Exploring Trends in BIPOC Student Engagement: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract: The literature has shown that student engagement (SE) improves students' self-confidence, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills, leading to positive outcomes in overall experience in higher education and potential for graduation and career success. However, SE in higher education is not well-researched among students who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) or within the intersection of students with these identities who are also first-generation or international students in the Canadian context. This literature review investigates factors for differing rates of SE among BIPOC students compared to their White peers in Canada. Unfortunately, due to the limited Canadian-specific literature, we could not solely include Canadian studies and also included US studies in our results. Findings suggest that greater representation of BIPOC faculty contributes to a sense of belonging for BIPOC students, which can increase student engagement. BIPOC, international and first-generation students are likelier to work off-campus, making it challenging to participate in SE. Lastly, BIPOC students are more likely to be commuter students, creating an inverse correlation between public travel and SE. Our findings show that hiring more BIPOC faculty, creating more opportunities for on-campus work, and creating more opportunities for alternative transit are potential next steps to aid the SE gap between BIPOC and White students.

Keywords: Student engagement, higher education, BIPOC students, Canada, international students, first-generation students, representation, work, commuter student

Student engagement (SE) is the act of actively participating inside and outside the classroom in various ways (Quaye et al., 2019). SE is traditionally broken down into two interplaying integral components: a) the amount of time and effort put into an individual student's academics in addition to, b) how the institution establishes and distributes its resources to facilitate student participation in activities that aid in furthering persistence and belonging in higher education (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007, as cited by Quaye et al., 2019). For this literature review, the authors decided to take these two components of SE and narrow in the focus on a specific subtype of SE called co-curricular student engagement. This is a type of SE that includes a large array of out-of-class experiences and activities such as volunteering, participating in Greek life, student government, varsity sports, and student clubs (Ahren 2009; Banta and Kuh 1998, as cited by Glass et al., 2017).

Student engagement (SE) in higher education has been a well-researched field of study since the early 1980s, with various theories emerging on the factors contributing to the student experience (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1975; Kuh, 2001; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2004; Jacoby, 2004). Positive academic and social student engagement has been shown to improve students' self-confidence, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills (Gellin, 2003; Huang & Chang, 2004; Beilke, 1990, as cited by Case, 2011). Students who participate in academic or social engagement are also more likely to persist and complete their university degree (Astin, 1984, 1999; Baum et al., 2013 as cited by Clay, 2016; Kuh, 1993; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005). Despite the availability of research in the field, the literature is notably lacking representation of the experiences and attention to the unique needs of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) students' engagement on campus. This is especially the case for BIPOC first-generation students and BIPOC international students (Glass et al., 2017; Quaye et al., 2019; Kabalkin, 2021).

Since the 2000s, BIPOC student engagement has begun to receive attention from researchers (McDougal, 2018; Harris III, 2011; Waterman, 2012; Brooms, 2017; Clark, 2018; Strayhorn, 2008; Guo, 2011). The positive impacts of academic and social engagement are exponential for BIPOC students, including enhanced resilience, social capital, navigational capital, and a sense of belonging on campus (Brooms et al., 2018). However, these students do not engage as much on campus as their White counterparts. For instance, 66.9% of Black men reported they never had an informal meeting with a faculty member during their first year of college (BPS, 2009b, as cited by Wood & Newman, 2017). In addition to this, first-generation students, have reported less interaction with faculty than their non-first-generation peers (Soria & Stebleton, 2012, as cited by Glass et al., 2017).

The trend of reduced BIPOC student engagement was noted within an opt-in co-curricular career development program offered at a small undergraduate university in Ontario, Canada, where author Montanna Tries is an undergraduate Psychology student and author Jenny Richmond-Bravo was employed as a Program Coordinator. These

authors noticed that most students who opted into the program self-identified as White. They were inspired to investigate why this might be happening and what might be done to make the program more accessible to BIPOC students. The authors conducted a literature review to answer the question: what factors contribute to low BIPOC student engagement in co-curricular programs and activities, and how can institutions do better in this regard?

