

## **Appreciative but Battered: The Bittersweet Experiences of Former Black Public Relations Graduate Students**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study extends the scholarly literature that addresses diversity issues in public relations graduate education by focusing on the lived experiences of former Black graduate public relations students (all of whom were practitioners before full-time or part-time university teaching). By conducting in-depth interviews of nine participants, we assess the experiences they had in their graduate programs as well as how those experiences manifest in the relationships that they have (or had) with their Black graduate students. Results from this study provide practical insights that have the potential to assist public relations graduate programs in the recruiting and retaining of Black graduate students.

*Keywords:* public relations, graduate education, Black students, challenges, opportunities

Despite attacks in the United States levied against both the higher education degree and the longstanding belief of the degree's value (see Naz, 2025 or Kurtzleben & Nadworny, 2025, respectively), the historical and contemporary data highlighting the benefits of earning a college degree are robust (Newton, 2021; Rose, 2013). These data indicate that college graduates amass greater lifetime earnings in comparison to high school graduates; they experience lower unemployment rates; they experience greater civic involvement; they are more likely to have full-time jobs, and they tend to secure jobs with better benefits, including paid vacation, flexible work arrangements, health insurance, and retirement. All these factors contribute to greater long-term financial stability and security (Newton, 2021; Rose, 2013). Most projections show that despite public skepticism about the cost and value of a college degree, a bachelor's degree will significantly increase the chances of securing a well-paying job in the future (Palmer, 2024). It is for these reasons that education has been touted as the mythological great equalizer, the means of social class mobility and more positive health outcomes, particularly for first-generation college students and other marginalized community members (Holmes & Zajacova, 2014).

If the bachelor's degree is perceived to be the panacea, the proverbial golden goose, or the ladder to social mobility, particularly among marginalized community members, the thought of pursuing graduate education might feel unnecessary to some if the bachelor's degree has equipped them with the requisite knowledge and skills to land a job in the industry (Waymer & Taylor, 2022). However, in their study of undergraduate applied communication students attending a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), Waymer and Taylor (2022) found that the majority of their participants believed that the master's degree was the de facto modern day "new bachelor's degree"; therefore, participants "knew they needed to go back to school eventually to 'stay ahead,' earn

their desired salary, or achieve other long-term goals" (p. 55). Thus, most expressed some desire to pursue a master's degree at some point in the future. This logic aligns with the logic espoused on several graduate programs' websites that promote the master's degree as a means of upskilling and advancing (e.g., Georgetown University, 2025).

Waymer and Taylor's (2022) study, albeit an important one, represented only one side of the coin. In essence, they explored how, as a discipline, public relations and other applied communication disciplines might recruit more Black students into graduate programs by gauging interests, unearthing barriers to application or entrance, and identifying tactics, initiatives, strategies, and programs that might be useful for the successful placement of Black undergraduates into graduate public relations and communication-related programs. On the other side of the coin, this study extends the scholarly literature that addresses diversity issues in public relations graduate education by focusing on the lived experiences of former Black graduate public relations students (all of whom were practitioners before full-time or part-time university teaching). In this study, we assess the experiences they had in their graduate programs as well as how those experiences manifested in the relationships that they have (or had) with their Black graduate students. From a practical perspective, these experiences have the potential to assist public relations graduate programs in recruiting and retaining of Black graduate students.

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Chicken or the Egg: Diversity Issues in the Public Relations Industry Begets Diversity Issues in PR Education or Vice Versa?**

The public relations industry has long struggled with representative workforce diversity. For decades, the profession has been disproportionately White. A 2018 *Harvard Business Review* analysis found that the U.S. public relations workforce was about 87.9% White and only 8.3% Black or African American (Chitkara, 2018). This imbalance led

Vardeman-Winter and Place (2017) to describe public relations as still a “lily-white field of women” (p. 326), harkening back to Layton’s (1980) first use of the term in the early 1980s.

Recent data suggest modest improvements; however, the disparities in racial/ethnic composition of the public relations workforce remain stark between White individuals and those constituting non-White groups, including Black or African Americans. By 2021, some studies indicate that government statistics reflect that about 83.7% of PR specialists were White, with roughly 12.3% Black/African American (Tsai et al., 2023) (an increase in Black representation compared to a few years prior). As of 2024, research shows that “Black people comprise just 9% of those working in entry-level PR specialist roles” (Carter, 2024, para.1). Despite the modest increase in the percentages of Black practitioners working in the public relations field, industry observers continue to describe PR as “too white,” noting it does not reflect the rapidly growing diversity of the U.S. population.

