

Misperceptions of Racial and Ethnic Student Organizations on a Predominantly White Campus

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Abstract

Much of the research on racial and ethnic student organizations focus on the organizations' benefits and the individuals involved. This paper shifts the focus to the student perceptions of race and ethnicity-based organizations. This paper aims to understand how students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds perceive racial and ethnic student organizations based on their knowledge about the purpose, impact, and contribution to the campus community of said organizations. Data analyzed come from in-depth interviews conducted with 53 undergraduate students on a predominantly white, mid-sized, rural, public, Midwestern university. Respondents were of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, including both non-members and members of the organizations. Findings suggest three themes: the misperception of self-segregation, the misperception of exclusivity, and the misperception of necessity. The analysis found a positive correlation between knowledge and positive views of the racial and ethnic student organizations. This research demonstrates how college students' misperceptions of racial and ethnic student organizations are linked to knowledge and awareness of the organizations' purpose, impact, and contribution.

Keywords: Race and Ethnicity; College Students; Diversity; Student Organizations; Higher Education

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Introduction

As the United States' racial and ethnic composition continues to diversify, universities have begun recruiting an increasingly diverse student body. In the 20 years between 1995-1996 to 2015-2016, the population of students of color increased by 16 percent (American Council on Education 2016). Though the number of students of color is growing significantly, higher education institutions continue to be predominantly white (American Council on Education 2016). The dichotomy of increasing diversity in higher education, while many campuses continue to be mostly white in composition and culture, has led to growing concerns regarding the experience, retention, success, and belongingness of students of color (Eitzen et al., 2016; Ramos 2019). Racial and ethnic student organizations (hereafter referred to as RESOs) have been discussed as a solution to many issues faced

by students of color at a predominately white institution: microaggressions, lack of representation, lack of sense of belonging, etc. (Chang 2003). RESOs offer students a designated place to openly express their culture, create social ties, and develop their racial and ethnic identities while ensuring that their cultures are represented, and voices are heard on campus (Soloranzo et al. 2000; Harper and Quaye 2007; Mueses 2008).

Thus, most of the existing literature on RESOs focuses on the organizations' impact on the lives of students of color. This paper offers a new angle of examination of RESOs by analyzing how college students of all backgrounds perceive RESOs. By identifying the misperceptions of RESOs on a predominantly white campus, a link can be made to both levels of knowledge about the purpose, impact, and overall contribution to the campus community and

the racial assumptions students bring with them to campus. This research aims to understand further the benefits of RESOs for students of color and the common misperceptions of them so universities may be able to better support students of color by reducing tensions that derive from these misunderstandings.

The misperceptions found through this analysis reinforce how RESOs serve as a space for students of color and as a resource to help navigate a predominately white institution. The majority of the ideas and assumptions white students used to fill their gaps in knowledge about RESOs were based on the racial and ethnic stereotypes that are still dominant in society. The pattern of bringing general stereotypical racial and ethnic knowledge to universities with them is something the campuses need to be aware of for RESOs and all students of color on their campuses. It is clear the RESOs are valuable, but the misperceptions challenge their legitimacy on the student cultural level. It should not be the job of RESOs and their members to break down these misperceptions and prove the legitimacy of their organizations' purpose.

Literature Review

A vital element of this study is based on understanding the relationship between race and space. Race and space - the general environment of social life - are concepts that share similar attributes: they are contested, change in terms of meaning and use, created and deconstructed through interaction and relationships of individuals, and play a role in the perpetuation of inequality (Neely and Samura 2011). The institution of education was created as a space that explicitly/formally excluded individuals based on racial/ethnic background. Though society has moved past explicit de jure segregation, most institutions' structural foundations have not changed (Gusa 2010). Many of these institutions continue to benefit the white population significantly more than any other racial or ethnic group (Hotchkins 2017). Today, college campuses are promoted as welcoming, equality-driven spaces yet continue to be exclusionary spaces based on race/ethnicity (Gusa 2010; Moore and Bell 2017; Thelamour, Mwangi, and Ezeofor 2019). The previous statement is exceptionally true for predominantly white institutions (PWIs). On PWIs, all spaces that are not purposefully created for students of color are by default white spaces because they have not been restructured to accommodate any group but white students (Moore and Bell 2017). A large amount of defaulted white space on many college campuses can lead to a lack of sense of belonging for students of color. By creating spaces for students of color, like the space created by RESOs, a sense of belonging can start

being built because belonging is often considerably associated with the racial make-up of a space (Neely and Samura 2011). A significant portion of understanding the purpose and impact of RESOs is understanding how they create comfortable/safe spaces for students of different racial and ethnic groups on a PWI.

