



Cultural Immersion Project: Interview Paper Assignment

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The following quotes are from a Black Student Union member that I interviewed for the organization/agency portion of this assignment. The following are direct quotes from them, they wished to remain anonymous.

When I asked them what the purpose and mission statement of their organization was, they replied, “the purpose of the Black Student Union organization is to allow room for a safe space on the college campus for Black individuals. The mission of the Black Student Union is both to allow students the ability to feel a sense of community with their fellow Black peers, while also getting connected with the local community of Monmouth. The Black Student Union also serves as a hub for students to gain knowledge and awareness of Black culture. The goal of the Black Student Union is to bring about awareness, unity, and a sense of community that helps to give college students an enjoyable and purposeful college experience!”

I went on to ask them about the services they offer to their identified population. They replied, “the services offered to us include things like weekly opportunities to meet up and have open discussions or allowed times to mingle with one another. We hold all sorts of events that are equally informative in terms of Black history or culture, as well as fun and engaging! We discuss anything from politics, social justice issues, historical movements to movies and traditions. We hold all sorts of events, from presentation nights to movie nights. The Black Student Union also encourages students, Black or not, to come and participate in discussions and events to become more educated on Black issues as well as support their fellow Black peers!”

I followed up with a question about how members of the population are made aware of their offered services. They said, “members are made aware of different events and services we offer through our Instagram, flyers across campus, and mostly by word of mouth! Usually, events that are being held are fun and exciting and so getting the word out is the best way to encourage people to come and check it out! We also try and do outreach on campus. We will have days that we go and walk around trying to meet students and invite them to participate. Sometimes we set up a table on the main part of campus so that we can easily intercept students on their way to class. At our weekly meeting we try and cover plans for future events we will hold and have physical handouts to remind people. We also really try to stay up to date on our Instagram stories and posts so that we can reach the most amount of people quickly.”

Then I asked them about the areas of greatest need not only for their agency/organization but for their population as well. They responded by saying “I think the greatest need in our organization would be just for students to feel not only safe, but valued and supported, especially in a college environment. Often, Black students can be stereotyped as lazy or incapable of academic success and that can really be a shot to people’s confidence. So, having a space where individuals can feel like their voice is heard and appreciated and respected is an absolute need for us Black students. Not only having a space for this, but just giving students the opportunity to feel like leaders in our community by using their voice is essential to building up a strong Black community on campus. I think that in terms of our population, being in Western Oregon there aren’t a whole lot of Black students, so local Black representation is hard to come by. Having things like Black professors and coaches and other members of society representing Black culture and students in a positive way is also a definite need.”

I then inquired about some of the more significant challenges for their population that is being served and what were some steps they were taking to address these challenges. To which they replied, “I would say that the most significant challenges for us would be representation. The population of Black students on campus is not nearly as much as White or Hispanic students, and there is a lack of Black authority figures both on campus and within the local

community. I think having positive role models that are Black for Black students is crucial in giving the students a person to look up to that shows they can be successful just like them. In terms of steps taken to address these issues, we really try and educate others on the importance of Black representation and recognition on all college campuses. We have held events within the community to allow for local individuals to have their voice heard on the issues they face that may be separate from the campus. In terms of Black representation in the local community, we have been holding community events and allowing space for the residents to see that Blacks are underrepresented in this community. I think the goal would be to address this issue and work towards a solution collaboratively with the local community.”

And finally, I asked them about the importance of social justice within the agency/organization community and for their cultural group overall. Their final response to this question was, “I would say that social justice in our union is highly valued. One of the most important things that we can do as a group is find support from one another through social justice movement and awareness of issues. Having this union on campus allows us to share our experiences with prejudice and social injustice that we face often, sometimes daily. For our cultural group overall, I would also say it is extremely important to advocate for social justice issues within our community. Finding space for discussion about social injustice and desiring solutions to local issues is something that the Black Student Union is a catalyst for. If we can unite our college campus with the local community on issues of social justice, that is where I believe the real change will occur.”

Now I am going to dive into my one-on-one personal interview with my friend, Marnasha. The following are summarizations of her answers to the questions I asked her.