Methodology

The authors conducted a literature search using the Google Scholar database to investigate the significant factors contributing to lower BIPOC SE on campus. Google Scholar was used to easily search many databases at once with a single search, and our primary author is most familiar with the search engine. Only English-language papers published between 2005 and the end year of 2023 were included. Search terms included: "BIPOC student engagement," "BIPOC student engagement in higher education," "Black student engagement higher education," "Indigenous student engagement higher education," "Latin student engagement higher education," "Asian student engagement higher education," "first-generation student engagement higher education," and "International student engagement higher education".

The initial search produced numerous publications from the United States (U.S.) and other locations outside Canada. To further refine the search, the authors utilized the criteria "Canada" and "Canadian higher education" to narrow the focus within the Canadian context.

Very few Canadian-specific papers were identified, so reference lists were used to expand the search for Canadian papers. Unfortunately, not enough Canadian papers were found to conduct a complete literature review solely focusing on the Canadian context. The authors then returned to earlier search parameters and included studies from the U.S.

Low Socioeconomic Status as Proxy for Systemic and Structural Racism

Structural and, in turn, systematic racism continues to have a lasting impact on the lived experiences of BIPOC individuals in higher education in North America. These groups do not typically have the generational wealth, networks, and opportunities dominant groups can afford. Negative stereotypes and biases about their abilities, competence, and potential still produce barriers to social and economic advancement. These are the contributing factors to the overrepresentation of BIPOC individuals in low socioeconomic populations that are due to systemic and structural racism rather than an inherent trait attributed to their race. Low socioeconomic status is, therefore, a proxy for racism, not race, amongst BIPOC students. In short, low SES is not purely due to the result of race but is a result of racism in our culture and society broadly.

Findings

Three key themes emerged from our literature search. First was the issue of representation: research shows that when a person of authority or a business partner matches the race of the student, the student is more likely to feel a sense of belonging, which can lead to increased SE (Kabalkin, 2021; Quaye et al., 2019; McDougal, 2018). Second, the intersection of race, class, and first-generation and international student status impacts students' decisions to work on- and off-campus, which has complex effects on SE. For example, BIPOC students, due to structural racism, are more likely to come from a lower socioeconomic background yet are less likely to take on-campus positions due to low wages and maximum hour caps (Steckley, 2022; Kabalkin, 2021; Ijoma et al., 2021). Third, the complexity of being an off-campus commuter student has adverse effects on SE. Whether active or passive, commuting takes time and energy and is typically negatively correlated with on-campus SE (Doyle-Baker, 2022; Quaye et al., 2019; Allen & Farber, 2018).

Theme One: Representation

The reviewed literature suggests a low representation of BIPOC faculty in Canadian Higher Education (HE). Roughly one-fifth of Canadian faculty identify as a visible minority, and the composition of tenured faculty is less diverse than in lower academic ranks such as non-tenured faculty and TAs (Statistics Canada, 2019, as cited by Steckley et al., 2022, pp. 2379-2380). Representation matters as it can shape the self-image, self-concept, and reputation of BIPOC

students in environments dominated by the racial majority. As Ijoma et al. suggested, "You can only aspire for what you can see yourself in" (p. 353). The mere presence of BIPOC faculty can help give students a sense of comfort and belonging on campus (Brooms & Davis, 2017). Representation can also provide validation and a higher sense of hope among students (McDougal, 2018), which supports the aspirations of BIPOC students to succeed in university.

BIPOC faculty and staff can facilitate SE by acting as role models or mentors to students and building a sense of community. BIPOC faculty can also increase students' social capital as they connect to people with authority and power (Rihal, 2023; Brooms et al., 2018). BIPOC students may look for faculty, business partners, and mentors based on how they perceive those people and may be more likely to use recommended resources around the community and campus if the race of the faculty member who suggested it matches theirs (Blake-Beard, 2011, as cited by Rihal, 2023). These findings align with the Similarity-Attraction paradigm, where a person naturally gravitates toward another person or group with similar personality and physical characteristics (Bryne, 1971, as cited by Rihal, 2023).