Many studies have assessed student perception of their universities' campus climate regarding race. When asked to discuss their opinion of campus climate, students of color consistently report negative perceptions, often stemming from a negative experience with race while on campus (Jones, Castellanos, and Cole 2002; Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr 2000). Students of color report regularly experiencing microaggressions inside and outside the classroom by staff and students (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000; Smith, Allen, and Danly 2007; Nadal et al. 2014). Experiencing microaggressions can have significant adverse effects on students' mental and physical health, their sense of belonging, and their sense of self, all of which ultimately impedes academic performance (Nadal et al. 2013; Nadal et al. 2014). Students of color have also expressed a clear racial hierarchy present on their campus, placing white students at the top as intended by the institution's original construction (Chou, Lee, and Ho 2015; Ritter 2017). Due to their negative experiences and a campus climate that is not in their favor, students of color often lack a sense of belonging on their campus (Harper and Hurtado 2007).

Many studies have also focused on what enhances the university experience for students of color (e.g., Harper and Hurtado 2007; Kuk and Banning 2010; Johnston 2014). For example, greater involvement of students of color on campus positively impacts their grades and sense of belonging on campus (Guiffrida 2003; Fischer 2007). Students of color have expressed that they want their cultures to be understood and recognized as an element of the overall campus culture (Soloranzo et al. 2000). RESOs offer students of color a space to express their culture, create social and cultural connections, and develop their racial and ethnic identities (Chang 2003; Harper and Quayle 2007; Mueses 2008).

Currently, the majority of the literature on RESOs is from the perspective of students of color. Fewer analyses of campus climate and race/ethnicity have included white students (Ancis et al. 2000; Rankin and Reason 2005). Existing data on white students reveals noteworthy contrasts with the perception of campus climate shared by students of color. When asked about campus climate, white students often report no significant concerns or issues (Rankin and Reason 2005). When asked about race and racial identity generally, many white students have claimed a lack of

knowledge surrounding the topics due to their racial identity being something they rarely, if ever, consider (Gallagher 1997; Chesler, Peet, and Sevig 2003).

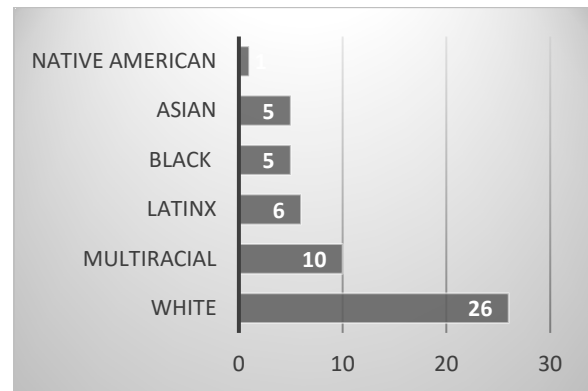
The data on RESOs is a minute portion of the research investigating students' experiences on college campuses. This niche area of study mainly focuses on the impacts of RESOs on the lives of the students who participate in the organizations. Little is known about the understanding white/non-POC students hold about RESOs. This analysis aims to fill this gap by analyzing the perceptions of RESOs held by students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. This article explores how students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds perceive and understand racial and ethnic student organizations and what shapes their perceptions.

Methods

It is worth noting that much of the current literature has been collected using methods such as surveys and focus groups (e.g., Mills and Murray 2017; Cureton 2003). A small number of analyses have used one-on-one semi-structured interviews for data collection (e.g., Gallagher 1997; Ritter 2016; Wilkins 2016). When one-on-one interviews have been used, it is often combined with other data to create larger data pools. Student organizations were not the focus (e.g., Wilkins 2012; Cabrera 2014; Johnston-Guerrero and Chaudhari 2016).

