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### “How Did We Get Here? Exploring Students of Color’s Journeys at Trinity College”

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**“How Did We Get Here? Exploring Students  
of Color’s Journeys at Trinity College”**

Candace Simpson

Senior Research Project

Educational Studies

December 19, 2011

In order to better understand how to make sustainable and positive social change at Trinity College, this project uses the Posse scholarship as a lens to explore how students of color experience the College. Focus groups are used to capitalize on an existing strong group dynamic, and individual interviews are included to show the themes of microaggressions and perceived gaze across all class years. Students of color report a heightened sense of awareness based on their ethnic and socioeconomic background. Their paths to Trinity are often challenged by their peers, and therefore feel immense pressure to take on leadership roles during their time at Trinity. This research aims to find a way to more effectively improve campus climate for all students.

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**“How Did We Get Here? Exploring Students of Color’s Journeys at Trinity  
College”**

**Introduction**

On the night of Mardi Gras 2011, I woke up to find “Black ppl suck” written on the whiteboard of my door. As one of the two Black students on the floor, I felt specifically targeted. When I spoke with Campus Safety and Residential Life, I had an image in of who the culprit could have been. Shamefully, I assumed for a while that a White person had scrawled on my door. After I had time to reflect, I realized that I was projecting nearly three years of bottled-up anger onto the situation. Truly, anyone could have written those words. I wondered why after three years of working hard both in and out of the classroom I was still uncomfortable. I did not feel like Trinity belonged to me. Nor did I feel that I belonged at Trinity.

It is in this spirit, along with similar conversations with other members of the Trinity Community, that this project is born. The discourse of “belonging” and “creating a community” has become exceptionally popular during my time at Trinity. I focus on the Posse Scholarship as a lens to explore the experiences of urban students of color at Trinity.

My research questions are: What are the most prominent pathways for students of color to attend Trinity? How do students of color perceive the reputation of scholarships and other admissions programs at Trinity? How do students of color perceive their own

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belonging at Trinity? What is their perception of campus climate, and what is their role in creating a supportive environment for all students?

In the spring of 2011, a Latino male student was told to get off of Trinity's campus by a White student, and was also called a "nigger". Adding to a host of other incidents, including the scrawling of the word "nigger" and the phrase "black ppl (people) suck" on the White boards of Black students, this case incited a student-organized rally which led to the updating of the student harassment policy. This update made explicit the consequences for being found in violation of the harassment policy, which could include expulsion from the College.

Certainly, each time the President or a Dean sent out an e-mail to charge College students to behave in a manner more "becoming of a Trinity student", there was a collective sigh among students of color<sup>1</sup>. It is important to explore how students of color are making sense of Trinity's history and present to gain insight on how the College may move forward in creating and sustaining better plans for campus climate improvement.

Students are in a position to critique their environment in a way that campus administrators cannot. They are perfect consultants for this project because they live the Trinity Experience all day and every day. They may be more likely to draw connections between admissions policies and an unsafe campus climate. Students will also be an unparalleled resource because they are not bound to Trinity by employment. They cannot lose their jobs by speaking candidly about the College, as staff members might face that dilemma. Because Trinity's limited endowment makes the prospect of becoming a need-

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Senior, Dec 2011.

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blind institution difficult, it is important to hear the voices of students of color who would not be at Trinity without financial support. Trinity College, as a need-aware institution, should be held responsible for the ways they recruit students. In the Admissions Office one morning, a staff member asked me casually “Are you Posse? Or Questbridge? Or are you just regular?”<sup>2</sup> These assumptions of normalcy trickle from administrative policies and flow to the micro level interactions that students experience on a daily basis.

Nationally, affirmative action initiatives face criticism, as legal scholars and politicians argue that affirmative action initiatives inherently provide the “greatest threat” to American merit based operations, and that these programs are far from a “fair”, “colorblind” America<sup>3</sup>. In a Wall Street Journal Opinion Piece entitled “Diversity and the Myth of White Privilege”, author James Webb argues that while there is a “debt” to be paid to Black American citizens, government programs specifically aimed at “people of color” are unfair and should end<sup>4</sup>. Wrapped in the discourse of colorblind equality, Webb and others continue to miss the relevance of the legacy of institutionalized racism. Diluting the conversation to a situation of “the less qualified and Black candidate wins over the more qualified White candidate”, such arguments do not account for the structural reasons in which Whites and Blacks have statistically disproportional rates of success. De facto segregation, which leads to a stark contrast in school quality, is a part of the inheritance that all Americans must live with.

