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Trinity in Color: A Commentary on Minority Retention

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Introduction:

As a student of color at Trinity College, I have a lot of personal investment in the

issues of retention and how comfortable students of color feel on campus. In the past 5

years at Trinity College, there have been several initiatives started to handle the issue of

the low retention rates for students of color, the most recent of which is the Retention

Task Force, which was set up "to explore the factors that contribute to students of color

graduating at lower and slower rates than white students."[1] Before delving into any true

discussion on the issue of low retention rates for students of color, there are some factors

that need to be considered dealing with the atmosphere of Trinity College. Social

environment or atmosphere of a college campus is just one of the many complex factors

that contribute to a healthy college experience. "Robert Arne and Albert Yates note that

the single most important factor in successful recruitment and retention of minority

students is the institutional atmosphere."[2] Many students of color feel that they have

earned the right to be at Trinity College and have been prepared for the academic rigors

of college life by their high schools, whether they were public or private, but socially and

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[1] "Retention Initiatives," http://www.trincoll.edu/pub/student_life/retention_initiatives.html
[2] Carol Olson, Recruiting and Retaining Minority Graduate Students: A Systems Perspective
Journal of Negro Education, Vol. 57, No. 1. (Winter, 1988), 33.

mentally many of these same students feel isolated and unwelcome by the environment of the college. These feelings about the college can have a negative effect on the retention rates of students of color because they can lead to academic problems or cause students to feel isolated to the point that they leave the school.

The issue of students, whether Black, White, Asian, Hispanic or Native-American, feeling comfortable at their college can have a profound affect on learning, leaving "students suffering academically because of the way they experience their college environment."[3] Environment in this context is not based solely on the surroundings of the students (i.e. "quiet halls" or substance-free living arrangements[4]), but the social interactions that happen with peers in and outside of the classroom. In 1999, the Retention Task Force, a group of administrators, put out a report on success and satisfaction at Trinity College stating that they were trying "to meet the challenge presented by our graduation statistics [of raising retention rates for students of color] and to ensure that each Trinity student not only achieves success academically, but is joyful about being a member of our community."[5]

In 1999 the Retention Task Force set up several goals and a timetable of when things were to have been done. One of their goals was to within three years "eliminate significant racial/ethnic disparities in rated satisfaction with the social and cultural

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[3] Leonard A. Valverde and Louis A. Castenell, Jr., *The Multicultural Campus: Strategies for Transforming Higher Education* (AltaMira Press, 1998) 99.
[4] Retention Task Force, *Success and Satisfaction at Trinity: A Report of the Retention Task Force* (Trinity College, 1999) 9.
[5] Ibid. 1.

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climate at Trinity."[6] Another of their goals was to within two years "significantly reduce

the perceived frequency of racial conflict on campus and significantly improve respect

for people of color."[7] These two goals along with many of the other goals were to have

been achieved by this academic year, but in light of the incidents that have been taking

place on campus recently with racial profiling by Hartford police and Trinity students

alike, it is safe to say that these goals have not been met.

Methodology:

Surveys were given to 20 students of color (i.e. African-American, Hispanic, and

Asian-American) at Trinity College to qualitatively understand if the atmosphere of the

college could be a cause for low retention rates. Students were approached based on the

way they looked (i.e. skin color and/or other "distinguishing" characteristics).

Approaching students in different community/social gathering areas on campus (i.e. The

Cave, Mather or the cultural houses) based on their looks, brings with it a certain level of

bias because I am judging people solely on looks, but this was the only way to survey

students of color without becoming very intrusive by using list broken down by race or

ethnicity and making phone calls, sending emails or dropping by dorm rooms.