The sample for this study consists of 53 interviews from an oral history project conducted in 2016-2018. The oral history project collected in-depth narratives about race and ethnicity from undergraduate students from a mid-sized, rural, public, PWI in the Midwest. Interviews were conducted by trained undergraduate students of differing racial and ethnic backgrounds. Interview training consisted of an initial introduction to interview basics and the semi-structured interview guide. Interview topics delved into the participant's experiences with race and ethnicity throughout childhood, in their families, communities, and schools, as well as their college-level experiences and perceptions. The study's university has an approximate population of 11,000 undergraduate students: 82% White, 6% Latinx/Hispanic, 5% multiracial, Black, Native American, and Asian each less than 5%. RESOs represent those who identify as Black, Latinx, multiracial, and Southeast Asian at this university. In all, 27 students of color were interviewed for this project. Approximately 75% of the students of color who participated in this study were active members or were members of RESOs during their college careers. In this sample, students of color are overrepresented compared to the campus student population.

Figure 1: Participant Demographics



Interview transcripts were initially assessed by looking for mention of RESOs. Some interviewees posed a question pertaining to the organization, while the topic came up organically in other interviews. Next, the transcripts that discussed RESOs were analyzed using multiple rounds of open coding (Flick 2019). The quotes were coded based on the relationship of the participant to the RESOs. The quotes were categorized as a member if the interviewee regularly participated in a RESO at any point in their collegiate career. Participation includes regular attendance of general meetings and events held by a RESO. If the interviewee had never participated in a RESO, they were categorized as a non-member. The quotes from non-members were then further coded based on the amount of knowledge of RESOs the interviewee expressed. In this project, knowledge refers to the amount of information an individual holds about the purpose of RESOs, why they are essential, and the role they play in the greater campus community. Non-members who held a significant amount of knowledge about RESOs typically gained their knowledge through interactions with members of RESOs, through participation in an organization that worked with a RESO, or through employment/participation in spaces on campus that exposed them to the organizations. The quotes were categorized as positive, neutral, or negative, concerning how the interviewee spoke about RESOs. Further coding categorized the types of perceptions respondents held. Through this process, three significant misperceptions of RESOs were discovered. These perceptions were related to the interviewee's level of knowledge about RESOs and the knowledge the participants used to fill the gaps in their understanding of RESOs.

Analysis

When analyzing the interviews, a pattern emerged when participants discussed racial and ethnic student organizations. Much of the discussion is related to perceptions and misunderstandings of the organizations. Three themes were identified. First, students perceived the organizations to be self-segregating, meaning the organizations separate themselves because those involved do not want to be around other groups, which negatively affects diversity, socialization, and integration on campus. Many also perceived the organizations to be exclusionary, believing the organizations purposefully do not allow students of specific racial and ethnic groups to join their organization. Lastly, was the perception of RESOs being unnecessary, expressing that RESOs do serve a purpose on campus, but they are not completely necessary. The individuals who expressed these themes shared a commonality - a lack of general knowledge about all RESOs and racially identifying as white. It is also valuable to note that Black Student Union (BSU) was referenced much more during interviews, which can be attributed to the much larger presence BSU has at the campus of study and the generally high levels of racist ideas and beliefs most significantly affect the Black community. The amount of knowledge students possess greatly influences the misperceptions of RESOs they hold about the purpose and impact of the organizations and the knowledge they use to fill the holes in their understanding of RESOs.

RESULTS

Self-Segregation

The first theme identified was the misperception of self-segregation.

Misperception: Racial and ethnic student organizations are used as a form of self-segregation. The organizations separate themselves because those involved do not want to be around other groups. Self-segregation negatively affects diversity, socialization, and integration on campus.

When discussing RESOs, one interviewee expressed an understanding of the purpose of the organizations, but sees the structure of the RESOs as counterproductive to the goal of the organizations:

As much as I think it's important for people to be comfortable with how they identify themselves, I think it's almost like I don't know, I think it's backwards, like why would you want to have a group specifically for your race or your- I feel like it's hard to assimilate yourself . . .