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<sup>2</sup> Field notes 10.28.11

<sup>3</sup> Lind, M. (2010, August 24).

<sup>4</sup> Webb, J. (2010, July 22).

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Enter Posse. The Posse Foundation is a non-profit national organization that was started because its founder, Deborah Bial, heard a student say that he would have stayed enrolled at his college if he had his “posse” with him. This scholarship recruits public high school seniors and trains them in cohorts called “Posses”. The Posse Foundation sends students from urban public high schools to top colleges and universities around the country. With the philosophy that students do better with a support network, Posse finds that their graduates have a 90% graduation rate, which is much higher than the national average<sup>5</sup>. With a commitment to diversity of experience, the Posse Foundation recruits from urban public high schools, with a few exceptions for Catholic high schools on occasion. Because Posse recruits so heavily from urban public high schools, and these districts tend to be majority-minority schools, Posses tend to have Black, Latino, Asian, and immigrant scholars.

Locally, Trinity has had a legacy of Posse scholar leaders. Our last Student Body President and our current Vice President of Multicultural Affairs are both Posse scholars, and there are many other Posse scholars in other leadership positions around campus. Trinity’s multicultural first-year mentoring initiative, Promoting Respect for Inclusive Diversity in Education, or PRIDE, frequently has several Posse scholars on staff.

There are currently seven Posse cohorts on campus, four hailing from New York and three from Chicago. The 2012-2013 academic year will be the first one in which there are eight Posses at Trinity. As the program continues to expand, and as more initiatives to recruit students of color become popular, the College has a duty to ensure

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<sup>5</sup> Posse Foundation. (2011). *About Posse*.

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that each Voice is heard. For the student of color, how might Trinity better serve *all* of its students, given its unique context and history?

### **Thesis**

Students of color report a heightened sense of self-awareness based on their ethnic and socioeconomic background. Living under a perceived gaze, they feel pressured to perform well in the academic sphere, to take on leadership roles on campus, and to serve as ambassadors between various social groups. They also feel that their journey to Trinity may not be as validated as their White counterparts, and therefore find leadership roles on campus to be rewarding experiences.

### **Literature review**

There is an old proverb that says, “We stand on the shoulders of our ancestors to get a better view”. In order to get a “better view” of my own research, I intend to stand on the shoulders of previous scholars who have done similar research to situate my own. Scholars have found that there is indeed a conflict worth exploring when students of color attend schools that are predominantly White.

Daniel Solórzano, Miguel Ceja, and Tara Yosso find define in their work “Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students” the concept of microaggressions. A departure from the popular perception of racism <sup>6</sup>as “gross and obvious”, microaggressions are “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously”(Solorózano et al., 2000). Racism, for these authors, must first be defined as a phenomenon where one group believes it is superior and also has

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<sup>6</sup> Megan, K. Trinity College: Racist Confrontation Prompts Rally.

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power to act on racist feelings. Most importantly, they note that racism affect multiple ethnic and racial groups, which frees the conversation about race from the typical Black-White binary. Citing microaggressions within academic and social spaces, Solórzano et al. find that the effects of these racial microaggressions are indeed real and worth exploring. Primarily, these effects include the “resulting negative racial climate and African American students’ struggles with feelings of self doubt and frustration as well as isolation”(Solórzano et al., 2000). Amidst these feelings, African American students must also navigate a way to balance their social and academic priorities.

In response to the “tiring”, “unfair”, and “discouraging” roles that Black students traditionally hold on college campuses, they create “counter-spaces”(Solórzano et al., 2000). These counter-spaces are those in which “deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive racial climate can be established and maintained”(Solórzano et al., 2000). Such counter-spaces include Black Student Unions, offices that serve the multicultural community, and historically Black fraternities and sororities. In this way, Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso find that African American students forge safe and meaningful spaces for themselves and others on college campuses. Examples of counter-spaces at Trinity would include the cultural houses, the Black Student Union Imani, the PRIDE program, and others.

Arguing that the educational implications of their minority status at predominantly White universities are indeed major factors in their time in school, the authors argue that a student’s “success and persistence in the face of a racial discrimination [should be] considered as a factor in the undergraduate, professional

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school, and graduate admissions process” (Solorózano et al., 2000). The authors also cite the idea of “stereotype threat”, which is a “social psychological predicament that can arise from widely known negative stereotypes about one’s group”(Steele and Aronson, 1995). Steele and Aronson find that when students of color are aware that their racial identity is taken into consideration, they do considerably worse on standardized tests. This effect can be applied to the classroom dynamic, as students of color at Trinity represent a collegiate minority. While the authors focus on the consequences of attending a predominantly White college, I focus on the ways colleges can take responsibility for the negative experiences of their students, and make strides in incorporating them in meaningful ways.