Native-American students were left out of the study because their overall number

of 10 students enrolled since 1996 at Trinity is very low.[8] According to Kent Smith,

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[6] Retention Task Force, *Success and Satisfaction at Trinity: A Report of the Retention Task Force* (Trinity College, 1999) 12.
[7] Ibid. 12.
[8] Information courtesy of Trinity College Admissions Office Preliminary Statistics

Director of Institutional Research & Planning, Native-American students make up such a small percentage of the overall number of students of color on campus that their retention rates don't have any significant impact on the data the school compiles. There were 8 African-American, 6 Hispanic (Latino/a) and 6 Asian-American students surveyed over a period of two months. First-year students (freshmen) were also excluded from the study because at the start of the study first-year students would not have been able to answer the questions with the depth needed for this qualitative research, but at this point in the semester/year many first-year students of color have very strong opinions about Trinity College and issues dealing with students of color on campus. If, by chance, a student who was asked to do a survey turned out to be a first-year student and/or did not want to give their race/ethnicity, they would have been excluded from the study.

Both male and female students of color were surveyed. There were a total of 11 female students of color surveyed (5 African-American, 3 Hispanic and 3 Asian-American) and 9 males (3 African-American, 3 Hispanic and 3 Asian-American). All students surveyed attended public (10), private (9) or parochial (1) high schools before coming to Trinity College. Although all three types of schools that are "feeders" for Trinity College are represented in the study, originally parochial schools were left out of question number one on the survey (see appendix 1). The students surveyed were asked what type of high school they attended and if they felt that their high school prepared them for college in order to establish whether certain types of "feeder" schools (i.e. public, private or parochial) yielded a higher retention rate for students of color.

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All students surveyed signed consent forms before beginning the survey and were given the option to withdraw their information at any time. All information is kept confidential by coding each student's information using race/ethnicity, gender and a number assigned to them randomly (1-20). African-American students were coded with the letter B, Asian-American students with the letter A and Hispanic students with the letter L. Male students of color were coded with the letter M and female students of color were coded with the letter F. Also once the paper is turned in all information will be destroyed to protect the identity of all participates.

All information given in the surveys will be cross-referencing with the statistics on retention for students of color at Trinity College provided by Kent Smith and the Retention Task Force. This data, which is already being used to discuss the issue of retention as it relates to students of color, will be used in conjunction with the surveys. None of the current data shows any connection between the atmosphere of Trinity College and the effect that atmosphere has on students of color. When the Retention Task Force tackled the question of retention and why students leave prior to graduation they came up with three factors: academics, social/cultural, and financial. They even went so far as to say that "the reasons (factors) often complement one another,"[9] but never went on to explain these connections. Their data neglects to incorporate the thoughts of the students. That data also didn't take into consideration how "entering a relatively closed, intense environment in which issues of race, religion, gender, sexual

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[9] Retention Task Force, *Success and Satisfaction at Trinity: A Report of the Retention Task Force* (Trinity College, 1999) 2.

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orientation, and class have high visibility has forced many of these students [of color] to face some of the conflicts and contradictions in American society."[10] This research allows students of color to give some kind of insight into the way that they experience Trinity College.

<u>Interpretation and Analysis of Primary Source Evidence:</u>

Several of the students of color that participated in this study said that when they came into Trinity College they had high hopes for their college experience. These students are among those students of color that Myrtis Powell would say came into Trinity College "well prepared, enthusiastic, and self-directed, only to become dispirited, discouraged, and angry."[11] Asian Female 17 (AF17) said that when she "first arrived at Trinity... [she] was basically idealistic and optimistic about just college in general," but earlier on in the survey she made it very clear that she did not feel as if she belongs here at Trinity. The question asked of her was a simply, but very loaded question; "Do you feel like you belong here?" She stated that she does "feel as if [she has] the right to be here," but "in terms of...being someone who is in a welcome environment, no." AF17's experience at Trinity College was a lot different than any of the other students that were interviewed because she was suppose to graduate in 2001, but was put on academic

[10] Ruth Sidel, *Battling Bias: The Struggle for Identity and Community on College Campuses* (Viking 1994) 203.
[11] Leonard A. Valverde and Louis A. Castenell, Jr., *The Multicultural Campus: Strategies for Transforming Higher Education* (AltaMira Press, 1998) 99.