- White Female Non-Member

This participant describes comfort with one's own identity as important but sees separating based on racial identity as negatively impacting one's ability to assimilate into the larger student body. This statement assumes two things, separation is harmful and that students of color should want to assimilate into the predominantly white culture on campus. The statement alludes to the idea that students of color should want to assimilate into the broader campus culture, which at a PWI is white culture. The idea that students of color should want to assimilate holds the racist undertone that to be part of the campus community, students who racially or ethnically identify as something other than white should have to drop their culture to be part of the dominant one (García 2016). It seems like the participant was compensating for lack of knowledge about RESOs by referring to inaccurate dominant knowledge about what assimilation means that is entangled with racist ideals.

Another white female participant expressed an understanding for creating a small community of people, but perceived the separation as an act with negative effects:

Uh, I mean, it goes both [ways]...I feel like, I, I like it and I don't like it. I like that it brings, like, the smaller population together, you know? Um, I like that, but I also feel like it puts them away from, like, the whole idea of being diverse. -

White Female Non-Member

This student's perception of the RESOs' separation is counteractive to diversity ideals. Perhaps this shows that this student understands diversity as a space where all racial and ethnic groups are visibly mixed. This belief would create a sense of discomfort when looking at the reasonably homogenous groups created by RESOs because it is not what her understanding of diversity looks like. Again, inaccurate knowledge is used to compensate for a misunderstanding of what diversity means. This person's understanding of diversity is based on an idea that cannot be reached without first addressing all of the racism-based issues that are the cause for self-segregation in the first place.

The concept of self-segregation is not new when discussing diverse student bodies. Self-segregation

has been addressed in studies about cross-racial friendships and campus climate (Antonio 2001; Chang 2003). Like these past studies, the topic of self-segregation is confused for separation by many student participants, leading to misunderstanding. Segregation is perceived negatively because it is often understood as the opposite of integration. Integration is often the central element students associate with diversity, though it is a very shallow understanding of the topic (Antonio 2001). Segregation, often being perceived as a synonym for separation, creates a negative association for separation as well. Students who recognize RESOs creating smaller racial/ethnic groups witness separation from the general student population, not self-segregation. The difference between segregation and separation is based on who is enacting their power. Like that of Jim Crow, segregation is forcefully promulgated by those in power (Alexander 2012).

In contrast, separation is enacted by individuals using their autonomy, choosing to separate themselves. Though in some ways, segregation and separation may visibly look the same, in the case of RESOs, a choice has been made by the members of the RESOs to separate themselves from the greater campus community. Many of the students who spoke about self-segregation perception were also speaking in the same negative connotation. These participants lack one piece of pertinent information: Why do the students involved in RESOs choose to separate themselves from the rest of the student population?

Navigating a university's social and academic areas is challenging and complex for every student who steps foot on a college campus. This difficulty is greatly increased for students of color who also have to navigate the racial climate of a PWI. At PWIs, students of color have reported instances of oppression, discrimination, and alienation on top of not feeling support by their universities (Jones et al. 2002, Smith et al. 2007). Creating a space where students of color are the dominant group allows them to counteract the effects of some of these challenges (Neely and Saruma 2011). The meetings and organization spaces offer students of color a place to get away from predominantly white spaces' social fatigue and social stress. The organizations serve as a place of social connection and comfort that they do not always receive from groups of predominantly white students (Guiffrida 2003). These spaces allow students of color to be around other students of color, giving the space to speak freely without fear of any sort of penalty.

Some respondents recognize the significance of the purposeful separation of the organizations. One white male student emphasized the sense of belonging

that can easily be found in the small community created by RESOs:

In particularly for minorities, I think [the organizations are] a great opportunity, especially being on such a white-driven campus, for them to meet people that probably have a very similar background or heritage. If anything, they at least share a common denominator- that culture, and that can be a great unifier, and hopefully, that can be a source of friendship and belonging. Most importantly, it is a source of reassurance that they are welcome on campus and that they are not alone, though maybe it feels like that sometimes.
– White Male Non-Member

Though this student is not a member of the organizations, he expresses an understanding of the need/want to connect with those who share a similar background, especially in students of color on a predominately white campus. He expresses that the community created by RESOs can offer a sense of belonging and reassurance that students of color are an essential part of the campus community, a belief that may not always be clear in majority-white spaces on campus.

