreement and Miguel asks, "Will you explain it?" We readily explain our work, and this begins a pattern of the morning - we explain our

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analysis and the students elaborate and answer questions as graduate students, professors, and administrators join us to learn about our partnership.

There is a need for researching and designing programs from a participatory approach in higher education institutions and for research on educational opportunity programs. Students of Color are underrepresented in higher education because they have been historically underserved by and/or excluded from k-20 education institutions (Cooper, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Educational opportunity programs are crucial for supporting underrepresented students to attain higher degrees in the face of that historical exclusion. However, if these programs mirror the oppressive structures that have historically excluded Students of Color, they run the risk of continuing to marginalize the students they seek to serve and support (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Professionals working within these programs must seek out student voice and make it the focal point of the design and implementation of their organizations. Research that illuminates underrepresented student voice can be used to support this process. This is what our study aims to do.

STUDYING SOLUTIONS WITH STUDENTS

In our study, we drew on the principles of participatory action research (PAR): “critical scholarship, multi-generational collectives, [which work] to interrogate conditions of social injustice through social theory with a dedicated commitment to social action” (Fine, 2008, p. 213). We therefore engaged in work with students using a critical lens to understand the structures of their educational opportunity program, the Strive Program (pseudonym), as embedded in larger systems of inequity. We entered this work with the presupposition that expertise is widely distributed and that the wisdom, experiences, and histories of underrepresented students should be centered in the design and structure of programs meant to support them (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003; Torre, 2009). Throughout this paper, we draw on critical theories to understand students’ interpretations of dilemmas and strategies to improve their educational opportunity program (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Torre, 2009; Yosso, 2005).

In 2013-2014, we met regularly with a group of first-year students within the Strive Program, an educational opportunity program, to discuss tensions they were experiencing and support them in strategizing to address the tensions. Simultaneously, we (the authors) studied the process. This relationship began through a semester of ethnographic fieldwork situated within a larger research project aimed at studying the Strive Program. During interviews, students had identified the need for voice within the program. Through conversations in our research meetings, we (the authors) realized we had joint interest in learning more about the students’ experiences. As our fieldwork progressed, and we developed relationships with students, we discussed the possibility of working together to explore the tensions the students were experiencing. After four months of ethnographic fieldwork, we shifted our research role to participant observers (Spradley, 1980) as we formed a partnership with the students based on a participatory framework. For the next five months, we met regularly and recorded and transcribed our conversations.

The participants included seven freshmen; all were Students of Color. Two students, Carlos and Miguel, facilitated our meetings and acted as leaders in this partnership, and we conducted interviews with them. The students had an active goal - to start a student group that would serve as a space for student voice and organizing within the program. Students used us as a sounding board to articulate their feelings about the program and the goals of the student group. We (the authors) studied the discussions on the dilemmas students felt they were facing and the solutions they felt would alleviate these tensions. Our partnership meetings focused on the need for student voice within the program and simultaneously provided opportunities for students to organize, raise and explore concerns, and strengthen community.

THE STRIVE PROGRAM

The Strive Program, located within the College of Engineering in a large university in the western United States, was designed to provide opportunities for students who were underrepresented in the field to go into engineering. Traditionally, white males constitute the majority of the field of engineering (American Society for Engineering Education, 2011). The Strive Program sought to increase participation of females, first generation students, and Students of Color in the College of Engineering and as a result, in the field of engineering. The program encouraged applications from students who attended high schools that did not offer the prerequisite coursework for application to the College of Engineering. To this end, the program invited applicants who had not been accepted into the College of Engineering to apply to Strive in order to pursue an undergraduate degree in engineering through a five-year route. Students in the Strive Program received a small scholarship each year, intended to make up for the cost of the additional fifth year of the program.

The five-year route included programmatic supports. Students in the Strive Program were required to take particular classes, some which were strictly Strive classes, and some which were integrated with other first-year students. An administrator of the Strive Program taught a leadership class for Strive students only. In addition, students also took a critical-thinking humanities course with the honors engineering students. The program required that all Strive students live a community dormitory for their first two years. Students in the program were encouraged to access the college's resource center for additional resources, such as study groups and tutoring. Additionally, second-year students served as mentors to the incoming students. Administrators and mentors met with the first-year students in small groups periodically throughout the semester to check in with them and offer support. In the year of our study, 31 students were enrolled as first-year students in the Strive Program.

