

And the Band Played On: Student Activism and the Black Lives Movement at a Rural Regional Public University

Crystal R. Chambers and Loni Crumb

with Jayla Cofield, Nicholas Fullenwider, Chloe Pearson, and Amber Sturdivant
East Carolina University

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The emotional labor of organizing, leading, or participating in campus protests may affect Black students' involvement in social justice activism at rural, predominantly White, higher education institutions. In this study, we examined the experiences and reflections of three Black students who engaged in a Black Lives Matter-inspired protest at a rural, public, historically White regional university in the South. We used a narrative design approach and critical race counter-storytelling methods to present an account of a peaceful protest organized by the students. The counter-stories we present demonstrate both the courage and costs of activism engagement for Black students at a historically White, rural university. We conclude with providing ways in which university personnel and stakeholders in rural communities can stand in solidarity with students to heighten their voices and desires to render societal change.

In reflection upon student activism in the mid-2010s, Cole and Heinecke (2018) asserted that student protestors “show an optimistic, creative imagination that could serve educators well as we grapple with our first steps down a new road” (p. 1). While Cole and Heinecke pointed to a nirvana of inclusive and supportive college campuses that can foster social justice, the post-neoliberal culture of U.S. campuses obscures the onerous experiences of brave rural students who organized a campus protest in response to the killings of unarmed Black Americans.

In the present study, we examined the experiences and reflections of three of the Black band students who engaged in a Black Lives Matter (BLM)-inspired protest at a rural, public, historically White regional university in the South, which here we refer to by the pseudonym Southern State University (SSU). We used a narrative

design approach (Riessman, 2007) and counter-storytelling methods (Solóranzo & Yosso, 2001) to present an account of a peaceful protest by marching band students at SSU. We call this account *The Event* because this clash between Black students and the community, including alumni, and the SSU leadership’s response still resonate campus wide. Using Schlossberg’s (1989) theory of mattering and marginality, we found that students strategically organized and took calculated risks to engage in protest activities and, from their perceptions, were subjected to ostracization as well as threats to their safety both on and off campus. The counter-stories of the students we present demonstrate both the courage and costs of activism engagement for Black students at a historically White, rural university. In contrast to Cole and Heinecke’s (2018) suggestion, the physical risks, in addition to the emotional labor of organizing, leading, or participating in campus protests, may outweigh the benefits accrued to education systems at the expense of Black students (Chambers, 2016). As such we underscore the need for institutional leadership to advance equity and justice proactively, rather than reactively silencing student voices (Harper, 2017; Williams et al., 2021).

We begin by presenting a historical contextualization of student activism. From there, we discuss our research design, drawing from critical race counter-storytelling methods, and proceed to a presentation of thematic findings and a discussion. We conclude with recommendations for

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Crystal R. Chambers, Professor, Department of Educational Leadership, East Carolina University, 1000 East 5th Street, 203 Ragsdale Building, MS 515, Greenville, NC 27858. Email: Chamberse@ecu.edu

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staff, faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders in rural communities, imploring their enlightened self-interest in supporting students in their quest for social change.

Black Student Activism in the South: A Historical Contextualization

Student activism is a thread in the history of Western higher education (Lipset, 1971/1993; Perkin, 2007). In the 1940s and 1950s, Black undergraduates, with the backing of the courts, pried open the doors to historically White institutions (HWIs) in the American (U.S.) South. The University of Arkansas claims to be the first Southern public institution to desegregate in 1948, with flagship institutions in Virginia and North Carolina enrolling their first Black undergraduates in 1955. In resistance, students, community members, and even some administrators and faculty used harassment and isolation tactics to derail Black student enrollments (Chambers, 2016).

Some rural Southern communities met Black student activists with violent resistance. For example, in 1956, stones and glass bottles were thrown at Autherine Lucy's car when she attempted to attend class at the University of Alabama. A mob chased and shouted, "Kill her" (Sayre, 1995, p. 163). Moreover, *she* was expelled for safety reasons. Five years later, Charlene Hunter-Gault faced bricks and fire as a mob rioted outside her University of Georgia dormitory (Hunter-Gault, 1992).