Using the University of Michigan as a lens, James Anderson argues that affirmative action cases and programs should acknowledge the legacy of racism at the University. If these programs are merely to create a “multicultural university”, they have only done half of the job. They should take place in the spirit of attempting to address and right previous wrongs. If the University fails to do so, history may repeat itself. Racist theme parties and noose hangings are then expected (Anderson, 2007). Likewise, students of color should not be recruited Trinity to make the College appear diverse and trendy. Instead, students of color should be recruited because they have unique experiences that may grant them access to places that others may not. They have the power to serve as change agents in their own communities, in our nation, and in the world.

Mariana Souto-Manning and Nichole Ray go to great lengths to make their own experiences as Black and Brown women in higher education heard. They “analyze [their]

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tellings... a way to make sense of our experiences”(Souto-Manning and Ray, 2007).

Using “narrative tellings”, the authors give voice to their own struggles as Black and Latina women in a predominantly White graduate school (Souto-Manning and Ray, 2007). In doing so, the authors seek to do more than pontificate vaguely. For the authors, research is a mirror of one’s own experience. It was a way to make a personal experience relevant and valid. For my own research, I anticipate that my findings will encounter some criticism. Because I represent the very demographic that I study, I must first explicitly state this position of view. However, because I am a Posse scholar and a female student of color, I am in a unique position to both study and be studied. Throughout my research process, I go through great lengths to ensure that I maintain a professional distance while appreciating the rapport I have with my peers. Many of the stories that they shared with me would have remained secrets if they perceived me to be an outsider. I share a similarity with Souto-Manning and Ray because we intend to bring light to our lived experiences for the purpose of those in similar situations. In this way, studying one’s self and analyzing one’s own “tellings” is a liberating and productive experience.

They also investigate the layering of race, gender, and class realities within their university’s discourse. While their research stands to speak volumes about the struggles that Black and Brown women endure at graduate schools in the Southeast, they are not wholly applicable to the experiences of all students of color in undergraduate schools in the Northeast. The very breed of Northeastern racism is subtle and polite, frequently experienced in the form of microaggressions. The largest misconception and impediment to equality is the notion that all racism takes place in the South. For Solorózano, Ceja,

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and Yosso, it is important to recognize the subtle, polite, and academic monster of Northeastern racism. As a President's Fellow, President Jones invited a group of seniors to discuss the issue of retention on campus. Wrapped in this research project, I stood up to argue that a multicultural course requirement would create meaningful bonds between unlikely friends. Citing evidence and personal anecdotes, I felt warm and proud that my peers had received my ideas so kindly. As I walked back to my room, a White student approached me and said, "You know, you speak so well". Immediately, I crashed from pride to confusion. I wondered, "What did she mean by that?" "Would she have said that to me if I were White?" and "How do I respond?" as I stood lost. Zooming out, I realized that she could not have meant to offend, hoped that she meant the best, and politely said "thank you". Though well intended and polite, small interactions can have an adverse affect on students of color and their self-esteem.

The authors mark being "outsiders within" as they find themselves in academic settings. While they have been invited "into places where the dominant group is assembled [we] remain outsiders because [we] are still invisible and have no voice when dialogue commences"(Souto-Manning and Ray, 2007). Students of color are indeed "outsiders within" at Trinity. There are a host of so-called appropriate channels to air ones grievances about Trinity's climate. The Campus Climate Committee, various Common Hour Lectures, and Student Government Association all serve as channels that are supposed to give a forum to all student opinions. Unfortunately, many students do not voice their concerns in these official forums for a host of reasons. In my own experience, I have found forums like the Campus Climate Committee to stand as shadows of action.

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It is hard to find the efficacy and power of the Campus Climate Committee when they do not have concrete authority in bringing about sustainable change. Instead, Trinity students may devote their time to activities that bring more apparent worthwhile change.