DILEMMAS STUDENTS FACED IN THE STRIVE PROGRAM

Students experienced dilemmas within the structure of the Strive Program, based on rigid grade requirements and a one-size-fits-all approach, causing them to retake classes, costing them time, money, and morale.

Rigid Structure and Requirements

Though the Strive Program was designed to support underrepresented students, the grade requirements were stricter than the requirements for the rest of the College of Engineering. By admitting marginalized students who were originally denied admission into the College of Engineering, the Strive Program acknowledged that students were not initially accepted to the school due to systemic inequities (i.e. attending schools with high teacher turnover, failing ratings, no advanced classes offered). Still, the program maintained unnecessary and demoralizing requirements for the students to remain in the program once they were accepted. The program required that students earn a minimum grade of a B- in each class (as opposed to the minimum grade requirements for the rest of the College of Engineering, a C- for prerequisite classes, or D- for all other classes), and the students had to retake the class if they failed to do so. Despite how talented, motivated, and hardworking these students were, many students had to retake courses during second semester because of the grade requirements which cost them time, money, and morale. Miguel confided in us the pressures that came with these grade requirements and revealed the damage to his self-esteem:

I feel like, the time I actually broke out crying was December. Because I had been working really hard to get the grades for Strive, and I had failed all my tests. Which was really hard for me. And when I got my final grade, [starts crying] I failed them both. I failed physics and I failed math, and it was just really hard. I felt frustrated; I just didn't feel like I was enough after that. (Miguel)

Despite Miguel's account, he did not actually fail his courses by university standards but rather he did not receive the Strive Program required B-. Within our partnership, we were able to discuss this frustration with the students and support them in making sense of how this could inform the changes they proposed to the program administration.

The academic requirements not only lowered students' morale and shook their sense of belonging in the Strive community, but also pushed students out. At least four students left the program throughout that academic year:

Brad already left ... if you don't get a B- in math or science you have to retake. He enrolled himself in Calculus because he wanted to be on track. He felt like he messed up and he learned from it. [The administration] was making him go back and he said no and so he got out. (Miguel)

When students left, this sense of loss was profoundly felt and students discussed it at each of our meetings throughout the semester.

Students expressed feelings of frustration about not having a process to appeal individual cases; they discussed the desire to have a say in their future: "It's *our* future; it's what we want to do. I think we should have a bigger say in what we do and what we take. We're in college now. We're paying for classes" (Ophelia).

One-size-fits-all Approach

Students were all enrolled in the same remedial courses, in spite of their test scores or high school experiences. This one-size-fits-all approach led to students who had a stronger academic background to feel limited. The students pointed out that taking unnecessary courses put a financial burden on their families; tuition was costly, and the students needed to progress in as timely a manner as possible. Many of the remedial classes students were required to take in their first year did not count toward their degree, which added additional financial stress. Jackson explained:

Amanda dropped because she was way smart and way ahead. She could have easily been in calc last semester and [the administrator] would not allow it. She wanted to take classes without having to take the intro classes... She didn't have to go through all the intermediate steps that we have to go through and I think she felt that way too. She made straight A's and [the administrator] would not let her go [...]

The emphasis on grades and rigid requirements contributed to students feeling as if they were a statistic within the program, rather than individual people. Students explained that this also contributed to several of their peers leaving the program. The one-size-fits-all requirements of the program were experienced as barriers rather than supports. Students believed that increasing a sense of community would allow them to address the structural dilemmas that they faced. Carlos explained that with community, "You feel like you belong, and you're willing to stay and make it better."

BELONGING

Students conceptualized a complex definition of community, which included an awareness of inequitable positioning of individuals within structures, a belief that members of a community must take action to improve the community, and an understanding that community was imperative for people with non-dominant identities to succeed in institutions.