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withdrawal after a combination of harassment and threats on her life from White students

on campus and situations happening within her family.

Her case is not average of the students surveyed, but does lend itself to

understanding how some students of color may experience the atmosphere of Trinity.

AF17 was not put on required academic withdrawal because she was not able to handle

the academic rigor of Trinity College, but because of the way she experienced her college

environment.[12] When asked question number 8 on the survey (see appendix 1), AF17

began to talk about why students in general don't do well here and about herself in

particular saying:

> It's obvious that these students are intelligent you can't say that these students
> aren't intelligent they would not have been accepted to this college in the first
> place if they weren't intelligent or they weren't able to make it. So obviously
> there's something going on here [at Trinity] that says that something is
> responsible for their grade dropping so drastically or for their effort just stopping
> so much. Like when I was in high school I never got a grade lower than an 85
> and that was the lowest grade and when I went to Drew and Princeton I got As
> and Bs, but then you come back here and its like 'what is it about this
> environment and what is it about this place that effects students so much that their
> desire to learn is effected because it's not even about grades anymore its their
> desire to learn, their desire to participate?'

The admissions office of Trinity College prides itself on the fact that the average SAT

score for this year's incoming freshmen class was 1280 with half of the students scoring

between 1180 and 1350,[13] which means that Trinity accepts good students who,

according to the numbers, would perform well in the classroom. Unfortunately, just

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[12] Leonard A. Valverde and Louis A. Castenell, Jr., *The Multicultural Campus: Strategies for Transforming Higher Education* (AltaMira Press, 1998) 99.
[13] Mary Whalen, Senior Associate Director of Admissions, Group Information Session Outline for Student Admissions Associates. 2002

bringing these students in isn't enough. Myrtis Powell says that "retention involves keeping students enrolled to completion of their objectives" not just recruiting and admitting them.[14] AF17 and many of the other students surveyed realize that the environment at Trinity College does not provide a welcoming and nurturing climate.

Not all of the students surveyed felt as if they didn't belong here at Trinity College, in fact, 45 percent of the students surveyed do feel that they belong here. These students' answers varied a lot more than those students who do not feel welcome at Trinity, but two students LM20 and AM6 did speak to the issue of lack of diversity on campus. Black Female 1 (BF1) said that she "went to elementary and middle and high schools that were majority White so Trinity [wasn't] any different," which shows that she, unlike some other students of color, was not coming into a wholly new environment racially and socially. Another student, Asian Female 13 (AF13) said "I think I belong here because of educational opportunities." She also said "I think I can help the school out and bring out its potential." Although AF13 feels that she belongs here, when asked questions number 9 (see appendix 1) she voiced her dissatisfaction with the atmosphere at Trinity when she said "people should respect each other more and listen."

Preparation for college academics is one factor that is often looked to in order to understand why students of color are not doing well. This led the Retention Task Force to try to implement programs to strengthen the academics of students of color. One of the many projects to be put into place necessitated the establishment of "retention teams

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[14] Leonard A. Valverde and Louis A. Castenell, Jr., *The Multicultural Campus: Strategies for Transforming Higher Education* (AltaMira Press, 1998) 99.

for students of color who are on academic probation or at-risk of probation to provide

intensive, personalized, cultural- and gender-sensitive academic advising."[15] With the

exception of this project very few of the projects even mention students of color and

could be used as blanket projects for the campus in general such as the project to

"provide improved, coordinated wellness programming; hire a health educator."[16]

Although a very interesting project, this and many of the other "academic objectives"

don't take into consideration the "unique stresses experienced by minority students that

heighten feelings of not belonging and interfere with minority students' effective

integration into the university community (for example, experiences with racism,

questions about their right to be on campus)."[17]

     70 percent of the students surveyed said that they felt that their high schools

prepared them from college in someway. Four students out of that 70 percent, as can be

seen in the graph below, said that they felt somewhat prepared for college. One of those

students that fell into the category of "somewhat" was Black Male 8 (BM8). BM8 felt

that he had been prepared for college academically, but "socially [his] school didn't

prepare [him] for the level of racism that [he had] experienced." As can be seen in the

graph below, 60% of the students surveyed felt as if their high schools had prepared them

adequately for the rigors of college academia.

