Including the Discontented and Disregarded: Graduate Student Activism and the Evolution of the Alumni of Color Conference at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2003-2012
Overview of the Presentation

Introduction, Literature, & Frameworks

Methods

Findings

Implications and Conclusion
Introduction

This study employed scholarly personal narrative (SPN) (Nash, 2004) as a mode of inquiry to interview conference founders, current student leaders and Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) administrators in order to chronicle the evolution of the Alumni of Color Conference, started in 2003 and entering its tenth conference in 2012.
Graduate students of color at PWIs

- Struggle to recruit and retain (Gasman, Kim, & Nguyen, 2011; Reddick & Young, 2012)
- Challenges to students of color at PWIs (Gay, 2004; Brown, Davis, & McClendon, 1999)

Institutional responses

- Accommodationist?
- Sometimes fail to address concerns about curriculum, faculty, and funding
- Authentic resistance is often splashy, yet inconsequential
How are alumni of color connected to the experience at selective institutions?

- Purposes differ
  - To increase networking opportunities
  - Fundraising
- Tendency to focus on undergraduate alumni
The experience at the Harvard Graduate School of Education

Working Paper on Diversity at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (Mapp & Johnson, 1997)
- Student discontent on diversity in curricular offerings
- “Revolving door” of faculty of color
- Cancellation of Teaching for Social and Political Change course
- Half of senior faculty members of color left HGSE in 2004 for NYU
Exit, voice and loyalty (Hirschmann, 1970)

- Organizations are subject to lapses from “efficient, rational, law-abiding, or otherwise functional behavior” (p. 1). Members can respond...
  - Via the exit option (leaving the organization)
  - Via the voice option (expressing dissatisfaction through protest).
- Hirschmann presents a third option, loyalty, which “holds exit at bay and activates voice” (p. 78)

Critical Geography and Activism in Higher Education (Hay, 2001)
Methods

- Scholarly personal narratives (SPNs) (Nash, 2004)
  - Allows scholars to engage their personal experiences to “make narrative sense [and use] the personal insights gained in order to draw larger conclusions for readers,” thus confronting and challenging “older political or educational narratives” (2004, p. 18)
- SPNs coded by research team
- Four major themes emerged
Themes: Alumni of Color Conference serves as a forum for four spheres:

- Activism
- Intellectual
- Emotional
- Spiritual
- Communal

FORUM
• I think when we were envisioning this conference back in 2000 and 2001, we were really seeking to fill some various voids as graduate students of color that were present in our experience here at HGSE. – D, AOCC co-founder

• Students are able to create a space to talk about race and equity in education… students are mobilizing not only other students, but practitioners in the field – and researchers, so that we can really engage and talk about the topic. – J, 2013 AOCC co-chair
• We really were experiencing an intellectual void in some of our coursework. There were very few faculty here at the time who were dealing with critical issues around social identity markers and engaging us in critical dialogue and those that were here, as I said earlier, were not staying for various reasons. – D, AOCC co-founder

• We’re coming together to have those difficult conversations about the undiscussables… The gargantuan, obese, trumpeting elephants in the room that everybody is aware of, but won’t talk about. – D, 2013 AOCC co-chair
Findings
The Emotional/Spiritual Sphere

• I remember from the first conference… one of my fondest memories…[was] everyone coming together as a community… and we just stood and we held hands and there was a singing of “We Shall Overcome” and it just really touched my heart at that time. And ten years later, that is still a lasting imprint in my memory, because it speaks volumes of what a few of us envisioned in 2001. –D, AOCC co-founder

• I’ll never forget Dr. M [faculty member at HGSE], getting out there and groovin’. That was just inspiring to all of us, because it showed us that even the people we aspire to be were real people, and needed to connect, and needed to enjoy each other’s company. – J, 2007 AOCC co-chair
Findings
The Communal Sphere

• What started off as an idea between friends and colleagues really became, I think, something much greater. For me, one of the huge benefits of being part of that first AOCC group was really connecting with alumni whom I did not know. – R, AOCC co-founder

• The conference has been instrumental in keeping me connected to current students and to more recent alums, both personally and professionally. – T, AOCC co-founder
Findings
The Activism Sphere

• I think it is very important that the conference succeeds, and that it changes and grows and shifts. I think initially it was focused on the needs of African American students, but now it is more diverse. – H, AOCC co-founder

• It’s made the last ten years really different [at HGSE]. The landscape of the school is different because of it. – L, HGSE administrator
How do the Themes Map to the Hirschmann Framework?

- *Challenge* is an example of voice, while *safe space* is a response that engenders loyalty.

- *Merging* and *growth* allude to a time where exit was a dominant strategy, but has transformed into loyalty.

- *Exit* can be seen as an impulse for improvement, serving as a “wake up call” that alumni exit was a call to improve.

- *Loyalty* prompts disenfranchised members to stay affiliated with the expectation that reform can be accomplished from within.
Implications

- Work is in early stages – more to come!
- Institutions must navigate fine line of providing/welcoming student and alumni voice *without* co-opting
- Students are important to leverage and repair relationships with alumni who have opted to exit
- Alumni – student of color relationships are special and essential to improving both the student experience and the alumni relationship to the institution
- Students and alumni of color can serve as a conscience regarding institution’s commitment to diversity – is it rhetorical or infused into the institutional fabric?
Thank you!

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