

Recruit, Respond, Retain!

A University Study on Efforts to **Recruit** African American Students, Successfully **Respond** to Their Campus Needs and **Retain** through Graduation

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Introduction

Issue

- African American students have the lowest graduation and retention rates
- One in five will graduate with a bachelor's degree in 4 years

Purpose of Study

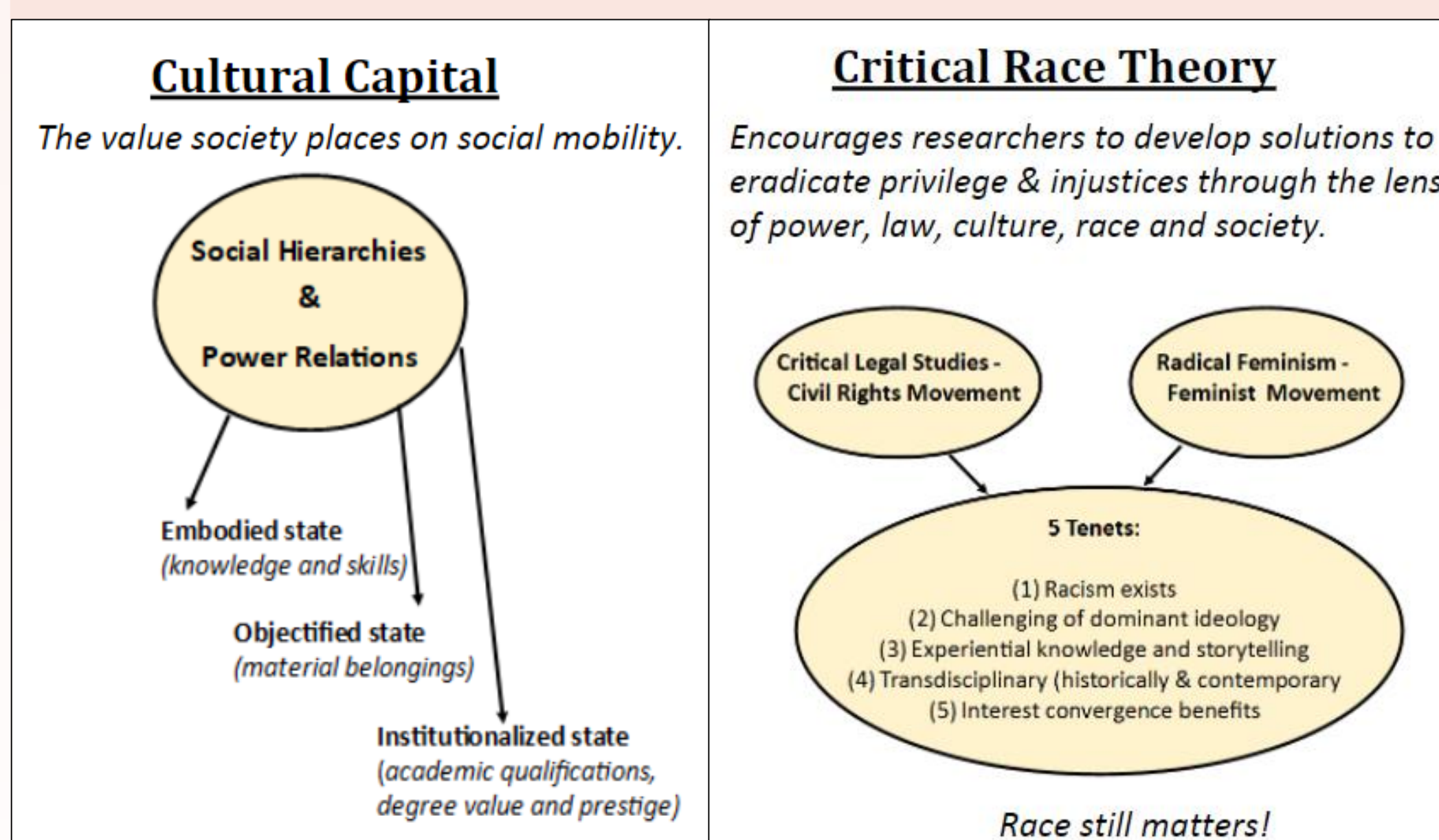
To provide an understanding of what experiences contribute to retention & graduation rates for African American students that subsequently increases their desire to persist through college. Additionally, it could broaden best university practices for students not involved in culturally specific programs and determine in what ways, and how, the university meets African American student cultural needs as well. This study yielded an analysis of how the university's strategic initiatives respond to student needs in developing connections to campus and possibly increasing retention and graduation rates.