### **Methodology**

I conducted two focus groups during Posse meetings with an entire Posse unit, and a third with four other available Posse members. In their work on campus racial climate, Solorózano et al. cite focus groups as an effective means to encourage the generation of reflective responses because they “provide an interpretation of the phenomena from the view of the participants” and an opportunity to “observe the collective interaction of the participants”(Solorózano et al., 2000). Especially given that Posse students operate in cohorts, focus groups capitalize on an already existing group dynamic. Each focus group lasted between forty minutes and ninety minutes. I also conducted individual interviews with one sophomore, junior, and senior Posse scholar in one-on-one interviews that lasted between twenty and 40 minutes. These interviews were recorded and transcribed.

I also interviewed both a senior Admissions Associate and a senior Multicultural Affairs Associate. These informants were asked to give their expert opinions on their role at Trinity College, and insight on the initiatives their Offices implement. These interviews were also recorded and transcribed. All participants were given a consent form, and during transcription any names were given pseudonyms. Any identifiable information was not transcribed.

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To ground these stories in a larger context, I consulted reports from the Office of Institutional Planning. These reports included survey data on students' perceived satisfaction at Trinity College in contrast with comparable schools, as well as figures on reported experiences of harassment or discrimination.

### **Context**

Trinity College is a place where contradictions come to life. Located in the diverse capital of Hartford, it educates approximately 2,200 students per year. 6% of students report Black, Latino, and Asian backgrounds respectively<sup>7</sup>. The tug between the Hartford's majority-White campus and a majority-minority setting of Hartford presents a unique environment for racial tensions to reveal themselves. In the fall of 2011, Trinity experienced a series of muggings. In all of the cases, Trinity's neighbors from Hartford were the suspects and Trinity students were victims. Adding a strain to an already weak relationship between Trinity and the larger Hartford community, the College added a more visible Campus Safety and Hartford Police Department presence to the campus<sup>i</sup>. The College also responded with an assuring e-mail that the addition of a gate would not be considered in the plans for securing the College. That students (and even parents) found this solution to be a worthwhile endeavor is a mark of how students view "the other". Rather than reflecting on personal responsibility for Trinity students or societal factors that make crimes of desperation prevalent, there was a desire to keep Hartford's urban blight at a distance. This viewpoint keeps the larger community in tension with the College, and ignores the cases in which Trinity students are on the other side of the law

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<sup>7</sup> "All Traditional Undergraduates: Selected Demographic Characteristics." *Office of Institutional Research*. Trinity College, 6 Sept. 2011. Web. 7 Oct. 2011

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as defendants. It is also important to recognize the town-gown dynamic between Trinity and Hartford as the College admits more students who may be perceived as “locals”.

In the spring of 2011, Trinity was plagued with a flow of racist, sexist, and homophobic incidents that captured the College’s attention. In the weeks that followed, students wondered about the Mather debate. At a town hall meeting, students felt that it was worth noting that “Black students sit here and White students sit there”. Was the preference of sitting with like-minded (and perhaps like-skinned) students a cause of campus climate tensions? Or was it a symptom of a larger issue? Could we find a way to build meaningful relationships with one another so that Mather Dining Hall could reflect a well-integrated campus?

President Jones’ “To Reweave the Helices: Trinity’s DNA by our Two-Hundredth Birthday” calls for the college to come to a point of action. Calling for an expulsion of fraternity and sorority houses on campus, an expectation for students to go abroad and engage in internships, and the addition of a pub to Trinity’s campus, President Jones makes very little, if any, mentions of race relations. Moreover, President Jones echoes the sentiments of many students that there is little to do in Hartford. In this way, President Jones seeks to create social spaces for Trinity College students because there is no “off-campus environment accessible to our students”<sup>8</sup>. Reflecting the Trinity community’s distance from the larger Hartford area, it is to be expected that students do not see value in the cultural offerings of the nearby Broad and Park streets. In doing so, Trinity creates bubbles of social spaces for Trinity students, which in turn reaffirms the

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<sup>8</sup>Jones, J. (2011). To Reweave the Helices: Trinity’s DNA by our Two- Hundredth Birthday. Trinity College, Hartford CT.

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idea that Hartford, and its citizens, are not worth building meaningful relationships with outside of community service initiatives.

Given that Trinity experienced an intense spring semester in 2011, and first year students were greeted with racial epithets on their door tags during the Fall Orientation of 2011, there should be much more attention paid to the ways that students of color experience Trinity. A campus that is welcoming and embracing of “the least of these”, in Biblical terms, is certainly one that can find a special place for all students.