Community as a Collective of Cultural Brokers

Community was central to the students' discussions. Their definition of community involved having a sense of belonging, not just on an individual level, but on a collective level, "It's not about me, me, me, me. It's about we and us. It's about we and us. It's all of us" (Carlos). The students described the "community sense" as "we/us," in which community members are interconnected in their willingness to help one another and to share resources and knowledge. Miguel explained, "I feel like that's pretty much what a sense of community is, helping each other, and looking for the best of yourself and others, and then I feel like it's just a matter of help and prosperity within the community."

Additionally, students' understanding of community involved sharing knowledge and resources. Students often identified cultural brokers, people who shared information concerning how to successfully navigate systems in order to gain access to higher education (Cooper, 2011).

Simultaneously, students believed it was their duty to work as cultural brokers themselves, passing on the information to others from their community: “I would see these amazing students and they'd do these amazing things but they weren't sharing. But that's kinda what made me mad. Or not mad, but like inspired to do that” (Carlos). Sharing was central to students’ identities as community members and provided them tools to skillfully maneuver within power structures.

Without a Sense of Belonging

The students’ experiences in the Strive Program were in tension with their understanding of community. While students approached community from a “we/us” perspective, the students felt that the program treated all students as a homogenous group without individual needs, yet singled students out based on grades. An important component of community for students was giving back, but the rigid structure and grade requirements offered few opportunities and limited time for students to engage in service. Students believed a foundational component of community involved sharing knowledge, but there was no space or vehicle for students to support each other in their experiences and share this information with the administration. Students’ ideas around community embodied a critical perspective focused on changing the future and understanding and addressing positioning within structures. However, as is often the case in educational opportunity programs for marginalized students, students did not have an avenue to participate in the development and improvement of their program.

STAYING

The students believed that improving community was imperative for people with non-dominant identities, and that membership in a community involves taking action to improve it. Carlos described how attending college is changing the future for himself, his family, his high school, and his neighborhood,

In our communities, with full minorities, they don't go to college. We're trailblazers, we're setting that new trail and we're expanding our roots to our community. Cause I knew when I went to college, when I came here, I wasn't just affecting my family and changing my family's future. I know I'm changing Montgomery's future and I'm going to work toward that and I'm going to do it and I want to. (Carlos)

Students articulated a belief that productive community members view themselves as actors in their own history and as a result understood that their actions could affect change within the Strive community.

Not every student entered the group’s discussions with this understanding of community already formed. For instance, two of the students, both of whom had met all Strive requirements, expressed their opinions that the grade requirements in the Strive Program were not too strict, and suggested that students just needed to work harder. These two students did not enter the program with a critical perspective, but our group participated in conversations that challenged this kind of

meritocratic thinking. Our meetings served to deepen understanding of systemic inequities in education through dialogue.

Supporting Students to Stay

The students' critical perspective of community also included an awareness of positioning within structures. Miguel asserted, "Everybody says college is the place where you find yourself and I feel like not many people are getting to find themselves in this kind of positioning, circumstances that we're in." Students wanted to feel supported by the community; they wanted space to develop as individuals to make their community better. This concept of making the community better added a critical perspective to the idea of giving back, and it broadened the concept of community to encompass marginalized communities at large. Carlos described the message of one cultural broker whose words stuck with him, a public speaker who discussed the importance of returning to one's community after achieving success: "...you can't really improve your community if you don't go back and help it. And that's what [the public speaker] emphasized, he's like, you have to be present there ... I really wanted to do that as well." The critical aspect of students' definition of community emphasized doing something with one's success because they realized that success was not just their own. For example, Carlos' personal future goals included using the success of an engineering career to establish scholarships and pathways for students from his and other marginalized communities, as well as returning to his own neighborhood to teach.

Without a Way to Give Back

As it was, students did not feel like the Strive Program was structured in a way where they were positioned as active community members who could give back to the program and support future students. They wanted to feel ownership and agency within the program. Students expressed a desire to push on the structure of the Strive Program in order to open up an avenue for their voice and concept of community: "We are going to be together for the next 5 years. It's really about coming together and having that community sense. Because we're really going to need that for us and to make the program better" (Carlos).