A particularly troubling aspect is the lack of diversity at leadership levels (Bardhan & Gower, 2022), meaning that once we advance beyond the entry-level positions, the disparity is further exacerbated. Some scholars in the discipline have examined this phenomenon under the framework of glass ceiling effects (Pompper, 2011; Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017); more recently, however, public relations education researchers have described this phenomenon as a PR industry “bottleneck”—whereby professionals of color are less likely to ascend to senior management (Tsai et al., 2023). Regardless of the label we use to conceptualize this workplace challenge, industry reports indicate that this issue is the result of rooted and systemic flaws in recruitment (see Waymer et al., 2025), retention (Wallington, 2020), and promotion practices (see Bridgen & Zele, 2025; Tindall, 2009a). In response, major PR associations such as the Public Relations Society of America’s Diversity & Inclusion

Committee have called for concerted efforts to improve recruitment, retention, and advancement of racial and ethnically underrepresented practitioners

While Black practitioners are underrepresented in the public relations industry, they are also underrepresented in the academy. Crucially, many scholars and practitioners point to the “Pipeline” problem – the notion that the dearth of diversity in the PR workforce is rooted in a lack of diversity among students and educators in PR programs (Waymer & Brown, 2018; Waymer & Taylor, 2022). This is likely the case because public relations is an applied discipline; it is an academic discipline with close ties to industry and one that leans heavily on industry connections to inform the curriculum and to prepare students for industry (see Commission on Public Relations Education, 2025); and as some scholars have put it: students cannot be what they cannot see (Brown et al., 2011); therefore, the lack of Black faculty, mentors, and guest speakers is a major contributing factor to the small number of Black individuals entering the profession (Brown et al., 2011; Waymer et al., 2015).

In short, there are systematic problems in public relations education. These problems include a lack of diverse racial/ethnic representation among the educator ranks—as indicated above—as well as a lack of underrepresented concepts, theories, people, and voices in learning—as indicated below. For more than three decades, scholars have been highlighting this issue (see Kern-Foxworth 1990). More contemporary work highlights the need for scholars and teachers to use frameworks such as Whiteness or Critical Race Theory (CRT) (see Pompper, 2005; Waymer, 2021) to help faculty and students engage with race, ethnicity, and broader diversity themes to enrich the academic environments by incorporating and interrogating these themes—connecting them with and grounding them within historical and social contexts (Holbert & Waymer, 2022; Waymer & Dyson, 2011).

This literature review and, by extension, this study are significant. Here is a brief summation and overview of the challenge that prompted this study. There is a dearth of Black public relations practitioners (see Wallington, 2020). Due to systemic flaws in retention and promotion practices, Black practitioners do not advance in the industry and, at times, leave the industry altogether (Bridgen & Zele, 2025; Taylor et al., 2025; Tindall, 2009a; Wallington, 2020). Black students have indicated that they desire more Black faculty (Brown et al., 2011). Having more Black faculty is one way for academic units to appear more attractive to potential Black undergraduate public relations majors (Waymer et al., 2025). The issue is compounded because in many states in the United States, accrediting bodies, such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (2018), require that faculty hold, at a minimum, a master's degree to be qualified to teach. Thus, in order to increase the number of Black faculty teaching at a university, then we must focus on increasing the number of Black students pursuing graduate degrees.

As a discipline, it is difficult to staff courses with more Black faculty, full-time or adjunct, if they do not possess a graduate degree. So, a critical question explored via the literature unearthed factors that impeded HBCU undergraduate students from pursuing graduate education in the discipline (Waymer & Taylor, 2022). This study explores the other side of the coin: when Black students decide to pursue graduate education, what were their lived experiences like?

We now turn to a review of Black graduate students' experiences in the academy writ large.

### **Black Graduate Students in the Academy: Challenges and Experiences**

To understand more fully the experiences of Black students in public relations, in general, and in graduate education, specifically, it is essential, first, to situate this discussion within the broader context of

Black graduate students' experiences across the academy. The Whiteness of the academy manifests not only in demographic composition but in epistemological assumptions, pedagogical approaches, and professional socialization processes that position Whiteness as the unmarked norm (Patton, 2016). Black graduate students often face pressure to assimilate into White academic culture while simultaneously being viewed as representative spokespersons for their entire race (Park & Bahia, 2022). This double bind is particularly pronounced for first-generation doctoral students, who navigate academia without the cultural capital and insider knowledge that their White, continuing-generation peers often take for granted (Posselt, 2018). We further explore the challenges and experiences, per the academic literature, of Black graduate students below.

Research consistently reveals that Black doctoral and master's students experience significant difficulties as they navigate predominantly White institutional spaces. This difficulty is experienced by Black students in a myriad of forms. Forms that are important but less critical include, but are not limited to, non-White graduate students frequently experiencing racial tokenization, frequently feeling the pressure to conduct deficit-focused research on their own communities, and often lamenting the systematic lack of diversity in curricula and faculty (Park & Bahia, 2022). The difficulties experienced by Black graduate students that take on more dire consequences include, but are not limited to, social isolation, microaggressions, hypervisibility and its related effects of being surveilled constantly, feelings of impostor's syndrome, and other indicators of not belonging to a social space (Merriweather et al., 2022; McGee et al., 2021; Miles et al., 2020; Wallace, 2022). These difficulties experienced are not insignificant—as research has found that due to their severity, these experiences have contributed to some Black students exhibiting symptoms of PTSD (Smith et al., 2007).

If there is a salve, or universal balm, if it were, to soothe some of these challenges Black graduate students encounter, it would be high-quality, effective mentorship—as mentorship emerges across disciplines as a critical protective factor. Studies show that sustained mentorship can reduce isolation for Black graduate students; furthermore, studies indicate that culturally responsive mentoring relationships—particularly those relationships with faculty who share racial identity or with faculty who demonstrate cultural humility—play a positive and significant role in Black graduate student persistence and success (Felder, 2010; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008). Yet access to such mentorship remains limited, given the severe underrepresentation of Black faculty. Black professors compose only about 6% of college faculty nationwide, while Black graduate students constitute about 11% of domestic graduate students, creating a mentorship gap that leaves many Black graduate students without same-race role models or advocates (Kim et al., 2024; Pew Research Center, 2019).