### **Analysis and Interpretation of Data**

#### *Blending In Hartford, Standing out at Trinity*

During my first focus group, I asked questions that would require students to think reflectively about their time at Trinity thus far. When asked how comfortable they feel walking down Broad Street, students generally agreed that they felt that the surrounding neighborhood was much like home (Focus Groups 1,2, and 3). A Latina student, Reina, expressed that Trinity students “definitely stand out” when they leave campus and enter the larger Hartford community. Arthur, a first year Latino male student challenged the idea of what a Trinity student might look like.

*“They [Trinity students and the larger Hartford community] can have a perception that Trinity is just overly White, so when they see a person of color they could think “this is someone walking down in the hood”...For me, I remember the first time I went to Stowe, I took a call when I was outside, and I was like “Oh, how am I going to get back in”? I forgot that I could use my ID for any building, so I was there for 5 minutes and a group of people come in. All of them were White and one Black guy, and they opened the thing, and I stand up to go, and the White people look at me like “Oh, where are you trying to go?” “I’m trying to go party” and then one of them starts pressing me for no reason, like*

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*"Oh yea, you're a local, what's the name of the president?" and I'm like " it's Jim Jones", and then the guy looks at me like "You're a liar, you just googled that up" ...The assumption was that I was a local, because of the way I look."*

While students of color might have an easier time “blending in” in the Black and Latino communities of Hartford, they also have a harder time convincing White Trinity students that they attend Trinity. Though far from “obvious, the subtle, cumulative miniassault is the substance of today’s racism” (Solorózano et al., 2000). As he told this story, his Posse brothers and sisters nodded in agreement. That Arthur and his friends have had such an experience is a call to create more meaningful ways for Trinity students to socialize and appreciate one another. Feeling a sense of un-belonging, students may feel more inclined to prove they have “earned their spot” at Trinity (Focus Groups 1,2, and 3).

### *Living Under the Microscope*

Students were asked to reflect on their experience at Trinity by “think[ing] of a time when your race or race relations became particularly apparent to you at Trinity”.

Reina recalled,

*“I actually really thought about it [my race] walking into Mather... My friends made it into a joke and say like "Blanco o negro" which means what side did you want to sit in for the day? Did you want to sit on the Black side or did you want to sit on the White side? And they would feel kind of weird to walk to the right side of Mather and find a table and sit there because it was like, I felt like it was all eyes on you for a second”*

My research does have limitations in that I have not had the opportunity to meet with groups of White students and ask them similar questions. However, it does seem that students of color navigate a daily dilemma with their identity at Trinity. While this

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experience to many may seem mundane or trivial, this is an internal struggle with which students of color must battle each day.

Students were presented with a prompt “How comfortable are you speaking with a friend about your college application process” and “How comfortable are you speaking with a new acquaintance about your college application process”. During the activity, many more students expressed that they were less likely to be comfortable talking with a new acquaintance about their college application process, citing that the process was “very personal”(Focus Group 2). Cynthia elaborated on the apprehension to share details of her college application process:

*“I don't like talking about my process in general because being an Asian, if I tell them I was president of my student body for two years and my GPA was a 4.0 it will be like "Oh so you're that kind of Asian". I'll fulfill the stereotype and I don't want people to see me like that. I like to separate my academic. I don't want to be seen as that girl who's part of this organization. I want to be seen as a person”*

Cynthia felt that her place at Trinity was contested by the larger community, and wanted to be seen as an individual. Her inclusion of the phrases “that girl” or “that kind of Asian” elucidates the fact that she has experienced such assumptions during her time here. If not, she certainly perceives these issues to exist, which is concerning in itself.

Cynthia echoed the sentiments of a senior Posse scholar who is co-chair of a multicultural student organization and a three-time P.R.I.D.E. Leader. David felt a pressure to go “out of [his] way to be involved with different people and get involved with different things”(Student Interview 3). In the first focus group, a first year student wondered, “Why do you have to be the one to make people change?”(Focus Group 1). In this way, the burden of creating and sustaining a campus community is placed on

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students of color to break out of their comfort zones, but it is unclear whether White students are expected to do the same.

*Using What You've Got to Get What You Want*

Throughout all of my interviews with Posse students, amidst all the diversity within each Posse, and paying respect to each unique group's dynamic, one thing is constant. Collectively, Posse scholars cited a laundry list of leadership activities on campus, including "co-chair", "president", "resident assistant", "P.R.I.D.E. Leader", "student government", "first year representative", and others. They represented many parts of campus, and as a whole, painted a diverse picture of Trinity's campus.