By 1960, 72% of public HWIs were nominally desegregated, with Black enrollments ranging from fewer than five to over 400 students. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Black student enrollments at HWIs grew. On average, these institutions had student bodies that were 2% Black (Johnson, 1964). As Black student numbers grew, so did their demands for holistic academic and social support—demands for Black instructors, Black studies and other cultural programs, financial aid, increased recruitment of Black students and athletes, anti-racism on campus, and more (Willie & McCord, 1972). Additional student movements of this Civil Rights era included feminism's second wave, the free speech movement, the emergence of LGBTQ rights, and Vietnam War protests (Chambers, 2016).

The 2010s brought a global wave of student activism, including the SlutWalks and their influence on third-wave feminism (Nguyen, 2013), the Yes Means Yes campaigns and #MeToo movements (Kananovich, 2019) as well as the Occupy movements and BLM (Ransby, 2018). Through its foraying of intersected identities and oft times intersectional advocacy strategies, BLM is all encompassing, confronting racial, class, gender, religion, ability, and sexuality privileges (Ransby, 2018).

BLM at Public Regional Colleges and Universities

A global network rather than an organization per se, BLM is a political movement centered on anti-Black racism. As defined by Ransby (2018), it is a "Black-led mass struggle" that "contextualizes the oppression, exploitation, and liberation of Black poor and working-class people within the simple understanding, at least in the US context, that 'once all Black people are free, all people will be free'" (p. 3). With BLM's emergence, rural communities, including students at rural public universities, ceased their silence (Simpson, 2020). This development is significant because while urban Black students are more likely to assert respect and acceptance of their whole selves, rural Black students are more likely to seek peaceable assimilation (Yull, 2014).

Yull (2014) observed that Black rural students want to distance themselves from racial dissent. Given the Southernization of U.S. culture (Applebome, 1997) and general indifference to racism (Cole, 2020), when rural students at public universities take a stance against racial injustice and police brutality, they incur great risks (Cabrera, 2014; Hardie & Tyson, 2013). BLM movements at rural, regional, public universities in the southeastern United States seem to have escaped national attention (White, 2016) beyond intermittent events (Jaschick, 2016). As a microcosm of rural society, regional public institutions are more likely to serve racially/ethnically diverse student bodies with high percentages of first-generation college students and Pell-eligible students (Gray, 2013). With declining funding to public higher education (Webber, 2017), regional public institutions are at a competitive disadvantage for alternative outlets for state funding. This financial precarity may motivate leaders at regional public institutions to react in favor of donors in ways that perceptibly ignore BIPOC students' needs and concerns (White, 2016).

Context of This Study

This study is situated at SSU, a regional public institution in the South, serving approximately 30,000 students with a historic mission of serving rural first-generation college students. In 2016, Black band students decided to conduct a BLM-inspired protest. Black members of the Mighty Swashbucklers, SSU's marching band, were concerned about racial violence nationally and with everyday interactions between Black people and police locally. In that year, there were 258 documented police-involved shootings of African Americans in the United States (Craven, 2016). To raise awareness of this issue, former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick sat during the National Anthem in the preseason. Subsequently, rather than sit, Kaepernick took a knee in consideration

of respect for the military and veterans. Nevertheless, his actions were interpreted to be anti-military and unpatriotic (Martin & McHendry, 2016), despite contrary evidence (Bretherton, 2017). Kaepernick's actions were emulated by other professional teams and students in secondary and postsecondary arenas, including the SSU Swashbucklers. SSU's service region includes three military bases, one each for the Marines, Army, and Air Force. With its military-friendly designation, academic partnerships with the military, and a robust Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) program, misinterpretations of the protests, unfortunately, dominated the media and public discourse. Essentially, it was in these national and local contexts that Black members of the Mighty Swashbucklers organized and executed their protest.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework we employed in this study was Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering and marginality. This framework describes the connections that students have with peers, faculty, and staff as well as how those connections foster their personal worth. These connections are also associated with increased student involvement and retention (Schlossberg, 1989). Concepts of mattering and marginality are derived from Park's (1928) conception of "the marginal man"—a person who has experiences incongruent with their peers within a given environment. The marginal man is akin to Ellison's (1953/2016) *Invisible Man* and the concept of Black double consciousness advanced by Du Bois (1903/1999) and, as such, helps explain Black students' campus experiences (Gossett et al., 1996).

Strayhorn (2018) posited belonging as an outcome of mattering, advancing belonging as foundational to student success. Students who have a sense of belonging are more likely to be involved and engaged in campus life, whereas students who feel marginal are more likely to be isolated and are more likely to develop psychological distress (Crumb et al., 2020). Validating students assuages feelings of marginality, which supports mattering and belonging (Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Réndon, 1994). Here we use the mattering and marginality framework, with the supports of belonging and validation theory, to situate Black students' campus connections after a campus protest.