The concept of representation is applicable in the development of relationships with business partners, employers, and mentors. As Brooms and Clark (2018) stated, "Networking and mentorship with someone who comes from similar cultures or situations helps communication, and life or interest or career pathway suggestions would be easier to understand" (p. 398).

With this in mind, we can see how recruiting BIPOC business partners, employers, and mentors for co-curricular programs might facilitate BIPOC SE while connecting students to these influential individuals, organizations, and causes. By helping students connect their identity to an authority figure, an organization, or a specific cause in their community, we can also promote an increased sense of connectedness on campus.

Theme Two: Challenges Related to On- and Off-Campus Work

In 2022, roughly 36% of first-year students at Canadian universities worked off-campus, while only 2% worked on-campus (Canadian University Consortium, 2022). Student engagement is directly related to decisions to work on- or off-campus, with students who work on-campus being more likely to participate in clubs and student organizations due to having more knowledge about campus activities through their job-related connections (Astin, 1993b; Hernandez, Hogan, Hathaway & Lovell, 1999; Hoover, 2004; Pike, Kuh, & Massa-McKinley, 2008, as cited by Case, 2011). Alternatively, students who work off-campus tend not to have the same knowledge of these activities, which can lead to missed opportunities in co-curricular SE (Case, 2011). SE researchers have found that working off-campus is negatively associated with co-curricular engagement due to reduced interactions with faculty or others who might refer students to co-curricular activities (McCannon & Bennett, 1996, as cited by Case, 2011).

A significant proportion of under-represented minority students come from a lower socioeconomic class where the importance of working and earning a wage is emphasized but has the detrimental impact of less time to engage in co-curricular activities (Kabalkin, 2021; Ijoma et al., 2021). BIPOC first-generation students are more likely than non-first-generation students to work during their studies and often work off-campus (Kabalkin, 2021). When these students do receive work-study positions, they are more likely to work a second job alongside their work-study to pay bills and help their families financially (Kabalkin, 2021).

To encourage co-curricular SE, we must further promote student employment on campus, which has its issues. BIPOC students face many challenges in obtaining secure on-campus work. Steckley et al. (2022) provided an example of a Student Partnership Program (SPP) offered at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. While this was a co-curricular program and not a work-study opportunity, the students were compensated $15.00 per hour for their participation in the program. The students expressed that the wage needed to be increased to cover rent or amenities if they only relied on the program for income. The students also expressed that, due to the poor wages, only wealthier students could actively participate in the program as they could dedicate less time to seeking other employment opportunities to supplement their income. One student in the study said, "If you're not a student who either has rich parents, or you know, parents who can afford to pay for your school and stuff or scholarships, there's very little incentive to do this." (Steckley et al, 2022, p. 2384). Another student said, "I can see people who need the money would have to turn down this position for something higher paying" (Steckley et al., 2022, p. 2384). These students emphasized that even paid opportunities on campus come with complex financial barriers, as the pay may not be

enough to cover the students' financial responsibilities, forcing them to seek other options. To further illustrate, Kabalkin (2021) interviewed a sample of BIPOC first-generation students about their struggles and perceived barriers to engaging with on-campus work opportunities. Again, these students emphasized that the work-study wage and hour cap resulted in insufficient remuneration to pay their bills, and many of them needed to take a second or third off-campus job to make ends meet (Kabalkin, 2021).

If students are to receive the benefits of working on campus (e.g., increased engagement with the school community), we must encourage them to seek on-campus employment. Students will likely look for work elsewhere when compensation is insufficient due to low wages and hour caps. There is little motivational incentive for students to actively seek on-campus work-study positions in today's economic situation, where more stable and higher-paid employment is necessary to cover tuition and living costs.