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[15] Retention Task Force, *Success and Satisfaction at Trinity: A Report of the Retention Task Force* (Trinity College, 1999) 8.

[16] Ibid. 9.

[17] Brian D. Smedley; Hector F. Myers; Shelly P. Harrell Minority-Status Stresses and the College Adjustment of Ethnic Minority Freshmen. *Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 64, No. 4. (Jul. - Aug., 1993), 435.

Do you feel that your school prepared you for college?
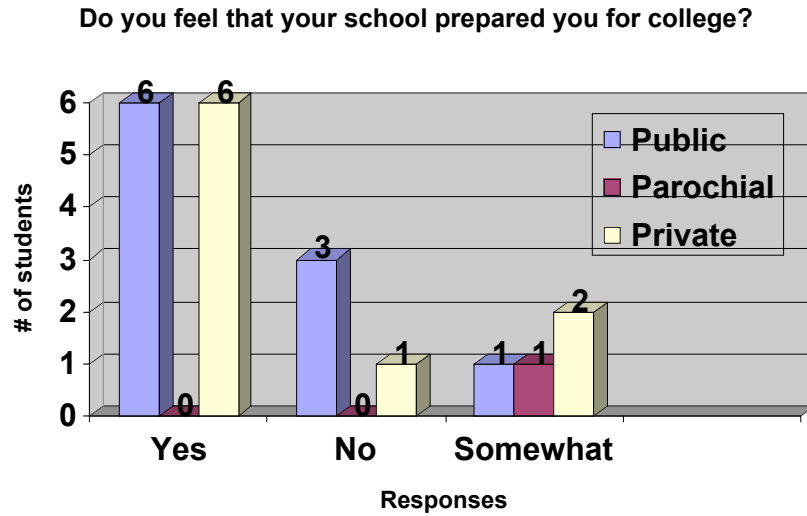
Although the sample of students of color surveyed for this project is very small, their responses to the aforementioned question are indicative of the types of students Trinity accepts. In 1979, Donald H. Smith study Black students at seven predominantly white colleges and he "observed that 'poor academic preparation in secondary schools appear[ed] to be the main barrier to access to higher education,"[18] but that would not seem to be the case at Trinity in light of the numbers that the admissions office gives as average grades for incoming students. The admissions office prides itself on the fact that the students who are accepted here are good students selected out of a very competitive pool. This year alone there were over 5,400 applicants and only 500 spots in the class of 2006.[19]

Even with all that said about the academic readiness of students of color for college, there still seems to be something keeping students of college from graduating. If

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[18] Meyer Weinberg, *The Search for Quality Integrated Education: Policy and Research on Minority Students in School and College* (Greenwood Press 1983) 286.
[19] Information courtesy of Trinity College Admissions Office Preliminary Statistics

the students of color who enter Trinity College are in this same competitive applicant

pool as their white counterparts, why were "75 students of color required to withdraw

from fall 1996 through spring 1999?"[20] BM2 said that his high school did prepare him

for college, but when asked questions number 3 (see appendix 1) he said "I perform well

in the right environment and Trinity's not the right environment." Myrtis Powell says,

"Many [students of color] come from segregated schools where they are the majority

[and the] overwhelming 'whiteness' may cause a kind of culture shock."[21] Depending on

the student's background Trinity could be a real culture shock. LF15 felt that her school

prepared her for college, but her high school was very diverse and coming to Trinity was

a culture shock, but she adapted. All students do not adapt as LF15 did, for instance, BF4

"wanted to transfer the first week" and BM2 said "To be honest, I hated it here because it

was missing cultural diversity. But for several of the students Trinity turned out to be

exactly like their high schools. These students had little or no problem getting adjusted to

the school because they had been in "lost in this sea of whiteness"[22] before. AM3 said

"Trinity is similar to my high school except with more freedom."