Researcher Positionality

Researcher positionality involves reflecting on how the researcher, participants, and phenomenon of interest interact and influence each other (Laverty, 2003). Our (lead authors Crystal Chambers and Loni Crumb) lived experiences of

navigating through HWIs as Black females prompted our interests in exploring how students of color find solidarity among their peers and support from university personnel in what are often deemed as "chilly" environments (New, 2015). Moreover, as Black faculty of color, we are vested in using our social capital to advance equity in education and liberation for students from historically marginalized groups. Providing a counter-story of the students' experiences in this study is an act of solidarity and student empowerment.

Research Design

The human subjects review board at the authors' institution certified the study as exempt secondary data analysis. The research question guiding this study was: What were the experiences and reflections of Black students who engaged in a BLM-inspired protest at a rural, public regional university in the South? We refer to this BLM-inspired protest as The Event and in the sections below detail it narratively from student experiences. Here, we use the term *experiences* to denote students' recounts of The Event. The term *reflections* refers to the meaning students made of The Event and its aftermath, which we interpreted using Schlossberg's theory of mattering and marginality (1989).

We used a combination of a narrative design informed by critical race counter-story methods and general qualitative interpretative design to conduct a secondary data analysis of interviews with three band students who participated in The Event. This protest achieved the level of an event as it was "a thing that happens, especially one

of importance" (Lexico, 2021). Various campus groups staged several protests, but not one of them was as public or received as much attention regionally and nationally. In the original data collection, students who protested in The Event were solicited to participate in an undergraduate class project and were interviewed by a student co-researcher.

Given the perceived suppression of speech about the event as described below, there was a reluctance among student protesters to discuss The Event with anyone outside the band. Nevertheless, Jordan, Nia, and Haven (pseudonyms) agreed to an interview. Jordan was a junior political science major with a public administration minor. Nia was a junior music education major. Haven was a senior communications major with a concentration in public relations and a minor in sociology. She was also a band section leader. The Event occurred in the year before the interviews. Participants were asked about their recollection of The Event, its planning, support from the university, perspectives on BLM, the military, and whether they would do it again (see appendix for interview protocol).

To examine our research question, we first constructed a collective narrative of The Event using interview data from the participants (Riessman, 2007). Second, we analyzed the transcribed interview data and coded the data using the constant comparative method (Miles et al., 2014). The faculty researchers coded data separately and then compared codes for reliability purposes and trustworthiness.

Results are presented in two parts. First, drawing from critical race counter-story methods, we narrate, using the students' words, the planning and execution of The Event. Counter-story is a critical race theory (CRT) method for telling the stories of marginalized people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), challenging inequitable power and privilege distributions across social, political, and economic systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015) based on five major tenets: first, the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; second, challenge to dominant ideology; third, the commitment to social justice; fourth, the importance of experiential knowledge; and fifth, the use of interdisciplinary perspectives. Whereas majoritarian stories mask minoritized experiential knowledge, critical race counter-storytelling exposes and recasts majoritarian stories of racial privilege, centering minoritized voices.

In the second part, we identify four themes that capture students' overall experiences after the event, analyzed through the lens of the noted frameworks using students' quotes: (a) "All I wanted was to raise awareness," (b) "Care about your students' values and feelings," (c) "I feel like they were thinking this wouldn't happen," and (d) "We accomplished something."

The Event

"Let's Do Something Together"

You know, social media and just the news in general. We have seen ... certain protests around the country. There were certain flares of activism with the Black Lives Matter movement, things like that on campus. So, we decided, because we were unable to attend a lot of the events, because of our rehearsals, because of school, because of classes... We were like, okay, let's do something together. - Jordan

Organizing for The Event grew from a desire of some Black band members to create space for collective solidarity. They first created a group-text chat. As the deaths of unarmed Black men and women gained visibility, these students desired activist participation but could not partake because of their band obligations. The solution they came to was that they would do something within the band. "Let's do

something together," was the general sentiment, according to Jordan. Drawing support from this circle, Haven recalled, "we had a blackout at one of our practices where everybody wore black, or everybody who wanted to wear black wore black, just in solidarity with the oppression that was going on in the Black community." Several students wanted to do more. Jordan shared, "About a week prior to the event..., we basically came together like, 'Hey, my sister, let's just take a day. Let's just do it.'"