Due to Posse's growing popularity and prestige, and of course due to the full-tuition scholarship, there is a large incentive for urban public high school seniors to apply to colleges through programs like Posse. As such, they feel pressured to deal with microaggressions and more obvious racial incidents. Abdo mentioned that he was appreciative of the scholarship. Compelled to keep pushing at Trinity and "take it with a grain of salt", he viewed the struggles at Trinity as "another stepping stone"(Focus Group 1). In this way, students of color must weigh the opportunity of attending a top college for a reduced financial cost and the emotional cost of attendance. Forced to deal with a double-edged sword of responsibility and opportunity, students of color must remember that their place at Trinity is serious and important.

Becoming involved in campus life is a healthy expression of the College experience. However, *why* they chose to become involved in leadership is still

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questionable. Shantell, a first year student from New York felt that “it’s up to me to speak up as a Black girl to show them that we have the capabilities, we are smart”(Focus Group 1). Operating under this pressure, some students of color felt they had to “change somebody’s views”, while others found that it was more effective to “lead by example”(Focus Group 1). Still, it is unclear whether the dominant culture at Trinity operates with the same set of expectations.

In the Office of Institutional Planning’s report “Students’ Experiences of Diversity<sup>9</sup> at Trinity”, James Hughes and Kent Smith find that

*“Fewer positive experience and more negative experiences encourage intra-ethnic socializing and ethnic organization, and students who spend more time in ethnic organizations may socialize less with white students, and thereby have fewer positive cross-ethnic experiences”*

Such a relationship is worthy of exploration and raises an important question. Do students of color feel alienated from the community at large, and therefore seek multicultural counter-spaces as a haven, or are they too busy in multicultural organizations that they do not have the time, or interest, to participate in the community at large? I argue the former. When asked to express their expectations about Trinity before their first day of their first year, many students felt that they were simply looking for “the college experience” and anticipated there would be struggles typical of any college student. However, when they arrive to Trinity, something changes. Something charges discomfort and changes the feeling from being simply a college phenomenon to a more racialized one. Because they do express anxiety typical of all college students

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<sup>9</sup> Hughes, J. et al. (2003). *Students’ Experiences of Diversity at Trinity*. Hartford: Office of Institutional Planning

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before they arrive at Trinity, it is fair to say that the “fewer positive experiences” encourage their participation in ethnic organizations.

Lucy, a Black sophomore Scholar, made a distinction between Posse and Trinity. While she agreed that she wanted a Posse unit support system and appreciated the full-tuition scholarship, she did not sign up for what Posse was intended to do at Trinity. She wanted to be “that leader” in the school, but she asked her Posse one piercing question: “Is that why the school wants you?”(Focus Group 2). Lucy felt that Trinity had recruited her to fill a quota and create change that the College would be proud of. That Posse scholars, and other students of color, feel that they are being used to bridge gaps and create change is worth exploring. It should not be the responsibility of students, especially the most vulnerable, to take on such large responsibilities.

Another student, Max, expressed serious disappointment in the fact that students of color were expected to respond to the incidents of spring 2011’s racist barrage:

*“We’re here to study. I remember last year when we did the rally in response to the racial slurs, the only thing I’m thinking is... it’s 12 o’clock at night. We’re all stirred up. But everybody has final exams the next day, the next day, and the next day. So the one racial slur that one person said affected damn near the whole population. Those were hours we could have been spending studying, so the fact that we even have to respond to something like that is an issue... It’s not going to change overnight because Dean Whoever makes a rule. This is stuff that they believe. So the fact that we’re here and have to deal with that is too uncomfortable, and it isn’t something we should have to worry about”*

The unfortunate timing of the rally presented a dilemma for many students. While it was clear that many students wanted to support a friend who had endured a traumatic experience, and that many students wanted to sound a resounding voice, they were expected to do so in addition to their studies. Such is the dilemma of leadership.

### **Recommendations**

Trinity is a place like any other in that social norms are produced and reproduced. If they are not organic, they can be challenged. There are ways to combat the pervasive ways in which students of color experience microaggressions and the stereotype threat at Trinity.