Theme Three: Complexities Related to Commuting

Living on-campus in Canada is slowly becoming a rare occurrence rather than the norm on university campuses (Doyle-Baker et al., 2021). In turn, commuting from home to school is becoming more common, with over one-third of Canadian students identifying as commuter students in 2016 (Doyle-Baker et al., 2021). In 2022, 30% of Canadian first-year students lived in on-campus housing, but the number tends to go down exponentially after the first year; in 2021, only 2% of graduating Canadian students lived on-campus, and in 2023, 8% of middle-year students lived on-campus (Canadian University Consortium, 2021).

SE researchers have found that students who live on-campus and do not commute are more likely to participate in co-curricular activities because of access to resources and more time to interact with peers, staff, and faculty (Gellen, 2003, as cited by Case, 2011). On-campus students also have more opportunities to socialize and make friends with peers in dining rooms, recreational buildings, and late-night study sessions, while the primary time for commuter students to socialize is in the classroom (Gianoutsos, 2011, as cited by Clay, 2016). Living on campus has also been among the strongest predictors of participating in co-curricular activities at faith-based colleges (Hoffman, 2002, as cited by Case, 2011).

Students who live off-campus are less likely to participate in co-curricular activities if they do not have a car and if the commute distance is longer and slower (Allen & Farber, 2018). Commuter students also report a lower sense of belonging on campus, a key factor for SE, especially for BIPOC students (Falls, 2009, as cited by Kirk & Lewis, 2015). Living off-campus and commuting to school is a significant hindrance for BIPOC, first-generation, and international students to participate in co-curricular SE.

As mentioned, BIPOC students are more likely to come from a lower socioeconomic class (Ijoma et al., 2021). Coming from a lower socioeconomic class makes buying and maintaining a car very difficult, and these students rely on public transit if the distance is too far to walk or bike (Allen & Farber, 2018). Additionally, living on campus tends to be expensive and has a high up-front cost, a barrier for BIPOC students right from the start. Thus, BIPOC students may be more inclined to live off-campus with relatives or with roommates and commute to campus instead, which is reflected in the higher percentages of students living off-campus across all years (Canadian University Consortium, 2021; Canadian University Consortium, 2022; Canadian University Consortium, 2023). As Quaye et al. (2019) pointed out:

> No matter the mode, commuting to and from campus places demands students' time and energy. As a result, they frequently concentrate their classes into blocks, take some classes online, and have little free time to spend on campus (p. 328).

Among first-year students, visible minority students were less likely to live on campus than their non-visible minority peers (Canadian University Consortium, 2022). For middle-year and graduating students, visible minority students are twice as likely to say they would prefer to live on-campus if they had the opportunity or the choice (Canadian University Consortium, 2021; Canadian University Consortium, 2023). Moreover, commuter students are more likely to work full-time jobs during school and balance multiple responsibilities and identities, leaving less time

for engagement on campus (National Center of Education Statistics, 2002, as cited by Kirk & Lewis, 2015). According to Quaye et al. (2019):

> The support networks for commuter students generally exist off, rather than on, campus, including partners, parents, children, siblings, employers, coworkers, and friends. Although these individuals can be supportive, students must negotiate with family, employers, and others to establish priorities, responsibilities, and time commitments (p. 329).

Universities would do well to create and find support programs and systems for commuter students to thrive on campus, close to their on-campus counterparts. One suggestion is to create a space where commuter students can spend time together between classes, similar to the Commuter Connection Hall at Mansfield University in Pennsylvania (Lipka, 2007, as cited by Kirk & Lewis, 2015). This space could be a building center, a specific hall, or a room for commuter students to spend time together, study, or nap and catch up on much-needed rest.

Allen and Farber (2018) found that commuter students often cycle to school as it is faster than taking public transit, increases student satisfaction with their commutes, and promotes better mental and physical health. Cycling to school is much more affordable than owning a car and less stressful than navigating public transit. As such, institutions might consider promoting cycling among commuter students by building proper biking infrastructure near the school and providing student discounts for bike-sharing or other biking services.