The plan was for Black band members to take a knee and refrain from playing the anthem as the band took the field. As each band instrument has a unique part, there would be instrumentation gaps where Black band members' notes would be missed. Reframed, the finished product was the sound rendered when only White instruments were given voice, metaphorically demonstrating the value of Black voices and Black lives. Student groups held similar protests at Temple University, the University of Michigan, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the University of Nebraska Lincoln, although those protests were largely uneventful (Jaschick, 2016). SSU student organizers had similar expectations.

As the date of The Event drew near, Jordan reflected, "There were more people attempting to garner support throughout the band and keep it less of a surprise." As a section leader, Haven had a direct connection with the band director:

He actually called me... He said, "I know you guys have been talking about doing something like protesting. So, are you guys still planning on doing that?" I was like, "Yes, we're planning on kneeling." And he said, "Well, I just want to make sure it's going to be uniform." ... So, to us, there was no problem. There was no problem with us wanting to protest because our band director came to us and was like, "It's fine. Just do it the same."

Jordan and Nia corroborated the band director's considerations for band unity—and safety.

At a band practice before The Event, academic and student affairs leaders met with students. Haven shared:

They brought out the president and the provost, and they were to address pretty much the band. They were like, "I don't know if you guys are aware, but some of your bandmates want to protest."

Jordan provided his recollection of one student affairs leader, stating:

“Hey, like if you guys do this, just know that the university has ways for you to have your voice heard, you know? And if you would like for your voice to be heard the university has ways to do that. Come to us so we can help you.” It wasn’t really a, like, don’t do it or do it kind of thing. It was more like a “Hey, if you decide to do this, we have things that we can do to support you in the future.” But then also at that same saying flip of the coin, uh, “If you do this, we don’t know what kind of consequences there will be,” you know?

Through that conversation, Haven said she felt “attacked.” Frustrated but nevertheless resolved, she asserted, “I’m still gonna kneel.” As students expected, the university’s president prepared a statement supportive of free speech for release at halftime.

On the day of The Event, when the band played the National Anthem, Jordan shared, “Some of us took a knee, some of us prayed, some of us were just sitting there and just looking around, just kind of taking in everything, understanding how much the moment was.” Students engaging in the protest constituted 10% of band membership but were dispersed throughout the band. Nia explained, “You’ve got people in the drumline, you got people everywhere, like across the field.”

Soon Nia noticed the crowd’s screams: “BOOOO,” “Respect the flag,” and the like. According to Haven,

it was incredible to me, the response. And I don’t mean that in a good way ... after our performance, people followed us, throwing beer cans at us, spitting on us, throwing umbrellas at us, throwing so many things at us, trying to hit us, punch us.

Nia did not notice the police escort covering band members as they left the field, whereas peers on the side of the field closer to the general public were more exposed to violent encounters. The emotional impact was immediate. Nia expressed exasperation: “I definitely cried. Definitely. It was, it wasn’t a cry for like they’re being mean. It’s like a, wow, they really don’t get it type of cry. Like, ‘Are they ever going get it?’”

Public reactions were strong. SSU’s president received hundreds of emails, many containing threats to cancel institutional support. In response, the SSU president issued a second statement asserting the right of the university to regulate student time, place, and manner of speech for safety reasons. He also, at this time, asserted the institution’s deep military connections. Students were directed to sign new band contracts, prohibiting protest while in band uniform.

Not signing meant discontinuing participation with the Marching Swashbucklers, which constituted a threat to scholarships, a key source of financial aid for some students.

Students’ Counter-Stories

“All I Wanted Was to Raise Awareness”

Students varied in their reasons for organizing and participating in The Event. In uncovering “the whys,” a quote from Jordan began the narrative above with an expressed need for deeper connections among Black band members and connections to contemporary social movements. Reflecting on her brothers and their fear for her safety, Nia asserted, “When females started getting involved [referencing Sandra Bland] it got scarier. It’s just a whole lot, Black in America.” Poignantly, Haven stated, “All I wanted was to raise awareness.”

A week after The Event, the band met. “A lot of us tried to explain, but now they were mostly upset because of what happened,” Haven shared. Speaking retrospectively, she said,

A lot of the band members were like, this was not the time, the place for you to do this. And we were trying to get them to understand there is never a right time and a place to protest.