Interestingly, 75 percent of the students surveyed mentioned the environment of

Trinity College in a negative light. BF10, a senior, said "I don't feel like the environment

wants me here." BF4, a junior, give the impression very dishearten by the fact that the

majority of the campus has not reached out to her even though she has tried to reach out

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[20] Retention Task Force, *Success and Satisfaction at Trinity: A Report of the Retention Task Force* (Trinity College, 1999) 4.

[21] Leonard A. Valverde and Louis A. Castenell, Jr., *The Multicultural Campus: Strategies for Transforming Higher Education* (AltaMira Press, 1998) 110.

[22] Ibid 106.

to them. Asian Male 12 left Trinity College shortly after completing the survey for

unknown reason (most likely voluntary withdrawal), but in his interview he said

"sometimes I feel like I am very different than some of the people I have been in contact

with at Trinity." When asked questions number 8 (see appendix 1), this senior said that

the only reason he is still at Trinity is because it's "too late to do anything about it."

Question number 8 also brought to light another issue, which may play into the low

retention rates of students of color, money. During the survey 9 out of the 20 students

specifically mentioned that the only reason they are still here is due to the financial aid

that the school provides not because they are happy, but simply because of the money

that the school gives.

Financial Aid Office says that "48% of the students here receive some form of

financial aid," but the average package is only about 25 thousand dollars, which is not

much at a school were the tuition is over 37 thousand dollars. C. Ottinger "believes that

socioeconomic status affects persistence when ability is taken into account."[23] Being of a

different socioeconomic status can have a negative effect on students especially when

they have to work twice as hard as their more wealth counterparts. AF17 said:

> If you're a student of color on campus most of the time you're not just going to
> school here you're going to school and working two sometimes three
> jobs…you're working to pay back your loans and in some cases people have
> children….

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[23] Leonard A. Valverde and Louis A. Castenell, Jr., *The Multicultural Campus: Strategies for Transforming Higher Education* (AltaMira Press, 1998) 102.

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This working can have a negative effect on a students work because many students want to be able to live as comfortably as those students with higher socioeconomic status so as not to feel like an outcast. Unfortunately, when a student is doing three times as much work at the other people in their class something has to suffer and it can not be work because the money is need and that is when students end up on academic probation and then required withdrawal.

Only AF17 went into any real depth about working on campus and how that can affect school work, but many of the students that participated in the survey were either at work, on their way to work or on their way from work when they were asked to take the survey. The Retention Task Force writes, "[W]e must remove all financial barriers to full participation in college life"[24] and for the enter class in 2000 they did remove those financial barriers by putting none of the students that year on work-study, but in years since many students have had to pick up several jobs and/or work long hours in order to make ends meet. One student, a senior, mentioned in a discussion at the Umoja house that he had never had work-study in his financial aid packet before this year and was upset at the fact that the school and the financial aid office would put him into a work-study program during the busiest year in his college career. This can add strain to the already hectic senior year of this student, which may translate into a drop in grades.

BM8 said, "I could have worked harder, but I think it's tougher for students of color because of working (jobs) and running organizations." As was said before,

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[24] Retention Task Force, *Success and Satisfaction at Trinity: A Report of the Retention Task Force* (Trinity College, 1999) 11.

working can be very time consuming, but if you couple that with having to head up and organization while trying to remain a student in good standing that is where the problems can occur. Of the students surveyed 65 percent of them are or have been involved in cultural organizations as a member of their executive board (E-board). These students are also the ones, who most often mentioned issues of diversity and race while taking the survey because these students are most often confronted with theses issues. 69 percent of the students involved in cultural organizations are also receiving financial aid from Trinity College. So while these students are working to change the environment of Trinity to "reflect the cultural heterogeneity within and create a learning community where all students are treated with respect and helped to succeed,"[25] they may or may not be neglecting their academic work, but they are definitely increasing their stress level to double that of their White counterparts.