MAKING IT BETTER

As our partnership progressed, students began to envision creating a space for student voice within the program in order to directly address structural dilemmas. The students articulated four main goals: to create a space for students to talk about issues within the program, to develop a vehicle to bring concerns and ideas to the administration, to organize opportunities for student bonding, and to serve as a national model for other educational opportunity programs.

Goal 1: A Space for Students to Talk about Programmatic Dilemmas

Students wanted a space to "spill [their] guts out" (Carlos) to one another, without adult presence. The students felt that with a space to describe their experiences within the program as new

college students and as marginalized students on a predominantly white campus, they could support one another and increase their sense of belonging. Bassam explained, “I like seeing diversity. I like seeing Strive kids. It’s not like I have anything against the majority, but I like to see that we have a presence on campus.” Students acknowledged that a positive aspect of the Strive Program was that it brought together Students of Color, but felt that they needed more opportunities to talk together about their experiences. Students wanted to improve upon the structures that already existed and create a stronger sense of belonging through acknowledging their collective positioning as non-dominant students on campus.

Goal 2: A Vehicle to Bring Concerns and Ideas to the Administration

Students identified other structures, such as programs within their high schools, which valued student voice. Miguel explained,

In our district, we had focus groups to see what we wanted to change. In our school we [students] ran it. Students opened up when the teacher left. We could talk to the younger students and relate to them and then advocate for them to the principal. Then the principal could say “yes” to this and this and this, maybe “no” to that...

Students felt it was important to constructively address concerns as a group, rather than allow individuals to complain or feel frustrated in small groups or on their own. Students wanted to address these tensions in a respectful and effective way, in order to increase their sense of belonging and improve experiences. They were not hoping to dismantle parts of the structure of the program, but rather to open dialogue between students and administration to work towards the common goal of retaining and graduating students. They wanted to have a voice in decisions that affected their lives. Students hoped that the group would function as a vehicle to reciprocally share knowledge and ideas with the administration. In doing so, the students wanted to alter the power dynamics within the program, position themselves as experts in their own lives (Kirshner, 2010), and change the landscape for future community members.

Goal 3: Opportunities for Student Bonding

The students felt that they started the program feeling a sense of pride through intentional team-building activities during the two-week summer program. However, once classes started the students felt a shift in the program’s priorities and messages, and all team-building activities ceased. The students no longer felt valued as individuals with histories, cultures, families, talents, interests, and skills; rather the only way they felt valued by the program was through academic achievement. The students wanted to plan social events, field trips, and team-building opportunities.

The importance of building community was apparent in our meetings, when students referred to Strive as a family. For example, when the students invited the rest of their cohort to a meeting to discuss this space for student voice, Damian suggested calling it a “family meeting.” Calling Strive a

family revealed how students understood community. Students wanted to plan the bonding events themselves, so that they could give back to their Strive community and create opportunities to share personal knowledge beyond the academic world. The students understood the importance of bonding to increase their sense of belonging on the predominantly white campus, in a way that would be crucial to their success.

Goal 4: A National Model

The students envisioned this student group as an integral part of programs designed to support underrepresented students in higher education institutions, and therefore understood their work a potential model for the nation. Carlos described his vision, “Say this works. [The administration] sees it works. Strive improves and the [retention and graduation] numbers go higher or whatever. Then on a national level they see this and they’re like okay, we need a student group like this.” The students felt that a space for student voice would allow similar programs to incorporate students’ skills and experiences in a genuine way that would value the whole student, beyond grades and test scores, which would result in increased retention. Situating the student group as a potential model for the nation aligned with the students’ critical conception of community, as they viewed it as a way to address systemic inequities in higher education.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications for Educational Opportunity Programs

The Strive Program hoped to serve as a model for other universities to address underrepresentation of women and Students of Color in the field of engineering. The students envisioned the student group as an integral part of programs designed to support underrepresented students in higher education institutions, and therefore understood their work as a potential model for the nation. They felt that a space for student voice would allow programs to incorporate students’ skills and experiences in a genuine way that would value the whole student, beyond grades and test scores, which would increase retention. Through our partnership many of their goals came to life as we created a space to talk about issues and support one another. At the conclusion of the semester, the students conducted a meeting with approximately 20-25 Strive students, around 80% of the cohort, where they began to design the format for the student group they envisioned throughout the partnership. The stakes were high for student achievement and the success of the program; students needed to have a space to communicate their needs, support one another, and develop community in order to succeed and complete the program.