Marnasha grew up in Portland, Oregon in a single-parent household with her mother and younger brother. She grew up in a suburb outside of downtown Portland and attended David Douglas High School. Growing up, Marnasha only ever had her mother and her mother’s side of the family involved in her life. She had no relationship with her father or his side of the family. Because of this single parent household dynamic, Marnasha is extremely close with her mother and values family over everything. Growing up Marnasha loved being in community with other people and loved to build new communities, like she did with her high school cheer team. Marnasha graduated from David Douglas with honors and an athletic scholarship to attend Western Oregon University (WOU) to cheer for the Wolves. She moved away from her hometown at age 17. She attended school at Western Oregon University from 2015-2018, where she began her degree in Nursing. During her time spent at WOU she became involved in an on-campus, college-oriented church and that is where I met her! She came to know and give her life to Christ in the Winter of 2018. While at college she participated in multiple communities. She was a part of the Black Student Union, Resonate Church, the Cheer team, and Phi Kappa Phi Sorority. She highly values community and serving others and that is why she started her career in Nursing. She is also passionate about social justice issues and educating others on Black issues. She continued her education at OHSU for Nursing and received her BSN, RN licensure last year. Now, Marnasha works full time as a Nurse on the graveyard shift at a hospital in Salem, Oregon. She got married in August 2020 to her best friend from high school.

Throughout Marnasha’s life and academic journey she has experienced some subtle and not so subtle instances of racism and discrimination. She has felt underappreciated and underrepresented in both academics and her career. She has experienced discrimination in her job firsthand by having a patient that has asked for a “non-black nurse” instead of her. She has had to fight tooth and nail to become a first-generation college graduate. She has experienced

discrimination of other African Americans within the healthcare system, during the peak of the pandemic. She has experienced a tremendous amount of adversity in her life and career. Throughout her academic journey she has felt God really comfort her during times of deep sorrow and hurt. She feels as though she was called to become a nurse, to serve others like Jesus did.

Some of Marnasha's key cultural events in her life began during high school. Growing up and attending a predominantly white high school, she felt as though she had to assimilate within the majority culture of white students. She enjoyed high school and had an overall positive experience, but she wishes that during that critical time in her life, she had more Black role models in the school as well as more fellow Black peers. She was raised in an all-African American household and felt as though her culture at home was different than the culture she was trying to assimilate with at school. Marnasha experienced instances of racism and discrimination while in high school in forms of microaggressions mostly. When she would get her hair braided other white students would make comments about how they "liked it so much better than her afro". She often felt as though the standard of beauty growing up in a predominantly white school and culture, didn't have much of a place for her Black beauty. She had other instances of microaggressions when peers would react to her intellectual and athletic abilities with surprise, making her feel belittled or that her successes were diminished because she was doing well "for a Black girl".

However, Marnasha did have some positive experiences with the majority culture in her community and high school. She started cheering for the David Douglas Scots and found a sense of community where she could display her athletic abilities and have a creative outlet. She found herself making friends with other students of different cultural backgrounds, like her friend Jesse who is Mexican. She became very good friends with Jesse in high school and learned a lot about his culture. Jesse is now her husband! As Marnasha shared her story and took me through all her major life events, from growing up to high school to her college and now career experience, I couldn't help but feel emotional. I felt saddened for her in the instances that she experienced being belittled or shamed. I felt angry for the times that she was discriminated against or experienced instances of microaggressions. But overall, I would say that I felt proud. I felt proud of my friend that has worked so hard to overcome so many barriers in life and come out resilient and joyful with a heart that loves Jesus. I believe that I responded this way to these different key cultural events because I love her dearly as a friend. I think I also felt these emotions because of the injustice within it. I feel passionate about equal and fair treatment and when there is injustice it does not sit well with me, especially when it comes to people I care about.

I would say that from this interview experience, I was privileged to learn about the personal experiences of a young Black woman. I feel because of this interview, I was able to appreciate these kinds of realities on a whole new level than anything I had learned through research. Hearing the personal accounts and the real and raw emotions felt by her were very moving and helped me to really understand her perspective in life. I was also able to see the areas in which I am privileged in this society as a white woman. I got to learn more about the level of adversity that is not just specific to Marnasha but is the reality for so many Black women and men in America in both academic and societal settings. I got to learn about the level to which individuals can rise to the occasion of conquering their goals and coming out of adverse situations with both grace and dignity.

