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Differences in Black and White Satisfaction at a Predominantly White Institution

**Introduction**

Choosing a college is a decision that most people spend a lot of time contemplating. Guidance counselors, parents, and teachers alike often refer to the college years as “the best four years of your life”, so there is no wonder why high school students are so careful when making this choice. There are a lot of factors that could influence a person’s choice to select the school that they will ultimately attend. Some of these factors could include how high the college is ranked in national publication, the location of the school, the school size, the majors that are offered, the reputation of the school and the makeup of the student body. Although these features of a school can be easily researched, one aspect of the school cannot be known to perspective students until they actually arrive on the opening day of school. Perspective students will never be able to know about how compatible they are with the school until they are actually immersed in that particular university setting. The student’s adjustment to the school is vital to their learning and could influence their feelings of satisfaction when reflecting on their college experiences.

Historically, blacks and whites were not always allowed to attend school together. During the time of segregation in the United States, children had to attend separate schools based on their race. The 1954 Brown v. Board of Ed. verdict changed the existing rules. After this, schools could no longer be separated by race, but were instead required to be integrated. It is important to determine if this verdict that would forever change the racial makeup and dynamics of schools at both primary and secondary levels, is really advantageous to blacks. Do blacks report the same amount of satisfaction from attending these predominantly white institutions as their white

counterparts or are they faced with more issues because they are the small minority on campus? There is a widespread belief that diversity adds to a student's learning experience, but it is noteworthy to see whether the positive results of attending a predominantly white institution outweigh the stressors that black students face in these environments.

### **Importance of Social Atmosphere on Learning**

It is obvious that students learn better if they are in an environment or community where they feel comfortable. No one will be able to strive in an environment where they are ostracized, discriminated against, targeted and stigmatized. In a predominantly white school, black and white students may differ in the level of comfort they feel in their school environment. Cohen (2007) says that students feel engaged and respected when there is a healthy school climate, that is, when people feel socially, physically and emotionally safe. In environments where students do not have a sense of belonging and are not comfortable, these environments undoubtedly do not promote learning. There is a discrepancy between blacks' achievement if they go to a predominantly white institution and if they go to a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), where they are mostly surrounded by other blacks. Palmer (2008) found that black students who attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities are more engaged and they have higher GPA's than students at predominantly white institutions. The comfort level and the relationships that these students have may have some effect on their better performance in the classroom. Walton and Cohen (2007) did a study in which they found that social isolation in school is more strongly associated with low academic interest for minority students than for students in the majority. In a climate where minority students could feel like they are separated from the majority of the other students, they may be less interested in their studies. These findings could potentially explain the differences in the GPAs of black students who attend

Historically Black Colleges and the GPAs of black students who attend Predominantly White Schools.

### **Effects of Being a Minority on Campus**

Being a minority on campus has many negative effects. People who are not a part of the majority may feel excluded, attacked and unsupported in college communities. Even when the situation is reversed, that is, when white students are the minority because they are placed in an HBCU there is a noticeable difference in their interactions with the majority. Although the white students did not report overt racism they did say that they felt social exclusion (Hall & Closson, 2005). Also, being a minority is another stress factor that blacks at predominantly white institutions have to deal with in addition to academic stressors. Phelps, Tranakos-Howe, and Dagley (2001) found that when black students at predominantly white schools score high on ethnic worry measures, they score lower on the openness to experience factors. If minority students are overly concerned with their ethnicity, they are less likely to take full advantage of everything that their school has to offer and less likely to want to meet people who are different than they are. Another limiting aspect of being a minority on campus is that the students may feel uncomfortable participating in class and may not feel like they are on the same intelligence level as their white counterparts. Cokley (2002) found that students who attended HBCU's have a better academic self-concept and have more positive perceptions of their environment. Blacks may feel somewhat intimidated and uncomfortable if they are participating in class if they feel pressure to represent their whole race or disprove negative stereotypes about black people. Blacks may often feel more at ease and more confident in their abilities if they perceive themselves to be similar to their classmates.