Similarly, a Latino student who has participated in a RESO viewed the community created by the RESO as a place he could let his guard down, offering the comfort of “home”:

I think they are useful, you know. I'm a member of Latinos Unidos, and I can be myself there because it's an environment that I'm comfortable. There are other Latinos there that I can just talk about anything with them . . . you really don't have that type of connection with other people not being, like, your race. . . . So when I go to LU, it's like, "Okay. I have people." . . . You know, it's a very helpful group, 'cause it brings you back to your own culture, and it makes you feel like home.
– Latino Member

As a member, this participant backs up what was shared in the previous quote by a non-member. RESOs not only offer reassurance and a sense of belonging but a place that is comfortable and does not require the extra effort to feel a sense of belonging.

As both of these quotes make clear, the more knowledge to RESOs, the greater understanding they hold about the purpose of separating from the larger student body. They understand that the “self-segregation” is not to foil the university's diversity initiatives, rather to slightly offset the difficulties of navigating a PWI as a student of color with the creation of a space.

The misperception of self-segregation serves as a negative perception of RESOs and their members. Holding this misperception can perpetuate an understanding of diversity founded in racist ideologies of assimilation and faulty integration. RESOs use events, cultural activities, and creating a community based on a racial or ethnic background to support students of color and boost retention rates by creating a sense of belonging. Misconstruing this as RESOs not wanting to be part of the campus community and not wanting to participate in diversity is quite the opposite of their goal. Suppose students believe that RESOs are self-segregating and, therefore, negatively impacting the university's diversity efforts. In that case, they will not only continue to hold a false idea of diversity but will be less interested in issues RESOs often speak up about.

Exclusionary

The second theme discovered is the misperception of RESOs as exclusionary organizations. This misperception builds on the misperception of self-segregation.

Misperception: Racial and ethnic student organizations are exclusionary. The organizations purposefully do not allow students of specific racial and ethnic groups to join their organization.

Students who are unaware of the role of RESOs tend to find the organizations as self-segregating and find them to be exclusive. The idea of exclusivity holds a negative connotation, for the organizations are believed to be excluding students based on racial and/or ethnic background. The two main reasons for this misperception are the organizations' title, making assumptions about who can join the organizations/the purpose of serving a specific racial or ethnic group, and lack of awareness that most other organizations and spaces on campus are white spaces.

An example of this was when a non-member was asked if he could think of any groups on campus that exclude specific individuals based on race, and he responded:

I would think BSU just because of the name of their group, I can't imagine any Whites wanting to join that group or if they are even allowed to join. But outside of those groups I can't think of any other group that does that. – White Male Non-Member

This student reasoned that the organization's title - Black Student Union - indicated that white-students specifically were not welcome in the organization. He

also states that RESOs are exclusionary, while no other campus organizations are. It is interesting to note that this participant perceived the organizations this way, basing the majority of his claim on the organizations' title, not realizing that though other organizations may not have “white” in the title, they are often exclusionary intentionally or not. This is true for most student organizations on the campus of study: honors organizations, business organizations, student government, future teacher organizations, etc. The misperception is also driven by what Neely and Samura call the entitlement to space that is a privilege of whiteness (Neely and Samura 2011). In this case, white students are so used to spaces being for them that when space seems as though it may not be for them, they see it as wrong because a sense of entitlement to space has been created. The other side of this notion is that there is no recognition for the exclusion that defaulted white spaces make for people of color. This participant reads BSU as exclusionary because it is the one space he can name that he does not believe he would be welcomed based on his race with no mention that this is often the case for students of color with many other organizations on campus.