Firstly, Trinity should explore ways to recruit minority students outside of programs like Posse. To clarify, programs like Posse do a wonderful job in sending Trinity potential leaders. The intent of this paper is not to call for a dismantling of Posse or other similar programs. However, Trinity does lean heavily on community-based organizations to supply quality applicants of color. In fact, compared to their White peers, students of color are more likely to be identified through a community-based organization (Interview with Senior Admissions Associate). Though there is a sense of prestige that accompanies the Posse Scholarship, Posse scholars cite that their peers devalue their college application process and feel that they were recruited and accepted only to fill a quota (Focus Groups 1 and 2). With the issue of campus climate in mind, students of color feel that their path to Trinity may not be as validated as their peers, and some White students may not perceive these students to truly belong at Trinity. It begs the question: How can Trinity students build meaningful relationships with their peers if they do not perceive them to be deserving of this experience?

Moreover, the mere visibility of the Posse Scholarship makes it an easy target for those who do not agree with its mission. Posse scholars, then, become spectacles and scapegoats for campus tensions. Because they are sent to colleges in cohorts, they are

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automatically viewed with special attention, and are often blamed for exacerbating the “Mather Hall” phenomenon.

The street indeed runs both ways. Abdo, a first year student, also argued that he was more deserving of the Trinity experience because he had the “grades” to earn admission. He also felt that “some of [his] classmates paid to get in”(Focus Group 1). In the American context, ownership is contingent upon a financial transaction. Stripped of their ability to literally buy their education, the concept of merit becomes an important one. If Trinity wants to alleviate racial and class-based tensions on campus, it must find a way to become need-blind. A limited endowment is an impediment to the opportunity to create access to Trinity’s experience for those students who cannot pay, and therefore, the College should incorporate the goal of educational equality into their donation solicitation efforts.

Secondly, Trinity should explore the feasibility of adding a multicultural course requirement. Currently, students are expected to fulfill distribution requirements including humanities, natural sciences, numerical and symbolic reasoning, and global engagement. Strangely enough, the global engagement requirement can be fulfilled with two semesters of a cultural dance class. In theory, a student at Trinity could take African Dance and Indian Dance, for a half credit each, and graduate with the pleasure in knowing that he or she had become “globally engaged”. That such a possibility exists is cause for concern. It is also a point of potential. Max shared a point about his social circles at Trinity:

*“I go to places where I know the people, and half of the relationships that I have with people on campus who are not necessarily where I’m from or look like me,*

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*those relationships come from classrooms, they come from programs, they come from different activities on campus during the day when everybody becomes sort of equal. When we're all equal under the professor... that's when I try to get to know different people so that we can have different conversations"*

In this way, Max gets to the cause of the disease of social cliques at Trinity. The cause for concern does not come from the mere fact that students socialize in racialized patterns in the Mather Dining hall. This phenomenon is a symptom of a larger issue, not the disease itself. The true cause of campus climate troubles are the very few opportunities for students from all walks of life to engage in meaningful relationships with one another. Tethered by a grade under a professor who helps to "equalize" the classroom dynamic, requiring students to take a course that focuses on a multicultural topic would provide an opportunity to bring a myriad of ideas to a forum. Max felt, and others nodded in agreement, that the only safe place for building relationships with different people was inside of the classroom. Trinity has a responsibility to encourage healthy dialogue as an institution of higher learning. Given that many student organizations are struggling with attendance rates, it is important to make exceptional use of the one space that all students must enter before graduating. The classroom has potential to serve as a site for challenging social norms and ideas of parochialism. It is up to Trinity as an institution to embrace that potential.

Thirdly, I suggest that Trinity support, financially and in spirit, the Office of Multicultural Affairs and the programs it funds. The most visible program that the Office funds is the PRIDE program, which seeks to acquaint historically underrepresented students with the inner workings of Trinity and Hartford during "Welcome Weekend". PRIDE leaders lead tours, facilitate workshops and activities, and act as big brothers and

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sisters for incoming first years during the first few days before the First Year Orientation program. They are also responsible for hosting programs throughout the year to provide a safe space for all students. Ultimately, the Office of Multicultural Affairs is charged with a three-pronged responsibility. First, they seek to provide counter-spaces for students who represent a minority population at Trinity. Places like the Umoja House and La Eracra, both spaces which house multicultural organizations, were frequently cited as the safest places on campus<sup>10</sup>. Second, the groups help to teach leaders of these organizations how to lead groups effectively, which provides an opportunity to enhance one's resume. And third, the programs that run under the Office of Multicultural Affairs are a golden opportunity to provide a campus-wide experience. In the past, the Office has brought Sonia Sanchez, Cornel West, and Marc Lamont Hill to speak at Trinity. While these thinkers are often speak on with Black and Brown issues, their ideas can be expanded to a larger demographic. A college that is welcoming to multicultural interests is one that is welcoming for all. Such a campus is one that stays true to our mission of "critical thinking, free the mind of parochialism and prejudice, and prepare students to lead examined lives that are personally satisfying, civically responsible, and socially useful"<sup>11</sup>.