Haven described one interaction with a White woman bandmate:

She said, “It’s just not fair because I was walking down. We had rocks thrown at us. People were saying derogatory things, that those people didn’t care about, our safety and our lives.” And I stood up and I said, “I am so sorry that that happened because it happened to me too.... But this is how Black people feel every day when they just leave their houses.... Like we get this unfair treatment all the time and you got to feel it for 10 minutes, and you didn’t even get hit or spit on. Actually, another Black player who wasn’t involved in it did.”

Here, Haven was referring to an incident in which a Black band member who did not participate in the protest was accosted in the stadium bathroom. Conveying perspectives espoused by others, she continued, “They’re getting so caught up in being attacked and you know, ‘I’m not racist.’ It’s like, okay. But that person next to you is, you know. And you’re not acknowledging that.”

“Care About Your Students’ Values and Feelings”

Courage

Student fear was palpable from the planning stages, but so too was the resolve among the students who were interviewed. Several students declined to participate in The Event in the wake of conversations with the university’s administration. The students discussed backlash in the rural community. Nia seemingly normalized the sociocultural dynamics in the community: “I was like, look at where we are. I mean, do you guys not expect for something to happen?” Despite the community resistance and administrative guidance, several students remained dedicated to protesting.

Fear, Precarity, and Student Support

Community, donor, and alumni vitriol continued the next several days. The SSU president issued a second press release. As described by Haven, the first statement

pretty much was like, we support our students and their right to express themselves... It was pretty much saying that they appreciated what we did and stood behind it, even though they might not have agreed with it, it was our right.

Jordan shared, “That initial response was very much ... in support and it felt like we had gotten, you know, a small victory.” By contrast, to Haven, the second statement “definitely negated and took away from the original statement.... Like ... we don’t stand behind what the students did. That won’t ever happen again.”

Students perceived this shift in institutional support as hurtful and personal. Haven shared:

if you have put this statement [the second one] out first, I would have been hurt, but like that would have been it. I wouldn’t have, nobody would have been upset.... It wouldn’t have been as big as a deal as it was, especially to *me*.

The students perceived that the academic and student affairs leadership were aligning with the president’s statement. Concomitantly, the band director issued a directive. However, as observed by Nia:

That letter that was sent out by [the director] was not sent out by [the director]. Now, I don’t have a hundred percent proof of that, but I firmly believe that *they* [emphasis added] wrote that and said, sign it, like, you know.... And he was put in a tough position.

As an untenured faculty member, his position was precarious. Nia explained, “There were people that got scared because they didn’t want for [the director] to get fired because of this.... He really cared for us.” Jordan and Haven also spoke to his care. Jordan believed that this care ethic emanated from the director’s Latinx heritage.

Regarding the broader institutional leadership, the thought among the band members was that donors mattered more than students. Nia shared, “You got people pulling money saying they’re not going to pay any more money to the school.... I feel like if it was their fairytale world, we would have been dealt with.” Students shared that donors wished to strike their scholarships or subject them to disciplinary action. From Haven’s view,

the money that you received from these donors and the alumni, the support and everything is more important than the actual students who are attending.... I felt unappreciated and I didn’t feel like I was wanted on this campus.

Students felt betrayed. Haven shared, “there are significantly less people in the marching band and it was last year..., and I do, I feel like the school’s response is what hurt us a lot because [there are] people who are really passionate about music.” Two of the three students interviewed discontinued with the band. Haven reflected, “As soon as I felt disrespected doing something that I loved, I didn’t feel like I could do it here anymore.... I really haven’t even been in the School of Music since.”

Black Leaders, Faculty, and Staff Matter

Beyond the band director, the students perceived other university support as limited. The underrepresentation of Black faculty at the university, including the fact that there was only one Black faculty member in the School of Music, contributed to students’ feelings of isolation. However, Haven noted support from three Black women, a tenured faculty member, a student affairs leader, and a staff member, in whom she could confide:

at one point I did get very emotional ... because I was like crying.... And one of the counselors ... she was also an African American woman ... she was pretty much like, “I understand you, and I understand everything you were going through.” She was like, “because I have gone through some of this as well.”

Haven felt that the care of these women and the band director were validating.