From my chosen cultural group, the elements of Consideration, Honor and Unity are prominent. I believe that this cultural group operates from a sense of consideration for others

because of how they seek to serve those around them. The Black Student Union seeks to serve college students by giving them a safe and inclusive space and encouraging them to have a voice for their community. Marnasha seeks to serve those around her through her vocation. As a nurse she helps the public and does so with a servant's heart. I also believe that this cultural group seeks to honor others because of how they choose to serve those around them and show to both the Black and non-Black community that they have worth and significance. I believe this just from the ways in which I have observed interactions within the community and in the way that they talk about those around them in both their educational and working communities. Lastly, I believe that both the Black Student Union and Marnasha seek unity and hold it as a high priority. I see this in how individuals engage with their community and work to help change it when it is not functioning in the best way. Based on my experiences with this population, as a Gracist I can engage with this community by coming alongside them in their pursuits for social justice and equity. I can support my fellow African Americans in my community by participating in local events and by becoming educated on issues within the African American community. I can show honor and consideration to the members of this cultural group by treating them with value and respect.

Overall, in reflection of both interviews, I would say that the biggest similarity is how the cultural group as a collective highly values community. I think the central theme throughout both of my interviews and my research as well as the events I experienced is that of putting an emphasis on community and serving others. In both interviews, the Black Student Union member and Marnasha explained how they desire to help others and serve others in their community and make people feel welcomed and cared for. In my research on African American culture there is a large emphasis on both familial community as well as ties to the general community. In the events I experienced I witnessed first-hand how the African American culture desires to serve others and make people around them feel welcomed and served. Another major similarity across these portions of the experience is that of desired acquisition of social justice. In both my research and experienced events, the concept of valuing social justice and change within broken societies is one of utmost importance. With both of my interviews, social justice is a priority and they both have a motivation to educate others in Black Culture and Black issues. The only real difference that I noted between the various portions of this experience was that of instances of discrimination. With my interview of Marnasha, her personal experiences of racism and discrimination were very apparent. Within the research there are statistics regarding the frequency of experienced racism for African Americans, but with this avenue there is not a whole lot of specific examples. With both my experiences at events, instances of racism and discrimination were not heavily focused on, while possible they were not at the forefront of conversations. And in my interview with the Black Student Union member, they also did not share any personal experiences of racism or discrimination with me.

The most surprising thing to me throughout all this gathering of information was that of how close and inviting the cultural group is. Like I had mentioned before, going to both events at the church and the cookout I felt as though I would feel unwanted or unwelcome but that wasn't the case whatsoever. I think often, African Americans are stereotyped as angry or unfriendly individuals, whereas they are some of the most kind and warm and friendly people I have ever met. I shouldn't have been surprised by this experience. I think that some of my own apprehensions about feeling welcomed were wrapped up in stereotypes of my own anxieties of feeling like I wouldn't have anything in common with this people group. I have so much in

common with this cultural group in terms of my personal values and views of serving others and placing family and community as a number one priority in my life.

I think what has changed for me since having this immersion experience is just my perspective on the African American culture. I think I have a deeper respect for them and their level of ability to overcome adversity. I have a greater appreciation for their cultural values of social justice, familial importance, and community involvement. Seeing first-hand how each of these facets of this immersion project care deeply and place high value on these realities was very moving for me and motivating as well. I think that I have changed in my perspective on how I can interact with the African American culture moving forward, I believe that since having these experiences and insight I can now confidently walk alongside African Americans within my community. I feel a drive to want to participate in local events and become even more educated on Black Culture and issues faced by the African American community. I think that my level of comfortability in asking members of this community personal questions has increased and I would feel confident one day working with this population in a counseling setting. I feel privileged from this experience to grow in my understanding of both my friend and of programs around me and through my research of this community.

I have gained numerous insights from this experience in both the information I acquired and the experiences I had. Some of these insights include learning about the cultural values that are across the board for African Americans. I experienced the research I had done come to life in the events I experienced, seeing the value of family and community come to life in at both the church service and the cookout. I gained a broader picture of who my friend is and what she values, and I was able to learn about a resource I was unaware of when I was on the college campus. I will apply these insights and new knowledge into my future work as a counselor with African American clients. I feel like because of this research and these shared experiences, I have a sort of new connection to this community that I didn't have before. I feel intrigued to continue my learning of this cultural group and motivated to discover even more about the individuals that belong to this community. I think that in my future career as a counselor, when working specifically with this cultural group I can encounter them with respect, honor, and love.