In sum, the marginalization of Black early-career scholars extends beyond graduate school into faculty positions, where those who successfully complete doctorates face continued barriers in hiring, tenure, and promotion (Griffin, 2020). This creates a self-perpetuating cycle: the scarcity of Black faculty limits mentorship for current Black graduate students, which in turn affects doctoral completion rates and the pipeline of future Black faculty (Posselt & Grodsky, 2017). The young, Black mentors themselves need mentorship, yet find themselves being thrust into the mentor role or feeling compelled to be THE mentor for the underrepresented before they themselves might be ready or equipped to do so (Waymer, 2012). This can lead to burnout or less-than-ideal mentorship of graduate students. This is a general problem across the academy and persists in the context of Black PR faculty and graduate students. We now shift our focus to relevant literature pertaining to Black graduate students in public relations.

### **Black Graduate Students in Public Relations**

This link between industry and academy underscores the importance of addressing diversity issues in graduate education. Specific to this study, it is important to note that Black professors remain severely underrepresented nationwide, comprising only about 6% of college faculty even as Black students make up roughly 14% of undergraduates (Pew Research Center, 2019). Given the pipeline concerns, understanding the status of Black students in PR graduate programs is essential.

Unfortunately, specific data on Black enrollment in PR master's programs are limited, as PR often falls under broader communications disciplines. Available statistics indicate that Black students remain a minority in graduate communications fields (Esters, 2017). Analysis of the available data indicates a concerning lack of Black students pursuing advanced PR degrees, which affects the talent entering the profession (Landis, 2019; Waymer & Taylor, 2022).

Most existing research on Black students in public relations education is almost exclusively conducted with undergraduate populations (e.g., Brown et al, 2011). For example, research by Brown et al (2019) found that underrepresented PR students (including Black/African American students) often reported a less positive experience compared to their White peers. These students were less likely to develop strong support networks, felt lower levels of comfort in peer interactions, and struggled with a sense of belonging in their programs. Such outcomes are linked to the racial makeup of PR classes – underrepresented students may be one of only a few people of color in a predominantly White cohort, which heightens feelings of isolation or tokenism (Brown et al, 2019). However, new evidence offers hope: one study found that, for those who do make it through and enter the PR field, race/ethnicity itself did not hinder early-career success among young professionals (Waymer & Brown, 2018).

Regardless of academic discipline, mentorship emerges as a recurring theme – having Black faculty or mentors, identity-based student associations, and inclusive peer communities can significantly bolster underrepresented students' confidence and persistence (Tsai et al., 2023). Even though most of the published research on Black students in public relations has been conducted with undergraduate populations, the findings remain relevant to this current study because they provide the impetus to explore whether similar sentiments are held by Black students who pursued graduate education in public relations. In short, Black graduate students, like their undergraduate counterparts, remain underrepresented in PR education, and they are likely to face distinct challenges once enrolled. As such, we suggest that to improve recruitment and retention of Black graduate students, researchers should highlight the importance of culturally responsive support systems. Broadening and developing further the pipeline will require both increasing the number of Black students who enroll in these programs and creating and fostering an environment where Black graduate students can thrive. This involves proactive mentorship, accessible role models, and a curriculum (e.g., Place & Vanc, 2016) that validates diverse perspectives.

Hence, we present the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How do former Black graduate students talk about their experiences as graduate students in public relations or applied communication graduate programs?

**RQ2:** Considering their experiences as Black graduate students, how do Black faculty talk about strategies for Black graduate public relations student recruitment and the impediments to successful Black graduate public relations student recruitment?

### **Methods**

The purpose of this study was to focus on the lived experiences of former Black graduate public relations students (all of whom were practitioners before full-time or part-time university teaching). To do this,

we conducted a total of nine in-depth interviews for this study. Consisting of five women and four men, all participants identified as African Americans. We asked participants specifically about their experiences in public relations graduate programs. The breadth of participant experience ranged from recent doctoral graduates to adjunct professors to academic deans to nonprofit leaders, all of whom had some industry experience prior to positions in academia. Each participant attended full-time graduate programs. Prior to graduate school, participants attended both predominantly White institutions and historically Black colleges and universities. Lastly, some participants reported being affiliated with professional organizations such as the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), the National Communication Association (NCA), and the International Communication Association (ICA).

We used Zoom (a cloud-based video conferencing platform) to conduct these interviews based on spatial alleviations and the transcribing capabilities afforded by the platform. To ensure rich responses, we developed a thorough and structured interview guide, allowing for open-ended responses to the questions. Questions presented in this study were divided into two categories: their graduate education and their faculty member experience as related to their encounters with Black graduate students. We asked follow-up questions when appropriate to further expand on the concepts presented when answering the initial question. We concluded the interviewing process once we reached saturation – redundancy of themes across participants (see Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Tracy, 2025).