Conclusion:

Trinity College has taken notice of the issue of retention and has notably made steps to raise the retention rates for students of color on campus, but the institution has neglected to take into consideration fully the social dissatisfaction that many students of color feel on campus. The data I collected is only a smaller sample of the small number of students of color on campus, but their issues are real. Numerically, there was no conclusive evidence shown in any of the surveys conducted that would allow me to say

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[25] Leonard A. Valverde and Louis A. Castenell, Jr., *The Multicultural Campus: Strategies for Transforming Higher Education* (AltaMira Press, 1998) 109.

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that all students of color feel unwelcome or uncomfortable here, but the fact that there are

students who do is something that should be recognized. When one student "feels like

there are people [or] groups of people who don't feel that [they] belong here [at Trinity],"

then there is an issue and you can be sure that student isn't the only one that feels that

way.

The issue reaches far beyond strengthening the programs of the cultural houses or

developing "supportive relationships with Hartford-area professionals of color."[26] The

issue comes down to social interactions with other students. Some students of color feel

like "second class citizens on campus," as one Black Female stated at the town hall

meeting on safety on November 5th, not only because the administration and faculty

haven't done enough to make students of color feel like a part of the campus, but because

some students in the majority on campus have alienated their peers of color. Myrtis

Powell states that "for students of color, a welcoming, nurturing, and caring climate is

crucial for retention"[27] and can influence whether a student decides to stay or leave. In

order for Trinity College to truly understand the reasons for the retention rates as they

stand at the college, the climate must be really analyzed and changed.

Furthering the Research:

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[26] Retention Task Force, *Success and Satisfaction at Trinity: A Report of the Retention Task Force* (Trinity College, 1999) 10.
[27] Leonard A. Valverde and Louis A. Castenell, Jr., *The Multicultural Campus: Strategies for Transforming Higher Education* (AltaMira Press, 1998) 102.

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If I was to expand and continue this research, the first thing I would do would be to survey all students of color on Trinity College's campus. I would go about doing this by first getting in contact with Dean Spurlock-Evans in the Office of Multicultural Affairs and asking her to provide me with a list of all of the students of color. I would then proceed to contact every student to find out if they would like to do an interview. By doing this I believe that I would be able to more accurately represent all views of the students because every student has different circumstances that brought them to and keep them at Trinity College. I would have also interviewed faculty in admissions, financial aid and the dean of students' office so as to gain a better understanding of how they see the issue of retention. I would also ask both the students and the administration about how many of the objectives of the Retention Task Force they see in practice at Trinity College today.

In terms of the questions asked of the students of color in the surveys, I would move more towards an interview format with follow-up questions whenever I felt it was necessary so as to get a more accurate depiction of what each student's experience has been like. I think that the survey questions without follow-ups only touched on many of the issues that different students deal with, but I waned to keep from influencing the data with questions that may have been leading. Also after the incidents, which have recently taken place on campus with racial profiling, I believe that many students of color would have a lot of information and incite into the way that they feel on campus after knowing that there are people here who feel that racial profiling is ok if it keeps everyone safe.

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Appendix 1

1. Before coming to Trinity did you attend a public or private high school?
2. Do you feel that your school prepared you for college?
3. Would you say your grades here at Trinity have reflected how hard you have worked? Why or Why not?
4. What race or ethnicity would you classify yourself to be? You don't have to answer this question if you don't want to.
5. Do you feel like you belong here? Why or Why not?
6. Did you enter Trinity College as a first year student (freshman year)?
7. How did you feel about Trinity College when you first arrived here?
8. What reasons would you give for the fact that you are still at Trinity College?
9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your Trinity experience?