Research Questions

- In what ways does the university address the specific needs of first-generation African American students to support their retention and graduation?
- How does the university respond to African American students' specific needs to make them feel more connected to campus and persistence?
- What role does the university diversity plan and racial climate survey results play in addressing equity, access, and campus climate?

The study provides an assessment of the university community's knowledge of intentional efforts to address disparities.

Conceptual Approach



Conceptual theories about potential challenges for African American students:

Cultural Capital

- Campus Connectedness
- Parental Involvement
- Cultural Centers
- Faculty & Staff Connections

Critical Race Theory

- Cooperative Learning
- Cultural Sensitivity
- Microaggressions

Methods

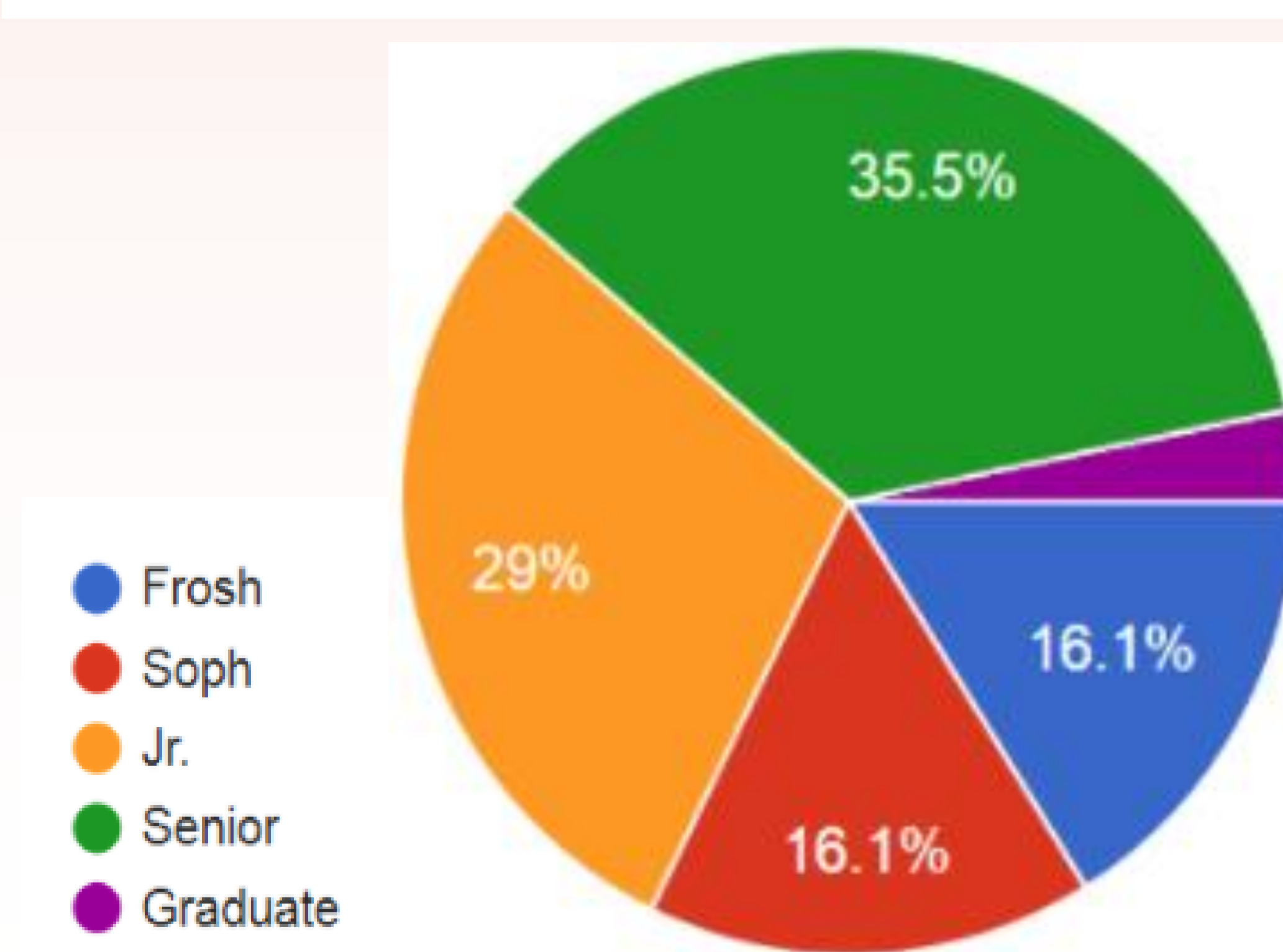
This study provides an assessment of the university community's knowledge of intentional efforts to address disparities. Specifically, this study focused on community connectedness, culturally specific resources, and programs available to address African American student needs and their effectiveness from the students' perspective.