Trinity College has a responsibility to ensure that their most vulnerable students have a safe and meaningful experience at Trinity. Ultimately, Trinity must explore its own role in creating sustainable social change. How accessible is Trinity College for the typical public high school student? In our charge to educate students, Trinity must also

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<sup>10</sup> Focus group 1, 2, and 3, Interview 2.

<sup>11</sup> Trinity College. (2011). *Mission*.

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remember that no institution exists in isolation. All institutions come with a political and social context. Trinity must continue to support students of color, financially and emotionally, because they will have the power to effect pockets of change in their own community. To embrace the student of color's experience, and to see that experience as a worthwhile point of exploration, is to take the most important step in making Trinity College a safer place for all students.

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## Appendix

### *Attached is the Focus Group Script that I used for all focus groups.*

Hello Guys! Thanks for participating in this project. Here's what I plan to do in a short few sentences: I want to know how students of color end up at Trinity, and I'd like to know what their experience is once they get here. For this reason, my meeting with you is so special! If you see me referring to this paper, it is because I'm trying to make sure that I keep all focus groups consistent.

I'm handing out informed consent forms. One copy is for you, and one is for me.

We will be doing two activities, followed by a debrief. If you have any questions or comments, raise your hand so that I can come closer to you with the recorder.

Ok! Here we go!

Concentric circles → this is an activity that I'm borrowing from Posse. Anyone remember what concentric circles are? Right. This inner circle represents complete comfort. Anywhere else in the room is directly related to how comfortable or uncomfortable you are in that context. For example, I would stand the closest to the circle if the question is "how comfortable are you eating a hamburger with bleu cheese". I would stand furthest if the question was "How comfortable are you with dancing salsa on stage alone". Here go some questions.

1. How comfortable are you walking down your block back home?
2. How comfortable are you walking down Vernon street on a Friday night?
3. How comfortable are you going to Mather with a bunch of friends?
4. How comfortable are you going to Mather alone?
5. How comfortable are you sitting at a table of people you don't know at Mather?
6. How comfortable are you talking with a close friend about your college application process?
7. How comfortable are you at an Umoja party?
8. How comfortable are you at Psi U?
9. How comfortable are you at Pike?

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10. How comfortable are you at Cleo?
11. How comfortable are you at Sigma Nu?
12. How comfortable are you walking down Broad street?
13. How comfortable are you speaking up in class?
14. How comfortable are you speaking up in your Posse meeting?
15. How comfortable are you talking with a new acquaintance about your college application process?
16. How comfortable are you talking about sex?
17. How comfortable are you talking about race with someone like yourself?  
Someone different?
18. How comfortable are you talking to non-Posse students about Posse?
19. Overall, how comfortable are you at Trinity?

De-brief. So folks, what was that like? What are some questions that resonated with you? What do you mean when you talk about comfort? What stands in the way of your level of Comfort at Trinity?

#### Human Barometer

This is yet another activity I borrowed from Posse. Five of you will move according to each question. The rest will observe and answer questions. Everyone is free to answer questions. I will need 5 volunteers. You are the barometer.

1. Think of a time when your race or race relations became particularly apparent to you at Trinity. If you felt a positive feeling, move to the right. If you felt a negative feeling, move to the left. The middle is neutral.
2. Think of a time when your status as a Posse scholar became particularly apparent to you at Trinity. If you felt a positive feeling, move to the right. If you felt a negative feeling, move to the left. The middle is neutral.

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3. Think of the moment when you first applied to Trinity. Does the experience you expected then match the experience you are having now? If you agree, move to the right. If you disagree, move to the left. The middle is neutral.
4. Imagine you are given a time machine. You can go back one full year to give your one-year younger self some advice. Would you encourage Younger You to do what you did? If so, move to the right. Would you encourage Younger You to do something else? If so, move to the left. The middle is neutral.
5. Think about your experience thus far at Trinity. Take into account all extra curricular, classes, lunches in Mather, parties, and otherwise. Think about every facet of your Trinity Experience. Move according to this statement "I belong at Trinity College". If you agree, move to the right. If you disagree move to the left. The middle is neutral.

Debrief→ So what was that like? What are some things that stuck out to you? Are there any lasting comments or questions?

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