It is essential to acknowledge that while biking can help with travel within cities, it only helps a little with inter-city travel, and some commuter students do travel between cities for school. Inter-city travel alternatives most likely need government assistance to create more transit options and more reliable public transit for these students. It is also important to note two other facets of transportation that can be barriers to student engagement: weather conditions and travel infrastructure. Weather can be a barrier to in-person co-curricular student engagement because students may have a physically harder time getting to school through harsh rain or snow conditions (Hopson et al., 2022). This may be more prominent and pronounced in areas of Canada that experience more harsh snow or rain conditions or experience bitter winters. Infrastructure-wise, students in rural areas will likely experience these transportation barriers more, as these areas may not prioritize cycling or bussing infrastructure (Hopson et al., 2022).

Research Gaps and Other Considerations

Early in the literature review process, we found some notable gaps in the research on BIPOC SE. First, a noteworthy amount of SE research (both in general and relating to BIPOC students) is conducted in the U.S. higher education context. This makes it challenging to make direct inferences and apply them to the Canadian context as our systems differ critically regarding culture and the education system. For instance, many Black, Hispanic, and Latino student engagement studies come from HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) and HSIs (Hispanic-Serving Institutions). While these studies have larger BIPOC student samples, increasing generalizability, they cannot be applied to the Canadian context as Canada does not have these types of institutions.

There are no legal or required mandates to conduct and collect self-identification data on race or ethnicity like the U.S. does (Basu, 2021). As a result, universities can offer to collect data for their purposes but do not require it on a national level (Basu, 2021). Canadian universities are more likely to collect data on age and gender compared to sexual orientation and racial demographics (Universities Canada, 2019). Canadian universities are more likely to collect demographic and self-identification information from staff than from students (Universities Canada, 2019). Only collecting demographic and self-identification data from staff and not students makes it difficult to make inferences about BIPOC students specifically. During the article collection process, we also noticed that many studies we came across tended to have smaller BIPOC student samples. These samples may not be sufficient to represent the BIPOC student population in Canada fully and thus, may not be generalizable to all BIPOC students. Although we tried to primarily cite sources based on BIPOC SE in the Canadian context by individual universities, we used U.S. data to inform our results. We used U.S. sources to illustrate a broader picture for discussion where we could not find a Canadian source.

Second, The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is utilized by many institutions to collect data on SE patterns. However, the survey has been criticized for the way it captures BIPOC SE data. Kane (2023) found that some students needed help understanding the questions on the survey due to vague wording or ambiguity. This led to students answering questions the way they individually interpreted them, skewing the validity of the results. Further, NSSE tends to treat everyone taking the survey as a traditional student, which is typically defined as a full-time student between the ages of 18-24 who lives on-campus and works less than 20 hours per week if they are employed (Seidman, 2005 as cited by Kane, 2023). NSSE treating everyone as a traditional student is problematic as BIPOC students are more likely to be non-traditional students than their White counterparts (Kane, 2023). This is due to the increased likelihood that BIPOC students are commuter students (Canadian University Consortium, 2023), attend school part-time (Bui, 2002; Pascarella et al., 2004; Ward et al., 2012, as cited by Quaye et al., 2019), and work more than 20 hours per week (Kabalkin, 2021). As a result, the NSSE survey may misrepresent BIPOC students' motivations for not engaging on campus when compared to their White student counterparts. The NSSE survey does not fully consider the systemic issues affecting BIPOC SE, such as lower socioeconomic status (Ijoma et al., 2021), racial hostility on campus (McDougal, 2018), or familial obligations (Kabalkin, 2021).

