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Issue: Increasing the number of African Americans in undergraduate and graduate geography programs

Introduction

Geographies of broadening participation include well-organized efforts to increase the presence of under-represented groups at all education levels. Geography is a diverse discipline in terms of research interests and career options. Any effort to broaden participation requires a multi-faceted approach that includes experts in physical geography, human geography and techniques (GIS, etc.). The purpose of this briefing paper is three-fold. First, I critically engage with the theoretical and everyday concept of whiteness and how it may contribute to the under-representation of African Americans in geography. Second, I contend that the geographies of broadening participation can benefit from a continued re-examination of one of the basic tenets of geography, the relationship between humans and the environment. I conclude with examples of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) where geography is already being done, but in some cases under a different name.

Whiteness in Geography as a Discipline

Geography in the United States is often, whether consciously or subconsciously, coded as a white discipline. The purpose of this first section is to examine how we might utilize some of the existing literature on “whiteness” to consider the ways in which geography might be perceived by African Americans and other people of color. Whiteness privileges white bodies by assuming and promoting a set of values as normative values that all people should adopt. People of color can never enjoy the full privileges of whiteness, even if they adopt certain cultural norms (Slocum 2007; Kobayashi and Peake 2000; Lipsitz 1995). Slocum (2007) argues that whiteness cannot be reduced to racism or privilege, often operating as an exclusionary space, sometimes without the knowledge of the white people that comprise the space (Slocum 2007:526). Whiteness is so dominant that its values are conflated with American culture, rendering whiteness invisible to some, yet always present and powerful (Lipsitz 1995).

A critical engagement with literature on whiteness helps us to understand how it might operate in geography (and other disciplines) in multiple ways. Whiteness is even present in the way that some African American undergraduate students perceive the word geography. For example, “Geography of the African American Experience” is a title that seemingly has the potential to pique students’ interests. I hold a joint appointment with African American studies, which should contribute to interests from a diversity of students. Needless to say, there are seven enthusiastic and bright students in the class, who along with myself, wonder why the number is not higher. I gave a written exercise on the first day of class

where I asked students what they hoped to gain from the course. One student ended her response by saying that she wished that there were more students in the course to gain a greater diversity of opinions. She speculated that had the word “geography” not been in the title, there would have been a higher enrollment. In her opinion, students regardless of color, do not see the connection between race and geography.

The student’s sentiments are reflected in my experiences teaching both Human and Cultural Geography at two major universities. A critical examination of the connection between race and place seems outside of the realm of how geography is perceived by many students. This perception could contribute to the lack of African American’s in the discipline. This student along with the others all echoed the same sentiment. They wish that they had known sooner how diverse geography is; many would have considered either a major or minor. One possible solution is for instructors to bring in supplemental information reflecting the diversity of topics in geography. I would argue that this information is crucial not just in specialty classes that highlight race and ethnicity, but also in introductory level courses. This inclusion shows that geography as a discipline embraces a multitude of interests. I, along with my students, propose a more detailed qualitative study of undergraduate students to gain more insight into attitudes and perceptions about geography.

Human/Environment Interactions

The relationship between humans and their environment is one of the major tenets of geography. In efforts to broaden participation of the discipline, we might think through ways to broaden how this concept is defined and utilized in geographic research. Recent scholarship offers an increasingly nuanced understanding of the relationships between African Americans and the environment, finding that this relationship is directly influenced by past and present inequalities (McCutcheon 2011; Chesney 2007; Ferrell 2007; Densu 2007; Bandele 2007; Hargrove and Zabawa 2007; Hill 2007; Pennick et.al 2007; Smith 2007; Washington 2007; Finney 2006; Woods 1998).

Geographer Carolyn Finney (2006) argues that we must expand the definition of environmentalism beyond a “save the earth” approach to include as environmental actors people like her father who tended the land of a white family for over fifty years. Such a conceptual shift, she argues, will result in more African Americans becoming involved in activities associated with the mainstream environmental movement, while the movement will grow into one that is more broadly focused. Finney (2006) rejects the categorization of all African American environmental participation as environmental justice activism, and challenges the mainstream environmental movement to open its doors to more people of color. Expanding the definition of the mainstream environmental movement is one such way to broaden participation in geography. We might further look at efforts by scholars, some of whom are not geographers, to explore the relationship between African Americans and the land.

The 2007 Black Environmental Thought Conference, hosted by Tuskegee University, represented an attempt to disentangle the roots and present proliferation of black land principles and practices. Conference presenters examined the roots of black environmental thought, tracing it back to indigenous African cultures (Densu 2007; Bandele 2007). Others highlighted great thinkers, like George Washington Carver, who have contributed to environmental ethics and sustainable agricultural practices. For example Chesney's (2007) "Environmental Heritage Model" takes into account West African traditions, the Middle Passage and slavery, and landownership in a model that also includes the land principles of Aldo Leopold and David Thoreau. In this admittedly complicated model, he is expanding the definition of the environment. Taking care not to essentialize minority groups, it is important to take into account different understandings of the term environment, eventually broadening the definition. A signal that this is a ripe area of research is the Upcoming Black Environmental Thought Conference II hosted by the University of Minnesota in October 2012.

Geography in Unlikely (or Likely) Spaces

Broadening participation in geography requires that the discipline look to minority serving colleges, including HBCU's, to assess the work already being done that may or may not fall under the umbrella of geography. According to the United States Department of Education (2009), there are 105 HBCU's. Out of these universities, there are 14 established geography programs. There are an additional 3 geography programs at predominately black institutions (AAG 2011). Tennessee State University, for example, has a geography major along with a Geographic Information Sciences Laboratory, where students conduct research and also work with and provide services to the community (GIS Laboratory Program 2006). Chicago State (2009-2012) offers both a B.A. and an M.A. (with or without GIS concentration), and is involved in a number of community projects including the Neighborhood Assistance Center. These institutions continue to build their programs and form bonds with the community.

However, there are HBCU's that are doing geography without hosting full fledged programs, but instead have standalone geographers, geography classes, or geography-related classes. These institutions are crucial in efforts to broaden participation either through eventually building undergraduate and graduate programs in geography or sending undergraduates from other majors into graduate geography programs. These institutions include Tuskegee University, which has a well known College of Agriculture, Environment and Nutrition Sciences (Tuskegee University 2012). Claflin University has a standalone geographer who hopes to build a program and is currently teaching a number of geography courses. Spelman College (2004) has a two-semester required course entitled African Diaspora and the World (ADW), where students engage with material highlighting the movement and experiences of people of African descent (with a focus on women) across the diaspora. Broadening participation

requires that geographers look outside of courses labeled geography and beyond those in Departments of Geography to see and learn from what is being done in these courses. Geography might be a natural next step for students coming from some of these universities.

Conclusion

My goal in this briefing paper was to discuss perceptions of the discipline, and how these perceptions may lead to a lack of representation among some underrepresented groups. I also argue that we must continue to expand definitions of important geographic concepts including the relationship between humans and their environment. Finally, I give examples of work already being done at HBCU's. Geographies of broadening participation is an exciting opportunity to use geographic principles to increase the representation of underrepresented groups in the discipline and also contribute more broadly to the sciences of broadening participation.

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