### **Relationships with Faculty**

Another factor that could greatly effect a students' satisfaction with their university are their relationships with faculty. When students have good relationships with faculty members, they feel more supported in their school environment. Chism and Satcher (1998) acknowledge that faculty-student relationships are vital to overall development and therefore there is a need to improve relationships between black students and white faculty because these relationships are critical to those students' success. Without having close relationships with faculty, students may feel alone and helpless since the transition to college is usually a drastic change. Students are accustomed to having their parents around to ask for advice, but parents are not as accessible to them when they live on a college campus. For this reason, faculty members at school have to serve the same purpose for these students as their parents did at home. Also, there is an extra strain on the relationship between black students and white faculty because of distrust and social distance (Smith & Borgstedt, 1985). Black students may not feel comfortable talking to a faculty member of another race because they may not think that a person of another race could understand their plights and problems. Blacks and other minorities may think that since they are not similar to the white faculty members that the faculty members do not have similar experiences and therefore would not be able to empathize with black students.

### **Negative Behaviors That Could Result**

In addition to having a lower self concept, blacks who attend predominantly white institutions are also at risk for developing other maladaptive behaviors. Broman (2007) sought to find the relationship between stress, race and substance use in college students and he found that stress is related to substance abuse in college students. Although this information could lead one to believe that all students are equally as likely to be stressed in a college setting, Broman's

(2007) findings show that racial discrimination is a chronic stressor that particularly affects blacks and other minorities. Needless to say, increased drinking in black students is detrimental to both their health and their academics. In addition to the tension that all college students have to deal with, blacks are prone to experience additional stress due to racial discrimination that could occur in predominantly white schools.

### **Methods**

The Trinity Alumni Survey was found through the Trinity College Office of Institutional Research and Planning. Surveys from 1996 and 2005 were used to gather information from the alumni. Since there were a number of questions such as questions that asked about current professions, or further educational attainment, which did not pertain to satisfaction, not all measures from the survey were compared. (See Appendix 1).

In all there were 1,309 males and 1,106 females that took the survey. Out of the alums that participated, 2,242 (92.8%) were white, and 46 (1.9%) were black. Since the survey includes responses from when the survey was sent out in 1999 and in 2005, there were alums from a range of graduating class years. The alums were from the graduating classes of 1972, 1975-1977, 1979, 1982-1996, 1998 and 1999.

### **Satisfaction**

When asked the question “How satisfied were you with your undergraduate education at Trinity?” there was a significant difference in the answers that the alumni reported. The alumni could choose a number of options: very satisfied, generally satisfied, ambivalent, generally dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. For the purposes of this project, people who reported being very satisfied and generally satisfied were put into one group of “satisfied” and alumni who reported

that they were either generally dissatisfied or very dissatisfied were merged into one group, “dissatisfied”. The alumni who reported being ambivalent were kept in their original category. The categories were compiled in this way in order to make the results more valid so that there would not be a very small number of responses for any one category.

For the question, 90.3% of whites said reported being satisfied, compared with 83.9% of non-whites. Of the people who reported that they had ambivalent feelings about their education, 8.1% of non-whites said this, while only 5.5% of whites said they were ambivalent. As for the people who answered that they were dissatisfied, 8.1% of non-whites reported this, while only 4.2% of whites had this sentiment about their undergraduate education. (See Figure 1).

These results are consistent with prior research because it is expected that due to all of the extra difficulties that non-whites are faced with, it is likely that a lesser percentage of non-whites would be satisfied with their undergraduate education. Also, more non-whites would report either feelings of ambivalence or dissatisfaction than whites due to negative experiences that they may have had while attending Trinity white students may not have been as likely to have.