“I Feel Like They Were Thinking This Wouldn’t Happen”

Consequences of Neoliberalism

Black students who engage in the BLM movement in the rural Southern United States face the consequences of neoliberal ideologies on their campuses. As framed by Jordan,

I thought the reaction here was so big mainly because of the demographics surrounding the area of the university ... just predominantly White and predominantly what a lot of people see as conservative.... Personally speaking..., I feel like they’re actually more libertarian. They just don’t believe that there should be too much involvement with the government in general. They like things where they are cause things aren’t broken, so there’s no need to fix it. So, with this protest, I feel like they kind of took that idea of things aren’t broken. So, there’s no need to fix it.

Students felt that the community questioned the interjection of BLM awareness into their comfortable neoliberal setting. Haven stated,

I feel like they were thinking ... this wouldn’t happen here. This wouldn’t happen at my home. This wouldn’t happen, you know, where I’m from. So ... it like not just ruined their way of thinking but ruined what they thought this town was.

She saw the approach of alumni and donors as, “Me, me, me.... This isn’t pleasing me. So I’m going to take my money, take my donations.”

Dispelling Myths: Black Patriotism

The students rejected the mis-association of kneeling during the National Anthem and disrespect to the flag or military. Jordan reflected:

they took it personally, in a way of saying that there was an attack on that and anti-patriotism.... I have people in my family who have fought in and injured in war and yes, the American flag and national anthem had to mean something.

Part of this deflection connects to the marginalization of Black military personnel and veterans within dominant narratives of who serves in the U.S. Armed Forces. Each student spoke of a close veteran relative. Nia spoke to

dispelling myths about Blacks in the military and shared a common Black perspective on the purpose of service:

It kills me: “People like you have no respect for veterans and stuff.”... And I was like, “What? You don’t think Black people served in the military?!” I mean, yes. I have respect for the military because the military is fighting for us to be able to exercise these rights.... Like, what do you think they’re fighting for?

Jordan further explained the difference between disrespect and reverence:

especially those of us in [this region] should understand that when you kneel down to something, that it’s like when you’re praying, it’s sort of reverence to something.... Kneeling as something that is in reverence to something that brings you lower, humbles you, and kind of brings light to something else.

Silencing

The students were challenged to describe their experiences as racist. As they shared their perceptions of the community, there were long pauses associated with attempts to frame issues, so they did not implicate Whiteness. Nia was perhaps the most strained:

I feel like the, [long pause] I don’t know, I don’t want to get rude. So, I’m just going to like, say, I’m just going to stick with you. [Interviewer: I mean, you know you can say how you feel]. Well, [pause, huge sigh] I love my school, OK. But like we got, we got a wide variety.... I don’t know. This is really difficult to put into words.

In some settings, people are taught that if you cannot say something nice about someone, you should say nothing. The result is intergenerational silencing and the suppression of minoritized voices.

Students also received instruction not to talk to the press. Students shared that transgressions were sanctionable by practice bans. Missing practice meant not being able to play on game day and implicated grades because marching band is an academic class.

To control the narrative, the director designated two students to speak: The students holding the flag. Haven shared,

there was a television interview with two people from the band, and they were in opposition to the

kneeling, open opposition. They were the ones carrying the flag. Right. And it's so funny because a lot of people like to talk about them. They're like, upon a broken band, they were trying to just reunite them ... that above all else, America is one ... And I'm like, yes, I agree with that.... But I'm like this, their flag was the most important thing.

This vision of contrived unity was the lasting media impression that SSU desired.

“I Felt Like We Accomplished Something”

No Regrets

When asked whether, in hindsight, they would do it again, each student answered affirmatively. When asked why, Nia pointed to campus conversations: “The conversation that was started on this campus afterward was necessary. It may not have lasted super long, but it got people talking.” For Jordan, “it was more of a shell breaking moment within myself.” His commitment to social justice was reinforced: “If I see something that I feel I can personally affect I try to personally affect it. So, yes, looking back, I would absolutely do it again.”