While the sample size may appear small in comparison to other studies, repetition of themes and concepts is more important in qualitative research. Given the specific focus of this study (the lived experiences of Black graduate students in public relations programs), rich insights are more appropriate than attempting to make broader generalizations

(see Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Tracy, 2025). We recruited interview participants using the purposive sampling approach; specifically, we relied on the authors' personal and professional networks, as three of the authors identify as Black and have all attended full-time public relations graduate programs in years prior. In purposive sampling, the goal is not generalizability; rather, the goal is to gather rich, in-depth data from participants who can share the most valuable information, such as those with unique expertise or experiences. Purposive sampling allows for the targeted selection of "information-rich" cases to explore complex phenomena. We felt that this approach was best-suited given the small number of Black professors in the academy. Furthermore, we were careful not to recruit faculty who likely could serve later as blind peer reviewers on this project. As such, via our purposive sample, we recruited from across the United States tenured faculty at research institutions, persons who held graduate director roles in their academic departments, junior-level HBCU faculty, adjunct faculty, full-time lecturers, and current doctoral students. We hoped that these varied institutional types, geographical diversity, and varied faculty ranks represented would add to the richness of our responses.

The first author and second author are tenure-track faculty members at large, U.S. Carnegie-designated research institutions. The third and fourth authors are currently doctoral students at large U.S. Carnegie-designated research institutions. Although participants were recruited, their participation was completely voluntary, and participants were free to skip any question they were not comfortable answering. The recording times ranged from 43:17 to 1:09:10 for the nine interviews. Interviews were recorded via Zoom and stored in the cloud. The platform's transcription service was used, and all transcripts (and recordings) were reviewed for accuracy.

### **Interview Protocol**

There were three categories of questions asked during the interviews: graduate education, Black faculty member experience in PR graduate programs, and final thoughts. Under the category of graduate education, five questions were asked: (1) what inspired you to pursue your graduate education, (2) what challenges (if any) did you encounter as a Black graduate student in your graduate program, (3) what opportunities (if any) were afforded to you as a Black graduate student in PR and how did you learn of these opportunities, (4) what strategies are you using to create opportunities for current Black PR students, and (5) were you mentored as a graduate student and do you mentor graduate students.

All nine of the participants have taught public relations courses either currently or in the past. Therefore, a category that focused specifically on their experience as a Black faculty member in public relations related programs was included in the interview to gauge (1) their assessment on if they have seen an increase or decrease in Black students in their classrooms, (2) what they see as their role in recruiting and retaining Black graduate students in PR, (3) their relationship with Black graduate students in PR, (4) any strategies they could offer institutions of higher learning for recruiting Black graduate students in PR, and (5) what role they saw organizations such as AEJMC, NCA, and ICA playing in recruiting Black graduate students. Before the interview concluded, all participants were asked if they had any final thoughts related to the topic of their experiences as a Black graduate student and/or faculty member in public relations.

Data from the interviews were analyzed by both rewatching the saved Zoom recordings and reviewing the transcripts provided by the platform. Upon rewatching the videos and verifying the accuracy of the transcripts, all nine of the interviews were coded deductively in

response to the research questions at hand. The answers to the questions were explored and coded into themes. The coding process was complete once the list of themes proved to be repetitive and exhaustive (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Tracy, 2025). Due to the sensitive nature of sharing one's lived experiences, the identity of the participants is confidential, and pseudonyms are used throughout this study.

### **Findings/Results**

In this study, we sought to examine the lived experiences of Black practitioners and academics who matriculated through a public relations program of study, whether at the master's or doctoral level. To gather their accounts of their lived experiences, we asked participants about their graduate education experiences, their experiences as a Black graduate faculty member, and we provided them the opportunity to share any final thoughts as they pertained to the topic of graduate education in public relations. We developed the interview questions with the intent of being able to assess both the challenges and opportunities participants faced during their graduate education and to illuminate the ways in which their graduate education experiences manifest, or not, in their role as Black faculty members in a graduate program. Each of these categories produced its own themes. The results of these interviews are as follows. We present, first, the dominant themes in response to RQ1.

#### **Reasons Why Black Public Relations Graduates Pursued Graduate Education**

Responses for the question of what inspired participants to pursue graduate education yielded four key reasons: encouragement of others, lack of representation in the field, credibility for career advancement, and the underperforming economy.

##### ***Encouragement of Others***

Several of the participants noted that encouragement from others was a primary factor in their decision to pursue graduate study. Two

responses are highlighted as they best reflect the sentiment of other participants. Respondents Olivia and Johnathan note that the decision to get an advanced degree was motivated by others. While Johnathan, a communications leader for a nonprofit, highlighted his parents as being motivators because of their own advanced degrees, Olivia, a recent Ph.D. grad and current instructor, shared that it was her mentors who saw something in her that was the catalyst. She stated, “It was mostly just mentors, I guess, seeing the potential in me and, you know, I’m very appreciative of that. And that was why I decided to, you know, go to graduate school.”

This shows the important role that faculty advocates or mentors (or parents as graduate degree holders) can play in encouraging and, in some instances, convincing Black students to pursue graduate education. If Black undergraduates are eager to graduate and earn money to live (Waymer & Taylor, 2022), faculty advocates or mentors likely must play a pivotal role in helping them see the opportunities that graduate education affords them. Without such encouragement, they are likely not to pursue advanced degrees.