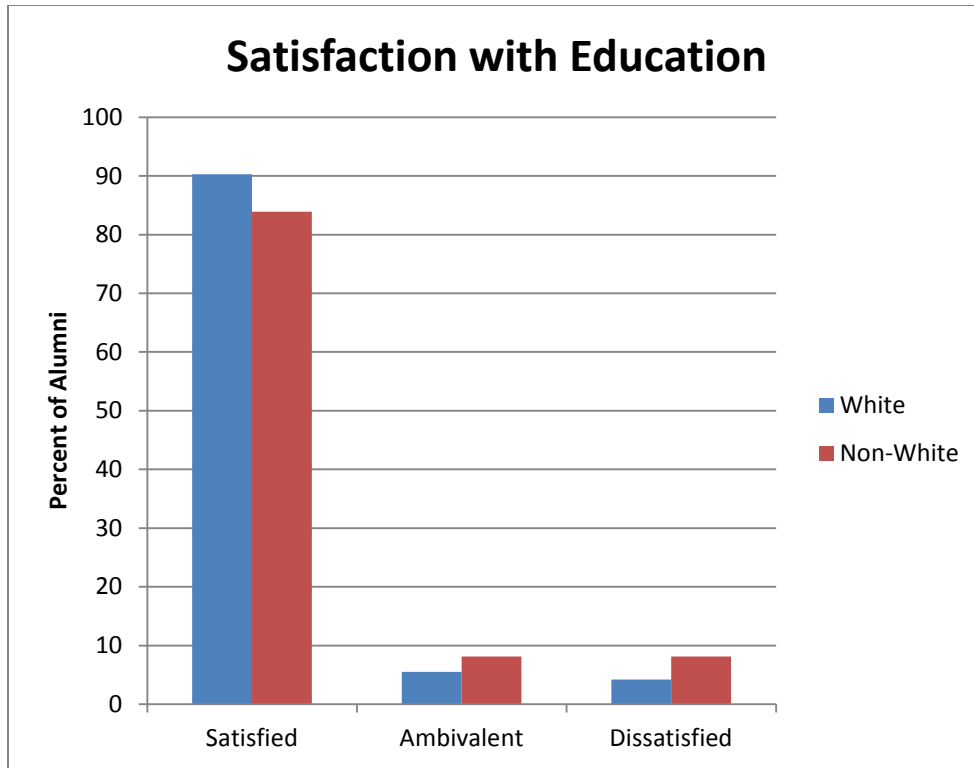


Figure 1. Alumni reports of being satisfied with their education.

### Encourage a Senior to Attend Trinity

There was also a significant racial difference of the people that reported that they would encourage a senior to attend Trinity. For this, alumni had the options of definitely would not, probably would not, maybe, probably would and definitely would.

Whites were more likely to say that they definitely would encourage a senior to attend Trinity than non-whites; 51.7% compared with 43.5% of non-whites. Also, 7% of non-white alumni said that they would definitely not advise other students to come to Trinity, whereas only 2% of whites responded the same way. Race did not play a factor in the people who answered that they probably would not recommend seniors to attend Trinity, 4.3% of whites compared to 6.6% of non-whites. In regards to the “maybe” category, there was also not a significant difference, with 10.6% of whites saying maybe compared to 14.8% of non-whites. The percentage of respondents who answered that they probably would advise a senior to go to



Trinity did not differ by race either, 28.9% of whites replied this way as compared to 30.4% of non whites. (See Figure 2).

White and non-white students may have had different experiences while at Trinity that could have impacted their answer to this question. If whites remember having more enjoyable experiences than blacks, this could be reflected in the answers. Obviously if a person does not positively recall their experience at a school, they would not want others to undergo the same trials and tribulations that they had to endure.