Another student expressed understanding self-segregation as the basis for exclusivity:

I think that they kind of segregate themselves within the groups because it's not like I'm not able to join like an African American one, so like that's segregated. – White Female Non-Member

This non-member participant expresses that self-segregating into RESOs is a way of excluding those that do not fall into the racial or ethnic community of a RESO. With this participant, there is again a lack of acknowledgment that most spaces on campus are predominantly white. This also prevents the admission that RESOs are the only spaces on campus that are occupied by more than a minute number of students of color and that they offer a sense of belonging that cannot be found in most other campus spaces (Neely and Samura 2011). Students must recognize that the need for RESOs is because all additional spaces on campus are default white spaces. Therefore, exclusionary is not the RESOs that are exclusive but the greater campus as a whole.

On this campus, the RESOs (like most other campuses) use the name of the racial or ethnic group they serve in the title, such as Black Student Union and Latinos Unidos. Students who hold little to no knowledge about the organizations often read the title as automatically excluding any individual that does fit the title's group. The misperception that RESOs are exclusive is something members of RESOs are very aware of and quick to address. One member explained

that the idea of exclusivity is the exact opposite of what comes to mind when thinking about RESOs:

I would say that [when] I hear Black Student Union, I feel just, like, all-around inclusiveness. . . . Black Student Union doesn't just cater to Black students. They cater to people that don't feel included. I feel like that's the most inclusive org or right now to me. – Black Female Member

Some non-members perceive exclusivity; this member believes that RESOs are the most inclusive organizations on campus. This member explains the organization's reach beyond just those who identify with the group in the title. RESOs are there for any student who does not feel included in the broader campus community.

Since the organizations are made to support a specific group of students on campus, those who do not fully understand the organizations' purpose see the organization's targeted group's specificity as a prohibition of any other individuals. Even a Black female student who participated in a RESO fell into this misperception before she gained knowledge of the purpose of the organization:

Aren't y'all, like, excluding people by saying, you know, Black Student Union? And so I didn't really understand it until I got there and I understood what it was meant for. And I think I didn't understand the concept until I got there. – Black Female Member

Even as someone who later became a member of the organization, this student perceived the organization's title as exclusive. As she expressed, once she attended a meeting and learned more about the organization, she was able to see that the organization was not exclusive. Instead, the title specified that students of color were welcomed. The title serves as a symbol that RESOs are not by default, only catering to the white majority like many other organizations on campus.

Again, those who participate in the organizations or those non-members that hold knowledge about the organizations debunk the misperception of exclusivity. Many members expressed that to share information about different cultures and the issue faced by communities of color, those who do not fit the organization's title need, and are encouraged, to participate in events held by the RESOs. One member explained that sharing their culture is a part of the mission of many of the organizations:

Because the whole point of the org is to, like, promote the culture. Like, we have a Japanese Club and that is literally, 'Come to learn about the

Japanese culture.' So . . . just because it says 'Black Student' doesn't mean it's only for Black students. It's like, everybody can come and learn about these issues relating to the African American community. – Asian Female Member

This member expressed that one of the main purposes of RESOs is to offer information about the community's experience represented by the organization both on and off-campus. Though this is not the only purpose of the organization, it is foundational to the additional work that RESOs do: representing the voice of the members to the greater campus community, spreading awareness about issues their community may be facing, creating a supportive community for its members, and working towards a more inclusive higher education experience for students of color.

The misperception of exclusivity is not unknown to those involved in the organizations. Many of the statements deconstructing this misperception were shared without being prompted by the interviewer, almost as a reflex. The effects of this misperception are of two different layers. The first layer consists of the lack of understanding by white non-members that the majority of spaces on campus are white-dominated spaces that are not fully inclusive to non-white students. Without understanding representation in space is a critical factor for developing a sense of belonging, one cannot know that creating a space that is made for and includes students of color is the first step of developing belonging for students of color on campus. The second layer of effects builds off the first. Without the understanding that most spaces on a PWI, by default, exclude students of color, the misperception of exclusivity makes the opposite seem more authentic and like a more pressing issue. This means that too many individuals who do not hold knowledge about the first layer issue will resonate on the exclusion of whites from RESOs, partially due to the sense of spatial entitlement, rather than focusing on the exclusion of students of color from the majority of other campus spaces.

Unnecessary

The third theme identified was the question of need. Some white participants questioned whether or not RESOs is necessary on campus.

Misperception: Racial and ethnic student organizations serve a purpose on campus, but they are not completely necessary.