#### ***Lack of Representation in the Field (and its Associated Challenges)***

All respondents noted the lack of representation in graduate academic public relations spaces. Katrina (a recent Ph.D. graduate student with decades of industry experience) said her reasons for obtaining an advanced degree were twofold. First, she was looking to make a career change from journalism to public relations. She, however, believed that such a transition would be more difficult for her, being a Black woman; therefore, she sought out a master’s degree to get her the “credential” she needed to transition—something that she believed her White counterparts did not do if they wanted to transition. Second, she was dissatisfied with Black underrepresentation in academic spaces and figured she could be a

part of the solution. She lamented:

I wanted to transition into PR from being a journalist but couldn't [do so easily] like white counterparts. So I needed to go back and get a master's; only saw one Black professor in the J-school of undergrad and realized that the lack of representation in the space was a problem; I knew from my experiences that mentorship and that allyship, and that someone who knows your lived experiences and can talk to those with you are critical. And I thought through, you know, like, maybe if I had had someone that looked like me in my undergraduate experience that could talk me through what it was going to be like when I went into the industry.

Having a Black mentor or ally likely could have made a considerable difference in assuaging the challenges this participant encountered as a graduate student. Stated simply, the belief that it is easier for White persons in comparison to Black persons to transition into public relations without the degree in the discipline highlights, whether real or perceived, the barriers to entry for underrepresented persons in the field of public relations.

### ***Credibility for Career Advancement***

Two responses are highlighted to demonstrate this theme.

Cameron (a tenured professor) and Tia (an adjunct professor and industry professional) shared that their motivations for graduate education were to earn a credential and credibility to move up the ranks in their careers. In particular, Tia discussed the importance of advanced degrees for Black women by suggesting the following:

I feel like for women of color, particularly African American women, you having advanced degrees is a key way to credibility, and so I couldn't just rely on having a bachelor's degree. I had to keep going, in my opinion, to demonstrate to employers to my colleagues that I was competent enough to do the job, and so, whereas I do feel like a lot of my white counterparts can just rely

on one degree, I often feel like from my personal experience, I was not going to have that luxury. And so that was really a main motivator. I needed the credibility and so I feel like it's necessary for the earning potential. In order for me to be able to climb the ladder, or to be in a position to make the money that I feel like my intelligence can afford me, I needed those degrees behind my name.

Tia's response reflects a common perception in the Black community that Black individuals face: deep-seated, systemic barriers that require them to put in additional work and effort to achieve the same level of success as their White counterparts –that is the Black Tax (Hicks, 2021; White, 2015).

### ***Underperforming Economy***

The last theme we highlight that reflects why Black graduate students pursued graduate education is related to the underperforming economy during their time of completing their undergraduate degree. For Catherine, a business owner and online instructor, the economy was “trash” when she graduated, and it was hard to get a job in the industry.

Research has shown that “Black workers have historically been the first to have their employment terminated when times get tough for businesses” (Dean, 2025, para. 2). In these situations, higher education can be thought of as a safe investment during economic downturns. However, for Black individuals, it can be the differentiator needed to set them apart (see credibility for career advancement theme above).

### **Most Significant Challenges Encountered As a Black Graduate Student**

In our attempt to answer RQ1, we also highlight two dominant themes that represent the most significant challenges that Black graduate students encountered in their academic programs. In some form, these themes were present in the responses of all participants: being the only one and a lack of mentorship.

***Being the Only One***

Cameron, Johnathan, and Tia forcibly noted that being Black, sometimes the only one, in their programs became an obstacle for a number of reasons, including being on an island, not having community, or seeing representation. Cameron (a tenured professor) explained:

I think the master's program, like the biggest challenge, actually was being, like, the only black male in a program that was predominantly, almost exclusively, composed of white women. But you know, it kind of put me on an island. And part of it was also I was the only one that was doing a thesis, whereas the rest of them were doing a project....having a mentor who just kind of identified that, you know. It might be helpful to actually get a perspective from a black man that is, like, doing this now was a good first step.

Isolation, for Black students, is magnified in graduate school (Johnson-Bailey, 2008). And in this instance, Cameron's mentor played a pivotal role in connecting him with another Black man in public relations, at another university, who could serve as an additional mentor to help Cameron navigate the academic space.

***Lack of Mentorship***

A recurring theme from the literature review and from our findings is that mentorship (or the lack thereof) matters significantly. And as indicated above, even when addressing issues of being “the only one,” culturally responsive research can mitigate the negative feelings of isolation.

Donovan, Tia, and Johnathan recall there not being any opportunities for them in graduate school, with Donovan in particular noting that it was “kind of sink or swim” environment.

We asked the respondents to reflect on the support they offer or the opportunities they seek out or create for their Black PR students. What is revealing is that many respondents discussed their motivation for providing such opportunities as a manifestation of the fact that they longed for such experiences—but never received them—as students. In thinking

about creating opportunities, Donovan said the fact that he did not have any mentors became a motivator to create opportunities for his Black PR students. Julia and Cameron noted that while they create opportunities for all of their PR students, they specifically offer mentorship (both formally and informally) to their Black students, with Cameron adding that he brings students along to help with his research. Catherine stated that she provides opportunities for her Black PR graduate students to work with her company on various PR related projects so that they can gain experience as well as research opportunities. Regrettably, Tia (an adjunct professor and industry professional) reported that she just didn't have the time to create opportunities for students. As she noted:

I did not have the bandwidth to be able to even extend myself to help those students. That comes with so much invisible labor . . . we as faculty are trying to keep our head above water while trying to support these students. It's just not sustainable. So, I feel like as my tenure as a professor, I just didn't have the bandwidth to even help students in need, because I was just trying to help myself.