Discussion

As mentioned in their examination of student activism, Cole and Heinke (2018) looked toward a post-neoliberal academy, a postsecondary education system driven less by academic capitalism (Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014) and more by equity, social justice, and human advancement. In this study, we found that students displayed a commitment to social justice and challenged dominant ideology through their activism and counter-stories. Despite the many risks they faced, these students persisted in their protest efforts and were extended varying levels of university support which they perceived was somewhat rescinded after The Event. Their physical safety was jeopardized, as was the case of student activists in the 1950s and 1960s (Chambers, 2016), and their emotionality surfaced as publicly displayed tears (Walker-Barnes, 2009). Despite their labors, the dominant story of The Event, as articulated by Haven, was that it was “completely wrong and disrespectful” for Black band members to protest. The perception was, “They have no right to do that because these people have gone and died and fight for their right to be on that field and play the National Anthem.” This student's perception was seemingly solidified by the initial conferral and hasty withdrawal of support. Haven's perception of The Event was also shaped by the silencing of students that resulted in their feeling

marginalized and as if they did not matter (Schlossberg, 1989).

However, the counter-story was not shared publicly as students were discouraged from speaking to the press, including the student media. Haven observed, “It was crazy to me because you're upset now, just because of the way everything turned out [regarding The Event], but you're not upset about what is happening in the community of people, of color and Black people.” CRT asserts the importance of providing counter-narratives to relay the lived experiences of individuals who are minoritized and often silenced. Three areas of discussion gleaned from the counter-stories are student motivations, courage, and resolve; institutional precarity and the support of Black students; and students' mattering and marginality.

Student Motivations, Courage, and Resolve

Black college students may experience secondary stressors stemming from the unjust killings of Black men and women (Goodman et al., 2012). Students in this study, among others at SSU and other institutions, stood in solidarity with BLM to raise awareness. These findings mirror other studies (Jones & Reddick, 2017; Leath & Chavous, 2017) that show how Black students at HWIs partake in civic engagement on college campuses to find solidarity with their college peers (Brooms & Davis, 2017) and echo the demands for recognition, respect, and support issued by Black students generations ago (Chambers, 2016; Ndemanu, 2017; Willie & McCord, 1972). This type of activism is a personal strategic attempt for students to collectively confront institutionalized racism (Williams et al., 2021), representing a commitment to social justice as indicated in CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Each student emphatically expressed that they would do it again, identifying personal growth and collective campus learning as byproducts of their activism. Thus, like other scholarship (Hope et al., 2016; Jones & Reddick, 2017; Leath & Chavous, 2017), we found that involvement in activism plays a vital role in Black students' personal growth, identity formation, and civic engagement at HWIs.

Institutional Precarity and the Support of Black Students

Twenty-first-century public higher education is marked by financial precarity, especially at regional institutions. As fiscal support for public higher education declines, public institutions seek to replace some state dollars through fundraising. Regional public institutions are newer to institutional advancement. Hence, they may be more sensitive to donors as they typically have fewer

tools to manage alumni and donor perceptions (McClure & Eppenstein Anderson, 2020; McClure & Fryar, 2020), which is detrimental to BIPOC students (White, 2016; Williams et al., 2021). At SSU, some people perceived the protest as contradistinctive to patriotism and military friendliness, thereby jeopardizing institutional backing from alumni and donors. Here, students experienced the same distortion of purpose Kaepernick received (Bretherton, 2017; Martin & McHendry, 2016) and were silenced without regard for their personal connections to and appreciation for the military or consideration of dissent as patriotism (Curren & Dorn, 2018; King, 1967). This suppression of student voice led to student feelings of increased marginality (Schlossberg, 1989) and lack of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018).

Given demographic browning in the United States (Grawe, 2018), it behooves institutions to reexamine racially indifferent leadership approaches (Cole, 2020; Harper, 2017), especially the use of suppression techniques to force alignment between student interests and perceived institutional goals (Williams, et al., 2018). Instead, as the leaders of academic institutions, presidents and other administrators should cultivate dialogue while intentionally educating the community on racial inequities and directly addressing student concerns (Harper, 2017).

Students' Mattering and Marginality

In this study, students emphasized mattering, both individually and collectively, as Black students at a rural, public HWI. They also articulated feelings of marginality. According to Schlossberg's theory (1989), mattering and marginality are a spectrum upon which students can map their institutional connections. That mapping can help us understand their desire to have their ideas and feelings validated as important, punctuated with appreciation, underscoring the dependence of these young emergent adults on university faculty, staff, and administration (Schlossberg, 1989; see also Réndon, 1984; Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Mattering was evident as students expressed that staff and faculty at their institution (i.e., band director, counselor, academic and student affairs leaders) engaged in authentic conversations regarding The Event and discussed possible ramifications and how to navigate the social and emotional outcomes. The students identified specific university personnel who cared about "what they want, think, and do and [were] concerned about their fate" (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 10). The presence of African American women and their support was poignant for two students, which underscores the need for increased diversity in university faculty, staff, and leadership (Crumb et al., 2020; Overstreet et al., 2021).