Unlike the other misperceptions, no one specifically stated the theme that there is no need for

the RESOs. For those who did not participate in the organizations and/or held little knowledge about the organizations' purpose, when asked if they thought the organizations were needed, answers were never stated confidently. Answers by non-members were often "I think so?" or "It seems like it." For example, one white female participant expressed her understanding of the impact of RESOs. When asked if the RESOs were a good thing, she stated:

I think they are a good thing because people can learn about different cultures and can go into them and, like, learn more about them. And it's a good place for different cultures to meet up and have that sense of culture together. – White Female Non-Member

This participant expresses that RESOs create a space for people with a shared culture to come together, which, in her perspective, is a good thing. Later, when asked if RESOs were necessary, she responded:

So I think they are definitely a good thing. . . . I don't know if they're necessary. I think they're good, but I don't think they're necessary.

This statement suggests that the student understand the impact of RESOs but lacks knowledge about the need for the organizations. RESOs fulfill the need of belonging, community, and support, while also serving as a voice to counteract discrimination and race-related issues on campus (Chang 2002). RESOs are being perceived as not serving an important role in the college experiences of students of color, not being students of color themselves.

The statements of non-members are in grave contrast to that of members who express a different narrative. In the case of one member, when asked if RESOs were needed, she shared that through her experience, RESOs are necessary:

Yes, I feel like they're very necessary. I think since I grew up in such a predominantly white community, and not really knowing anyone from my culture or knowing my people, I think it really helped me understand the Hmong community better when I came to this campus. . . . I mean, we all eat the same things, we speak the same language, and it just helps you feel better, especially when you're so far from home. – Hmong Female Member

This member describes the necessity for RESOs by expressing how a RESO has offered her a place of cultural connection and a sense of belonging. Without

RESOs, this student shares that she would be missing a cultural community and connection on campus.

From this statement and other members' statements, it is clear that RESOs still fulfill a need. They serve many different functions to support students of color: a place of social connection and aid the transition to university life. Both prior research and the student quotes from this project show a lack of RESOs would harm students of color. Without RESOs, there would be fewer spaces and resources for students of color to navigate the social challenges of attending a PWI (Chang 2003; Mueses 2008; Neely and Samura 2011).

The misperception of unnecessary is tied to the misperceptions of self-segregation and exclusionary. Without the proper knowledge to break down the prior misperceptions, it can be difficult to fully understand the need for RESOs and the space they create. For white students, even holding a decent amount of knowledge may not be enough to understand the necessity of RESOs. After all, they most likely have never needed a space created for their racial group because they are part of the dominant racial group both on campus and off. This means it takes knowledge to break down the misperceptions, a willingness to learn and gain said knowledge, and there is a need to listen to peers of color who clearly express the need for the organizations and the space they create.

Discussion and Conclusions

The existing literature on RESOs focuses on students who participate in these organizations and how it shapes the college experience of students of color. This paper explores the perceptions of RESOs from the perspective of many different student groups at a mid-size midwestern university, taking a unique view, focusing on how RESOs fit into the overall culture of a PWI. The findings of this project show that students involved in the organizations and those who are well informed about the organizations tend to have a more positive perspective of RESOs. Most negative and erroneous perceptions of the RESOs come from a lack of knowledge surrounding what the organizations offer members and the campus as a whole mixed with the dominant racist ideal of society.

Those who had a significant amount of knowledge about RESOs - the purpose of RESOs, why they are important, and their role in the greater campus community rarely fell victim to the misperceptions. Members of RESOs gained knowledge about the organizations through regular participation in organizational meetings, events, and relationships with other RESO members. Non-members who held a significant amount of knowledge about RESOs typically gained their knowledge through significant

relationships with members of RESOs, through participation in an organization that worked with a RESO, or through employment/participation in spaces on campus that exposed them to the organizations. Examples of these spaces are departments like student diversity and engagement, the university's student connection center, and other diversity-related departments. Non-members with these exposure levels to RESOs hold more knowledge and have more positive perceptions of RESOs overall.