While not all participants taught graduate students, the ones who did shared that they do mentor their Black graduate students through sharing their experiences, creating research opportunities for them, and being a safe space. Surprisingly, one participant, Catherine (a business owner and online instructor) shared that she has stopped mentoring students as it relates to them seeking advanced degrees. She expressed the following:

I did but I have stopped in the academic space because I was mentoring a few students, and they got their master's, and some of them wanted to get their PhD. But some of them had experiences that were really, like, similar and because I was not at their university, I felt terrible for leading them into it. Like, the very thing that I know was detrimental for me emotionally, and so I stopped mentoring on that level. I'll mentor in life, and if you want to go in the industry, like, I'll help mentor there. But on the

graduate student, I mean, of course, like getting your master's yeah, for sure. I've helped a lot of students get their master's. But like going beyond that, I relinquish. You know, because if I'm there, it's one thing, but if I'm not there at the institution, then I just can't vouch for it.

As Smith et al. (2007) found, Black graduate students can exhibit symptoms of PTSD. Catherine, in her experiences, has taken the approach of shielding students from the trauma she experienced. So, she has stopped advising Black graduate students to pursue the Ph.D. in most instances.

### **Impediments of Successful Black Public Relations Graduate Student Recruitment —A Faculty Perspective**

In answering RQ2, none of the respondents stated that they saw an increase in the number of Black students pursuing graduate degrees in public relations. Instead, they reported either seeing a decrease in the number or flat enrollment as it pertains to the number of Black students interested in public relations-related graduate programs. Three participants all noted that they mostly see Black students who are interested in studying public relations in undergraduate classes, but unfortunately, that interest does not translate to interest in graduate programs. When asked directly what factors they thought are contributing to flat or declining interest of Black graduate students interested in pursuing public relations, participants articulated students being job-focused, lack of outreach and awareness about the field, changing communication landscape, and lack of diverse faculty representation as the key factors. Given space considerations, brief examples of each are provided.

#### ***Students Being Job-Focused***

Just as economic factors might contribute to Black students pursuing graduate degrees in public relations, when the economy is strong, Black students tend to be job focused as Catherine noted. Donovan, an academic administrator, suggested:

Most of the students who are studying PR, that I've seen are more like, "Can I get a job?" I know during the pandemic a lot of

students—because the economy was so bad—were, you know, going to you know, going into graduate school. Because they said, “Well, might as well.” And that's not necessarily a good motivation for pursuing it...But again, I just don't see that level of proactive outreach for our students of color.

***Lack of Outreach and Awareness of the Field.***

Oliva (a recent Ph.D. graduate), however, noted that there just might not be an awareness that graduate school is an option. Speaking from her own experience, she stated:

The option probably was just never mentioned to them. Like, I know for me personally, I did not think about graduate school until someone pointed out to me, so I did not even think it was an option for me, you know, and that may also be the case for them. I know that there's this preconceived idea or notion where you only go to graduate school if you can afford it, or if you're like an exceptionally smart student, and a professor tells you that, “Hey, you should do graduate school,” which I know now is not the case. But I'm still seeing with a lot of undergrad students who still feel that way. And then from what I've heard from one or two students, I don't believe they know that, you know, it's open to them, that they have the option to do it.

***Changing Communication Landscape***

“Tia” (an adjunct professor and industry professional) declared that the changing communication landscape, which involves economics, converging media, and the rise of influencer culture, can potentially explain the lack of interest by Black graduate students in public relations. She suggested:

I think it may just be because where I teach, I teach at a predominantly white institution that doesn't hide its political ideologies the best. And so I think that that may be a reason why I don't see the amount of students of color in my graduate program. And I also think societal forces. There's a bit of a negative

connotation when it comes to getting a communication degree or communication-related degree, such as PR, because we see so many influencers, so much citizen journalism, that people may think like, “Wow! The cost of college is going up. Do I really need to go to school to go do this thing that I see somebody doing on TikTok?” And PR is so specialized, and people often don’t know the difference between PR-related jobs activities versus marketing versus advertising, that the value of having a PR-related education is conflated with those other subjects that students may not even know that it’s worth pursuing.

#### ***Lack of Diverse Faculty Representation***

Cameron and Katrina mention that there is a lack of representation in the field, as public relations is still viewed as a “White woman’s industry,” and that there is a need for more proactive recruitment of students of color.

Because faculty members often play a role (whether formally or informally) in the recruitment of students, we asked the nine participants what they felt their role was in recruiting and retaining Black graduate public relations students. The responses were mixed, with some participants detailing what they currently do to recruit Black students into the discipline and others blatantly stating that they actively try to dissuade students from seeking out graduate school. For Julia, talking to students, sharing her experiences, and writing letters of recommendation for graduate school is how she sees herself as recruiting Black students to graduate programs. Similarly, Katrina finds that being hands-on and transparent, in addition to having conversations about her experiences and writing letters of recommendation, is her way of recruiting. For Olivia, she states that her role in recruiting and retaining Black graduate students in public relations is the representation that they need to see. For Olivia (a recent Ph.D. graduate):

It's representation, you know. If you can see them, you can be them, and I don't believe that they're exposed to enough black faculty. Who's telling them that "Yes, you can do this. Yes, you can go to grad school," you know. "Yes, you can work in PR. Someday, yes, you can get your master's. Yes, you can get your Ph.D." Representation is kind of like to put Black faculty in front of these students and let them know, like, even if you don't take these classes, I'm still here.