There were three components to this study:

- Semi-structured interviews with nine campus student leaders,
- a survey of 31 African American undergraduate and graduate students, and
- data gleaned from university documents: annual enrollment, retention and graduation data; student campus climate survey; student exit interview study; and the university diversity plan.

	Interviewed	Surveyed	Total Participants	Sample Percentage	2017 Enrollment Percentage
Freshmen	1	5	6	15%	17%
Sophomore	1	5	6	15%	10%
Junior	1	9	10	25%	30%
Senior (4+ years)	3	11	14	35%	43%
Post-Graduate Student	1	1	2	5%	15.8%
Alumni	2	0	2	5%	-
Male	4	5	9	22.5%	37.5%
Female	5	26	31	77.5%	62.5%
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	9	31	40		

Table A. Survey response breakdown by first generation status.



Findings

Student Personal Background (Pre-College)

- Experienced Difficult Circumstances
- Resilience/Life Skills Development to Proceed
- Influential Figures were Motivators to Succeed

Program/Organization Experiences & Impact

- Important to Retention
- Cultural Connection Significant
- Connections to Relationships and Support System Critical

Student Experience/Transition/Connectedness to Campus

- Importance of Programs & Access to Resources
- Significance of Mentors/Peers
- Contributions of External Factors (Personal)
- Struggles/Challenges Contribute to Disconnection

Cultural Sensitivity of Faculty & Staff

- Microaggressive Behavior Experiences
- Expectations (Low & High) Concerns
- Lack of Sensitivity to Needs

Student Recommendations for University Administration

- African American Centered Community Events, Activities & Space
- Increased African American Retention Programs & Faculty
- Acknowledgment, Understanding & Sensitivity

University Artifacts

In an effort to triangulate the data in this study, student interviews, student surveys and university supporting artifacts were aligned to identify cross-comparisons with the efforts and interventions identified by the university, to the perceptions of students regarding the efforts to support and retain African American students.

- University Diversity Plan** - identified the specific efforts the university has taken to eliminate the opportunity.
- University Climate Survey** - revealed what students, staff, and faculty identified as concerns or areas of improvement.
- Exit Interview Data** – survey identified four categories for student departures: (1) personal reasons, (2) academic reasons, (3) institutional reasons, and (4) financial/employment. All students in the survey left the university in good standing.
- University Graduation and Retention Data Exit Interview Data** - Persistence and graduation data previewed a history of non-retention from year to year for African American students starting with a 2004 cohort.

Conclusion, Implications & Recommendations

The findings from the student interviews and surveys were consistent with university artifacts dictated based on how students perceived the campus climate. However, the application from those artifacts to address and improve upon student concerns did not correlate to what students saw as effective implementation. Nor did it seem that the implementation efforts were timely or intentional to address African American student needs. Although the climate survey indicated efforts, fruition was not evident to students to increase programs, staffing or space.

Implications: Creating a Student-Ready University

To determine the needs of first generation students, the study indicated that needs can be unique, as well as challenging, for African American students. Although it is difficult to generalize this sample of student experiences to an entire community, it is also impossible to predict the personal challenges and struggles prior to the start of college. However, it is evident that first generation students may not always walk into higher education as college-ready students. That being said, the university's challenge is how to respond and prepare to receive students, in essence, how to make the university student-ready. Universities will need to be poised to respond to the unique needs of students by creating opportunities for community connectedness and environments that are inclusive and welcoming of diversity.

Recommendations:

- Development of culturally relevant programs,
- Development of a campus-ready culture,
- Faculty and staff professional development, and
- Dedicated resources and space to support students

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