Though knowledge was the primary way to break down misperceptions, it is still possible to hold knowledge and misperceptions. Part of what breaks down misperceptions is being open to knowledge about RESOs and being willing to apply that knowledge to understanding the significance of RESOs. Knowledge can be easily dismissed, or if it is the opposite of a prior belief, it may take effort to change a perception, which one must be willing to do. It can also be true that one may hold the knowledge that breaks down one misperception but leaves another standing. Similar to many social issues, knowledge can be maintained, and misperceptions can still be present. The misperceptions found in this study – self-segregation, exclusivity, unnecessary – can be connected to the more general ideologies and stereotypes of different racial and ethnic groups beyond the institution of education. Just as many racial/ethnic social issues and misperceptions prevail in society through knowledge is continually being shared, the same can be said for the misperceptions of RESOs. It is also clear that many of the individuals that expressed misperceptions were drawing on dominant social knowledge that is based on racist ideals

Another element that can be connected to the misperceptions of RESOs is a lack of a consistent universal definition of diversity. Many white non-members saw RESOs as counterproductive to university diversity efforts in the case of the misperceptions of self-segregation and exclusivity. Their understanding of diversity is integration that leads to assimilation. In some of their statements, participants use the word “assimilate” and suggested that students of color should want to be part of the greater campus community. This understanding of diversity is detrimental to understanding RESOs and the experience of students of color on a PWI in general. Thinking that assimilation into the predominantly white campus culture equals diversity is a barrier to the deconstruction of misperceptions of RESOs and the spaces they create. Without an understanding that diversity is the celebration and appreciation of differences, it will make it much more difficult for an individual to understand the purpose of RESOs.

Conclusions

By promoting RESOs and developing a clear diversity definition, universities can help create a better understanding of RESOs and their contributions to the campus community, deconstructing the misperceptions uninformed students may hold. One way universities can spread understanding is by promoting RESOs and their purpose just as promoting Greek Life, Honors societies, and other organizations. This action could lead to RESOs becoming a normalized part of campus culture. For students of color specifically, promoting the organization will make the resource of RESOs known to them as soon as they enter university. A handful of participants shared that they did not learn about the RESOs until their second or third semester on campus. These same participants explained that they believed their first semesters of college would have been much better if they had known about these organizations right away.

The promotion of racial and ethnic organizations is only one way to aid the spread of knowledge about RESOs. Integrating RESOs' offices into the same place as the office of other student organizations or making their location well-known so that they are part of the campus and not hidden away will help clarify that RESOs are valued (Jones et al. 2002). Adding promotional materials, signage that shares the location of RESO offices, and other information can help seamlessly share knowledge. These actions, combined with others, could help make RESOs something everyone on campus is more aware of to work on eradicating any negative perceptions the organizations still face today.

While promoting knowledge about RESOs, PWI needs to be aware of the knowledge students are coming to campus with. Many of the misperceptions either have racist undertones or fully perpetuated a racist stereotype. This knowledge is coming from the dominant knowledge that is continually passed through society as a whole. There needs to be acknowledgement and understanding of this dominant knowledge as it enters predominantly white college campuses to better understand the campus culture and racial tensions at PWIs, which manifest as issues such as misperceptions of RESOs.

Though this research does contribute a new perspective to the existing literature, it is restrained by some limitations. This study's participants were self-selected, meaning they willingly chose to spend an hour or more of their time talking about their experience with and perceptions of race and ethnic related topics. Secondly, students of color are overrepresented in the sample compared to the

population of the university of study. These two characteristics create a skewed sample, having a more positive perception of RESOs. Since this study consisted of people willing to discuss race and ethnicity, there could be a greater level of misperceptions and negative opinions circulating on predominantly white campuses than was found in this study.

Racial and ethnic student organizations play a significant role in the college experience of underrepresented students. RESOs serve as a place of community, cultural expression, support, and more. Misunderstandings proliferate among those who do not participate in the organizations. Through university support and promotion, RESOs can continue to support students of color while diminishing misperceptions. With the dissemination of knowledge of the impact and purpose of RESOs will hopefully begin to alleviate some of the tensions that occur on campuses because of a lack of knowledge of the experience of students of color in predominantly white spaces.

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