For Tia, she feels that her role in recruitment and retention is limited in her role as an adjunct. However, Cameron and Catherine shared similar views of not recruiting Black students to graduate programs. For Catherine, as indicated above, she noted that she recruits for master's level studies, but that she cannot vouch for the doctoral level because of her experiences as both a student and professor. Cameron (a tenured professor), on the other hand, feels that there might be an oversaturation of Ph.D. students in general. He stated, "I try to talk more students out of academia than I do like talking them into academia....I think we're oversaturated with doctoral, with doctoral students".

### **Strategies for Successful Black Public Relations Graduate Student Recruitment —A Faculty Perspective**

Aside from what they personally do to recruit and retain Black graduate students to public relations graduate programs, participants were also asked what other strategies they thought could be used. Recruiting from HBCUs and fixing the academic system were the two most salient themes. Having honest conversations and meeting students where they are on social media, for example (undergrads), talking to high school students about the field (meeting them where they are), or having conversations with professionals looking to leave the industry, were also mentioned as viable strategies to employ. But we highlight the two prevailing themes below.

### ***HBCU Recruitment***

Johnathan (a nonprofit director) shared:

I went to an HBCU. I was a communications major, and so, you know, there were classes full of Black people trying to make a career in public relations type activities...I would suggest recruiting from HBCUs...And I think, as an industry they're missing out. We're missing out on a lot of talent that could be, you know, accessed.

### ***Fixing the Academic System***

Participants noted that recruiting Black students is a wonderful goal, but unless the systemic issues in the academy are addressed, we would not be able to retain these students. According to Catherine (a business owner and online instructor):

I think we have begin to fix a systematic issue because we can recruit more of them, and they can come, and they can have bad experiences, and they cannot get jobs, even though they have degrees. It's an issue at the core...If the systematic issues are not fixed. they're just gonna bounce all around.

An aspect of fixing the system is getting academic organizations such as AEJMC, NCA, and ICA to make a united front, share resources, and "include recruitment and matters of people of color in their overall mission as opposed to just only focusing on these issues in subgroups like the Black Caucus" according to "Malcolm" (a teaching professor). At the very least, Tia and Olivia believe that these organizations should be facilitators of awareness in ways that increase the credibility of the field, showcase mentorship programs, and provide opportunities for Black graduate students. For Donovan, these organizations should form an alliance, especially during this time. He shared:

I think it's critically important. And frankly, I don't know what the NCA or ICA or others are doing particularly

during this this time of you know, intense pressure and persecution. But I mean, I firmly believe in kind of like what Dr. King said, "You know it's not where you stand in times of comfort." It's time it's where you stand in times of controversy and conflict. So where do we stand on that?

Cameron (a tenured professor) suggested fixing the system by going beyond grad school fairs and implementing an intense, immersive mentor program for potential Black graduate students. He noted:

Have like an academic workshop weekend, where you actually bring them to a campus or something like that, and they work with Black PR professors. I would actually be interested in doing things like that if you sat there and told me. All right. Look where we're gonna invite 20, you know, potential doctoral students to campus for a weekend and have them like pair up with a Black faculty member. And just basically like, you know, work for a weekend on a particular project or something like that. Yeah, I'll do it because I feel like that's a lot more beneficial than some of the more formalized like group things that we're doing now. I think that's a lot more beneficial than a grad school fair will be.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Black undergraduate public relations students have indicated that they desire more Black public relations faculty (Brown et al., 2011). In many states in the United States, accrediting bodies such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (2018) require that faculty hold, at a minimum, a master's degree to be qualified to teach. As a discipline, it is challenging to staff courses with Black faculty, full-time or adjunct, if they do not possess a graduate degree. So, while prior studies have examined factors that might impede HBCU undergraduates from pursuing graduate education (Waymer & Taylor, 2022), this study asks individuals to reflect on their lived experiences

as former Black graduate students in public relations. We believe that understanding the lived experiences of Black students in public relations graduate programs is essential for recruiting and retaining them.

As such, this exploratory study is guided by two research questions:

**RQ1:** How do former Black graduate students talk about their experiences as graduate students in public relations or applied communication graduate programs?

**RQ2:** Considering their experiences as Black graduate students, how do Black faculty talk about both strategies for Black graduate public relations student recruitment and the impediments to successful Black graduate public relations student recruitment?

We articulated three broad takeaways from the findings. First, Black undergraduate students really are unsure about what a graduate degree in public relations is or what such a degree can do for them professionally, so pursuing a graduate degree felt a bit foreign to them. Second, a trusted mentor or advocate identifying Black undergraduates as promising graduate students can be one of the largest influencers in their decision to pursue graduate study. Such an action mattered greatly to our participants. Third, our findings are consistent with the broader scholarly literature that highlights the challenges that Black graduate students encounter in academic spaces, regardless of the discipline they are pursuing. These challenges include feelings of isolation, a lack of culturally responsive mentorship, feelings of hypervisibility, and the feeling of being expected to represent their race in research and in other avenues. Black graduate students in general have exhibited symptoms of PTSD, and some scholars have referred to this phenomenon as racial battle fatigue (Ragland Woods et. al, 2021). Some of our participants spoke of their experiences using language that is akin to a trauma-like response.