When universities design programs meant to support underrepresented students, it is important to make an explicit effort to disrupt deficit thinking (Castro, 2012) and value students’ cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Deficit thinking involves educators, administrators, and policymakers placing blame on individual students when they do not fulfill academic expectations, rather than considering the current system and historical context that produced the conditions that prevented the student from succeeding

(Castro, 2012). Yosso describes a model of community cultural wealth, meant to disrupt the common idea of “cultural capital” put forth by Bourdieu (1989). Yosso’s model offers a framework to understand the variety of strengths Students of Color bring with them from their homes, communities, and previous experiences into school settings. If educational opportunity programs staff recognize these strengths in ways that match or surpass the usual recognition of cultural capital, students will benefit.

Additionally, educational opportunity programs should intentionally plan opportunities for students to support one another. Tatum (2003) asserted, “Predominantly White colleges concerned about attracting and keeping [underrepresented] students need to take seriously the psychological toll extracted from [underrepresented students] and the critical role that cultural space can play” (p.80). It is important to center student voice in racial justice work so that students have space to tell their stories and draw on their histories (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This has important consequences for students, as underrepresented students are often silenced in our current higher educational system:

The “voice” component of critical race theory provides a way to communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed, a first step on the road to justice ... one of the tragedies of education is the way in which the dialogue of [underrepresented students] has been silenced. (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995, p. 58)

The establishment of a student group offers a potential way for underrepresented students to advocate for themselves within institutions of higher education. Furthermore, program administrators and staff should collaborate with students to design programmatic structures to value students’ cultural wealth. Through this kind of collaboration, programs can begin to embody that value.

Implications for Colleges of Engineering

Beyond educational opportunity programs, which already serve to increase equity and diversity within higher education, Colleges of Engineering should change norms and structures that keep underrepresented students out of the field. For example, admissions requirements that include advanced coursework not offered in every high school function to prevent underrepresented students from becoming engineers. Policies that impact students who do manage admittance must also be considered; when bell curves are used for student grades, requiring a certain amount of students to fail a course, the costs of failing can be insurmountable. Engineers require skills and knowledge beyond traditional math and science content, therefore university programs should find ways to value and further develop these skills in their future engineers. If Colleges of Engineering are committed to equity and diversity, they must rethink gatekeeping policies that sort, push out, and ignore students’ cultural wealth.

Implications for Researchers

Participatory approaches to research which privilege participants’ cultural wealth have the potential to develop authentic and meaningful solutions to issues that impact participants’ lives. Our

participatory approach provided another opportunity for students to advocate for themselves and for researchers to advocate on their behalf. An additional benefit of the participatory approach was how our influence as two positive adults privileging the students' assets and positioning them as experts had an impact on the students' self-esteem and potentially their trajectory and retention in the program. This was evident in the students' responses, when they were asked how the partnership had impacted their academic achievement. Jackson explained that before Carlos approached him to join the project, he felt "over it and isolated," within the Strive Program. He credited his involvement with the student group as the reason he felt reconnected and supported in the program, and the reason he developed a positive outlook about the program. Miguel also described the importance of the student group in his academic achievement; he felt that having the opportunity to use his skills and experiences to do something positive for his community allowed him to regain self-esteem and feel reinvigorated in his academic career. Future research could look at involvement in groups that privilege underrepresented students' voices and the impact on achievement, confidence, and self-worth. While this project seeks to contribute to the developing understanding of the potential impact of participatory work with underrepresented students in higher education, more research is needed in order to support the retention and experience of students.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, we would like to thank the Strive students for inviting us into their space and sharing their concerns, hopes, and goals with us. We would like to acknowledge Kevin O’Connor, the Principal Investigator for the broader research initiative in which our study took place, for his guidance and wisdom. Additionally, we would like to thank the wonderful professors/mentors who supported us in both the research and writing processes, including Margaret Eisenhart, Susan Jurow, Ben Kirshner, and Jennie Whitcomb. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the editors and reviewers of *Opportunity Matters*.