We also want to highlight two critical aspects of BIPOC SE that the reader should consider. First, we emphasize that disengagement or non-involvement on campus is often not the student's fault (Chipchase et al., 2017). Ultimately, the student tries navigating a complex higher education (HE) system while balancing personal, social, and professional commitments. Finding the perfect balance becomes more complicated when other social obligations are at play, including familial obligations, working to pay the bills, or living in an un-ideal living situation (Chipchase et al., 2017). Finding the balance can become exponentially more complex when multiple social identities are considered, such as being a BIPOC student, a first-generation student, or an international student. Second, Chipchase and colleagues (2017) argued that when one form of SE is present, it does not mean another type will be present. For example, if a student is engaged in their co-curricular activities, that does not automatically mean they are academically engaged and vice versa (Chipchase et al., 2017).

An example of this would be joining multiple clubs and attending club meetings but not actively engaging in class or visiting the professor during office hours. The opposite can also be true, where a student may be academically engaged but not socially engaged. An example of this would be actively asking questions during lectures but not joining clubs on campus or volunteering in the community.

Recommendations

This literature review aimed to answer the question: what factors contribute to low BIPOC student engagement in co-curricular programs and activities, and how can institutions do better in this regard? As has been shown, many factors can lead to reduced engagement among BIPOC students. These factors have their roots in systemic issues that particularly intersect with race and socioeconomic status. Based on the themes identified in this literature review, some recommendations (discussed below) emerged that might support institutions' efforts to improve BIPOC SE with co-curricular programs and activities. We acknowledge that none of these are perfect solutions and that applying these will not entirely eradicate the trend of reduced BIPOC SE in Canadian institutions.

Recommendation 1: Increase Representation of BIPOC Mentors in Co-Curricular Programs

Increased representation of BIPOC authority figures (such as staff, faculty, mentors, and business partners) can be a source of aspiration for BIPOC students, especially when there is a match between the race of the authority figure and the student, highlighting shared experience. As such, we recommend that program developers and coordinators make efforts to actively recruit more BIPOC partners from the community when a co-curricular program involves community partnership and to partner internally with more BIPOC staff and faculty to promote mentorship opportunities for students. This recommendation might extend to hiring more BIPOC faculty and staff overall.

Recommendation 2: Improve Pay Equity for On-Campus Work

Working on-campus was beneficial for fostering SE due to increased opportunities to engage with faculty, staff, and fellow students. However, due to broader socioeconomic factors and systemic issues, BIPOC students often need to

work to pay for tuition and other bills, leaving less time to engage in co-curricular activities. Thus, we recommend (1) increasing wages for work-study programs wherever possible to ensure wages are significantly above minimum wage; (2) increasing the hour cap for students in work-study roles so they can work more hours if they can do so, as this will allow them to focus on their on-campus work without needing to take additional jobs off-campus.

Recommendation 3: Provide Increased Support to Commuter Students

Due to broad systemic issues at the intersection of race and socioeconomic class, BIPOC students are less likely to live on campus and less likely to own a car. In turn, BIPOC students value the availability of public transportation and are more likely to be commuter students. As such, we recommend creating space and support programs specifically for commuter students, emphasizing increasing their sense of belonging on campus. Further, we recommend introducing additional biking infrastructure at institutions whenever possible, such as additional areas to lock bikes, student discounts for bike-sharing, etc.

Conclusion

In summary, co-curricular SE is a form of student engagement where the student actively participates in social activities such as Greek life or student clubs (Quaye et al., 2019). From this review, we can see there are multiple factors in the student's life, in addition to the structure of university policies and resources that help determine how the student engages academically or in co-curricular activities. Individual factors can severely impact student engagement on a personal level. However, individual factors can interact with university policies, resources, or broader systemic factors, making it harder for the student to engage in co-curricular activities. There are also different dynamics of student SE, where a student may be academically engaged but not engaged in co-curricular activities or may engage in co-curricular activities but not engage in their academics. BIPOC co-curricular SE is a complex issue that must be considered from multiple angles if institutions are committed to ensuring that BIPOC students feel comfortable and supported to engage in co-curricular activities. This research has provided insight into factors contributing to lower engagement among BIPOC students. The authors hope this awareness might inform future planning and policy decisions at Canadian institutions to make co-curricular programs and activities more accessible, equitable, and inclusive.

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