Our findings indicate that the experience of Black students in public relations graduate programs has been bittersweet. All our

participants earned their graduate degrees and currently teach college students in some capacity. While they are all grateful for the opportunity to attain graduate degrees and stand in the gap to be the representation they wish they would have had, the opportunity does not come without its challenges of loneliness, systemic hurdles, and invisible labor.

These participants had the unique perspective of being former Black graduate students and currently serving as faculty members; therefore, they can speak to the challenges facing contemporary Black public relations graduate students. Participants attributed the current lack of an increase of Black graduate students interested in public relations as a field of study in part to the lack of Black representation in both the industry and within the faculty teaching them. However, what is noteworthy is that after these faculty were “shown” by a mentor the possibilities and potential promise of what the future could hold for a Black public relations graduate degree holder, they jumped into a program—motivated to pursue the advanced degree (so that they can be present and mentor others like them). Yet, it was in those experiences as graduate students and then subsequently as faculty that they realized that the academy was lonely, and they barely had the capacity to survive the academy themselves. So, they experienced a double bind of reliving their loneliness that they experienced as graduate students, and those negative feelings were compounded when they also recognized they had limited ability as a faculty member to adequately address the needs of those students in need. They, too, as faculty suffered, as they shouldered the invisible labor that accompanies being “the only one”—in this case, a Black public relations faculty member—in these academic spaces. Sadly, because of these experiences, some participants have decided to discourage Black public relations students from pursuing advanced degrees, as a means of shielding and protecting them from loneliness and trauma-like experiences they themselves endured as graduate students.

Nearly 20 years ago, Natalie Tindall (2009b) wrote an article

titled “The Double Bind of Race and Gender: Understanding the Roles and Perceptions of Black Female Public Relations Faculty.” In this study, she found that the intersecting aspects of race and gender deeply affect the lives of Black women professors who teach in the public relations discipline. Black women faculty, according to Tindall (2009b), must traverse a difficult road as they navigate the responsibilities of teaching, service, mentorship, and in some instances scholarship. Our findings indicate that, while progress has been made in this area since Tindall’s study, the industry and academy are moving at leaden, dilatory speeds in addressing the issues that Black faculty, in general, and Black women faculty in the field of public relations encounter routinely.

Despite these obstacles and challenges, we believe that recruiting and retaining Black public relations graduate students is a worthwhile and noble pursuit. However, participants via their responses overwhelmingly indicated that even though there is a need for more Black people in the public relations field, in both academia and industry, they believe that positive systematic changes in the academic environment are needed to occur before active recruiting of more Black graduate students can take place. Specially, creating an environment where students feel a sense of belonging would be beneficial to their success in the program. Student groups, mentorship, community, and representation are all ways that we can begin to ensure that Black students thrive in our programs of study.

With that thought from the participants in mind, we provide at least one possible direction forward. To successfully recruit and retain Black graduate students to public relations programs, universities and national academic organizations alike should ensure that these universities have community-building mechanisms in place. For example, just like faculty cluster hiring initiatives have been touted as a way to increase faculty diversity at universities (Flaherty, 2015), public relations academic units across the country interested in increasing diversity in their graduate

programs should partner with national projects such as the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program or the Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) Compact for Faculty Diversity Initiative.

The intent of the McNair Scholars Program, a federally funded program, is to encourage students from underrepresented or low-income backgrounds to pursue a Ph.D. The program provides support through academic advising, mentorship, research opportunities, and financial assistance. In a similar vein, the Compact for Faculty Diversity is part of a national initiative designed to produce more underrepresented Ph.D. graduates; the intent is to encourage those graduates to pursue faculty positions. Public relations programs in academic/athletic conferences such as the Big Ten or SEC could each recruit approximately two Black graduate students into their programs via McNair or SREB. To build community, they could rotate hosting the students on their campuses for mentoring and professional development, and they could schedule routine virtual meetings for the students as a part of a comprehensive effort to provide a supportive academic environment for these students. Not every Big Ten or SEC university would have a Black public relations faculty member; however, the conferences as a whole can lean on the willing faculty who can serve as mentors to a cohort of Black graduate students. In this way, the mentorship load can be shared among Black faculty, and this can also serve as a means for them to establish community and mitigate feelings of isolation. As indicated above, national-level funding and longstanding programs with proven success exist—public relations as a discipline should find innovative ways to partner with these initiatives to do a better job of recruiting and retaining Black graduate students.

In conclusion, understanding cultural differences means understanding the different needs and challenges that one might face. As the common idiom goes, doing the same things repeatedly but expecting different results is insanity. If we truly want to diversify public relations

with more Black graduate students, we can no longer continue to recruit Black students into an atmosphere where they feel they do not belong, where they don't see themselves, and where they don't have mentors. We must create a space and atmosphere where these students can thrive and want to stay. If they stay and complete, at minimum, the master's degree, they can be the instructor of record for the next great Black public relations pioneer (Heinrich, 2015) whether they be an industry icon or an academic wiz.

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