Students anticipated adverse reactions from some community members and alumni. However, the conflicting statements released from the president and others caused

confusion regarding how much the students' values and efforts mattered to institutional leadership, especially given the condemnation they experienced. Upon experiencing this marginalization, students disengaged from an activity they "loved" because they felt "disrespected."

Implications

The counter-stories shared here highlight the importance of validating students' sociopolitical beliefs and the benefits of student organizing and civic engagement at a rural, regional university in the South. The following implications outline how student affairs personnel, faculty, and rural community stakeholders can better support Black student activism at rural HWIs.

Safety First

University personnel must ensure students' safety in all forms (i.e., physical, emotional, psychological) but even more so following contentious events. Regarding physical safety, campus safety officers should be involved and trained on keeping all students safe. Peaceful Black student protesters should not be deemed as criminal provocateurs of violence (Reinka & Leach, 2017). Furthermore, before and after planned protests, university leaders should enlist college mental health counseling services to attend to students' emotional and psychological well-being. Counselors can extend empathy and help students to healthily process their emotions. Counselors can also help counter students' adverse reactions and prevent them from withdrawing from university activities (Crumb & Haskins, 2017).

Racially Responsive Leadership

Each participant desired support from faculty, staff, and university leaders. Given racism tolerance, the scarcity of BIPOC faculty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), and the concentration of those faculty in the professions as opposed to the disciplines where they can teach BIPOC undergraduates, it may be more challenging for Black students to connect with allies in advocacy. Consequently, activism efforts may be more difficult at rural HWIs. Students want university administration, staff, and faculty to help shape their voices and ideas for advancing social justice. They also appreciate openly discussing the ramifications of such events with trusted professionals.

Preparing in the absence of crisis will allow for careful consideration of institutional mission, values, and constituencies when students lead social justice activism. If institutionally led, the burden is lifted from students (Harper, 2017; Leath & Chavous, 2017) and leadership can

shape the time, place, and manner of action, leading students as educators rather than following them as reactionaries (Harper, 2017). Institutions should consider racially responsive leadership approaches given the demographic imperative.

The Demographic Imperative

Demographically, 18- to 24-year-old college students are increasingly BIPOC. In the face of declining traditional enrollments (Grawe, 2018), it is in the enlightened interest of HWIs and their stakeholders, including donors and alumni, to abandon racially narcissistic approaches and build and support a diverse, equitable, and inclusive campus, as many state funding formulas include enrollments in their metrics. Black students matter to the institution's bottom line. If HWIs want to recruit and retain BIPOC students, campuses must feel—and be—safe, welcoming, and inclusive.

Conclusion

The Event was a unique experience in activism for students on SSU's campus as well as for people in the surrounding rural community. The outcomes of The Event included fostering Black student solidarity, education of White peers, and illuminating the physical and emotional costs of protesting racism in the 21st century. Several years later, The Event lives in the minds and occasional discourse of faculty, staff, and graduate students at SSU. It was a defining moment in institutional history. The impacts of The Event resonate in quiet corners among the faculty and staff who remain long after students graduate.

Trends show that students at rural universities and in communities across the United States are fervently working to support the BLM movement (Kelley, 2016; Simpson, 2020; Williams et al., 2021). With this notice, leadership at rural public universities can prepare for when, not if, a racialized event will happen. Institutional actions toward change shift that burden (Harper, 2017). It is our hope that this article encourages rural public institutional leadership to move from racial indifference and tacit oppression (Case & Joubert, 2020) to becoming allies who hold safe spaces for Black students to take a stand for social justice.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. What's your year?
2. Academic major?
3. What is your stance on Black Lives Matter?
4. In your own words, what happened?
5. Was the administration aware beforehand? What was their stance before the protest? After? What was your reaction?
6. Did you continue to play as you knelt?
7. Knowing what you do now, would you choose to protest again? Why or why not? What would you change?
8. Other schools in [the state] have had students participate in similar protests with few academic repercussions. Why do you think that this one provoked such a strong reaction from school administrators?
9. How do you think the administration should have handled the reaction to the protest?
10. Why did you choose to protest? Why did you not continue?
11. Were there any members of the band that were strongly opposed to your protest?