

Joel Howell  
April 23, 2015

## **Who Am I? : An Ethnography of Black Students in a Predominantly White Institution**

“I lack a sense of belonging, especially when I am the only one of my kind that I can relate to in the majority of my courses.” These are troubling words coming from the mouth of a young African American student that attends a PWI (also known as a Predominantly White Institution). The reason that I chose to look further into this growing group of individuals is because this topic hits home for me. Being a Biological Sciences major at Rowan University, it is very rare for me to see another black individual in any of my classes, let alone a black male. The student body of Rowan University consists of only nine percent Black/African Americans, while the majority race, White/Caucasian, makes up 68 percent (Rowan University in Glassboro, NJ). It can be very difficult for an individual to claim a school that does not 100% claim them.

Upon inquiring about the admission status of members of this community I was surprised to find an eerie pattern. The majority of the African American students that I came across were not admitted through regular admission, but instead were admitted through back-door admittance programs and athletic recruitment. The main program mentioned was the EOF (Educational Opportunity Fund) program, a program that was created to provide underprivileged college applicants the opportunity to attend college. For a lot of people, affording college would be impossible if it wasn't for this program. Only four percent of the individuals that I polled responded that they were actually regularly admitted students. It may not seem like a big deal how a student was admitted into a College or University, but it can have effects on a student's psyche in more ways than people believe.

“I was once told by a professor on the first day of class once I got to Rowan that because I was an EOF admitted student that I should immediately seek help because I would not be able to handle the workload on my own.” Words’ coming from An African American female student of Rowan University, but sadly this isn’t the only time I’ve heard something similar to this. Several people who I have interviewed were able to recall similar stories from their years of attending a PWI. Now relating this to the topic at hand, with a larger percentage of the African American students being admitted through programs such as EOF, it can sometimes be difficult to believe in yourself if negativity is coming from different directions. This is when the individual attempts to develop a sense of community with people who share similar experiences so they do not feel alone.

Becoming a part of the community of African American individuals who attend a PWI is not difficult to do at all. In a lot of ways, you become a part of it by force. At the majority of PWIs that were researched, it is the common feeling that the black community is so small that you start to feel like everyone knows everyone. This creates the natural tendency to attract to one another. However, to become a part of this group one has to basically lack the acceptance into the larger group.

Although Universities pride themselves on diversity, most of them are as segregated as can be. When taking a walk through institutions like Rowan University, Stockton University, and Rider University, there was one factor that was universal—the fact that races stuck together: Asians congregated with Asians, African Americans with African Americans, Caucasians with Caucasians, etc. Members of each ethnic groups tended only interact with people of that same ethnic group while purposely limiting contact with members of other groups.

Another common thing that I heard from various different people during interviews was the fact that members of their own race sometimes criticize them for attending PWIs. As one individual stated: “My friend who attends an HBCU (Historically Black College or University) is always asking me why didn’t I attend an HBCU, do I not want to be with my own people?” This statement seems to be a measure of a person’s sense of identity, in respect to their own ethnicity, solely upon their choice of college. The common response to this seems to be the reality that HBCUs do not accurately represent the demographics of the real world. Individuals who attend PWIs stand by the fact that they are surrounding themselves with similar demographics held by corporate America, so it will be easier for them to assimilate into that environment upon graduation.

Through more secretive observation, mostly people watching, something else stuck out to me during my research, the attraction of Greek Life. Some are interested in Greek Life for the social aspect, while others seek a sense of brotherhood/sisterhood that they are unaccustomed to. African Americans that attend PWIs have quite a choice on their hands when it comes to Greek Life. They can either join a Greek Letter organization that has a history heavily seeded with the goal of Black/Minority advancement, or they can seek acceptance from the majority and join an organization in which the majority of the members are of the majority race, Caucasian. This can be a very difficult decision for an individual to make because if they choose to make that decision it is essentially a lifelong commitment. It is common practice for an African American man or woman to join a historically black organization because it fulfills their need to be around positive people that they can relate better to. While conducting interviews it was common for a person to have at least been interested in joining Greek Life for at least one semester of their college career.

It is very important to learn about African American students because this group sometimes lacks a voice in the student body. Some people don't understand that there are a number of factors that an African American student that attends a PWI have to go through that other individuals do not have to experience during their college careers. I learned through my research, and from personal experience, that if you allow others to validate you and define you, attending a PWI as a member of the minority can actually turn into an ordeal. Whether you make up 9% or 68% percent, you are attending college to further your education and the outside factors have to be ignored so that you can overcome the obstacles ahead of you.

### **Works Cited**

"Rowan University in Glassboro, NJ - Find Information about Admissions, Tuition, Majors and Campus Life at Petersons.com." Petersons's. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2015.

### **Observations**

- Ethnic groups stay with one another
- Not too much mingling between races/ethnic groups
- Attraction to Greek life
- Members of Greek letter organizations seem to get the most attention
- Lack of members of minority races in certain majors
- Even when there are minorities in these classes it seems as though most of them are women
- A lot of African American and minority students seem to come in and out of the EOF office located in Savitz
- Family atmosphere
- Common backgrounds
- Criticized by friends/family
- Looked down upon by some
- Universities are not as diverse as they say they are
- Segregation
- Motivation
- Lack of identity

## Key Interview Notes

### **How does it feel attending a PWI being as though you are an African American?**

Well I personally like it because the real world is kind of like this. I know it may sound bad but I am a business major and most of the CEOs of the fortune 500 companies don't look like me. I have to be able to switch it up whenever its necessary and become a part of that environment.

### **What was probably the most disheartening thing you have been told that made you reconsider your choice to come here?**

I was once told by a professor on the first day of class once I got to Rowan that because I was an EOF admitted student that I should immediately seek help because I would not be able to handle the workload on my own

### **Greek Life, yes or no?**

I would say yes but I'm kind of lost as what I should do. I know I'm black so I should be looking towards the Divine 9 organizations but most of my friends don't look like me and are looking to rush these fraternities where most of the people don't look like me if you get what I am saying.

### **What don't you like about being at a PWI?**

I lack a sense of belonging, especially when I am the only one of my kind that I can relate to in the majority of my courses

### **What made you join a Greek Letter organization that is historically mainly Black?**

Well I come from a troubled home and a troubled background. I am the oldest out of all of my sibling so I was never able to know what it felt like to have an older brother and for me to be able to ask him for help. Of course I have my father but he never attended college and I don't think he can really understand the TYPE of troubles and issues I am going through like people in my frat can. I was attracted to them because they were all trying to better themselves and they actually encouraged me to push myself to be the best that I can be.

### **What is your major and what are the demographics of most of your classes?**

I'm a Biochem major with a minor in biology and most of my classes are a bunch of Caucasians and one or two African American females. I am honestly the only African American Male in all 5 of my classes.

### **Does that make you upset?**

Upset? No I would say that. It's just kind of difficult to stomach sometimes. Everyone around me is getting together and forming study groups and I feel like I can't relate with anyone enough to do that.