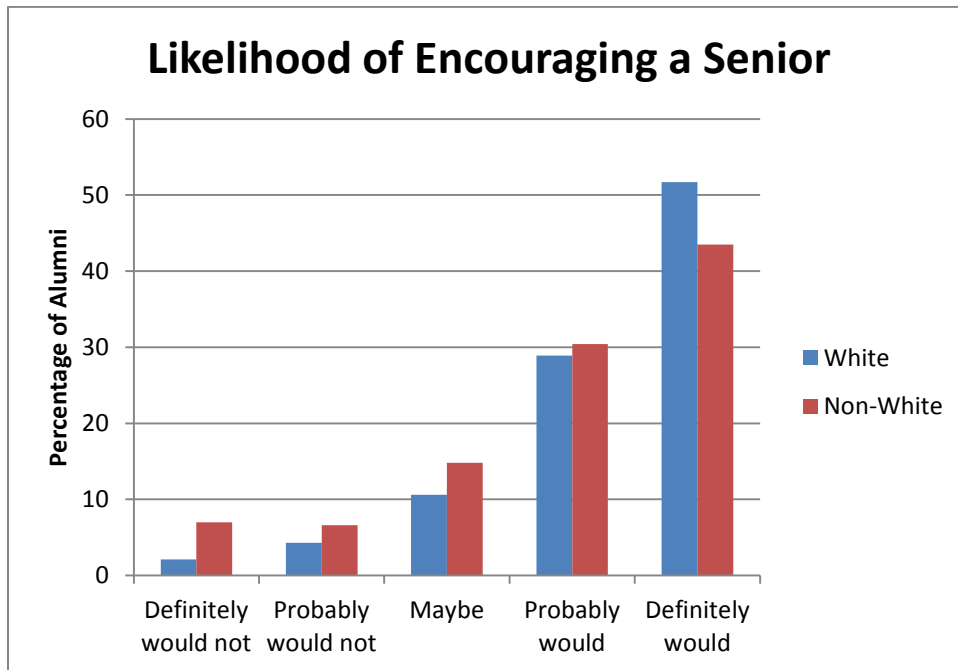


Figure 2. Alumni responses about whether or not they would encourage a senior to attend Trinity.

**Academic Advisors Clarifying Goals or Interests**

Although some of the results were consistent with the prior research, there were also some surprising results. There was a question on the Alumni Survey which asked the respondent how much they believed that their academic advisor contributed to clarifying their own goals or

interests when they were students. The respondents could reply that their advisors helped them “a great deal”, “some” or “very little or none.”

The answers greatly varied with 25% of blacks reporting that the advisors contributed a great deal as compared with only 9.7% non-blacks who answered the question the same way. Also, more non-black students were inclined to say that their academic advisors helped them clarify their goals very little or none. The percentage of non blacks who said this was 26.9%, while 21.9% of blacks did not think that their advisors aided them in clarifying their goals or interest. (See Figure 3).

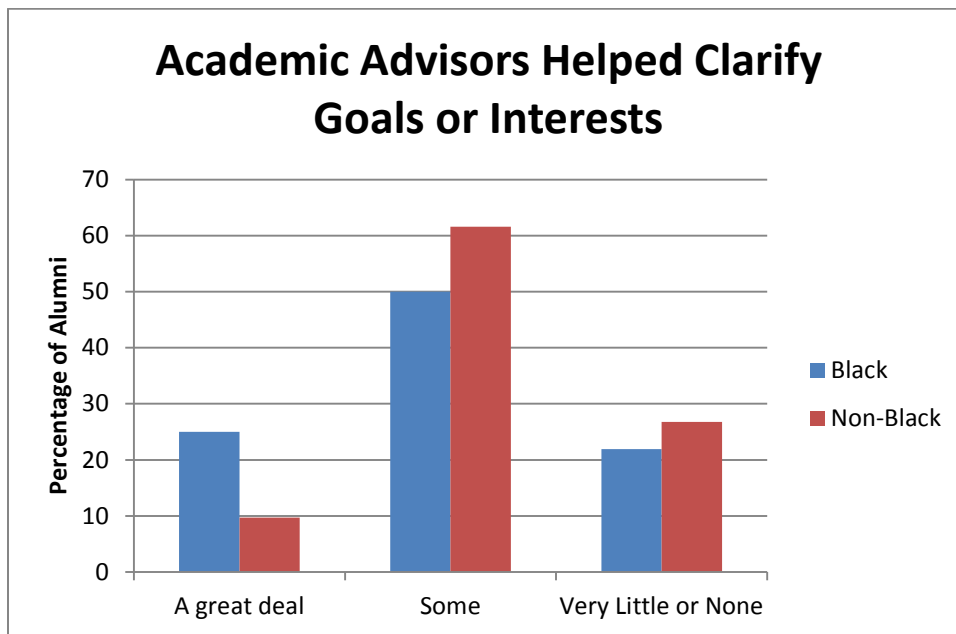


Figure 3. Alumni responses about the extent to which their academic advisors helped to clarify their goals or interests.

### **Academic Advisors Helping Achieve Career Goals**

There was also a question that asked about academic advisors helping students achieve career goals. The respondents could reply that their advisors helped them “a great deal”, “some” or “very little or none.”

For this question there was also a significant difference in the responses from blacks and non-whites. Only 8% of non-blacks said that their advisors helped them a great deal while 22.6% of blacks said that they were helped a great deal. On the other hand, 33.3% of non whites reported that their advisors helped very little or none, compared to only 19.4% of blacks who said that their advisors were not as helpful. (See Figure 4).

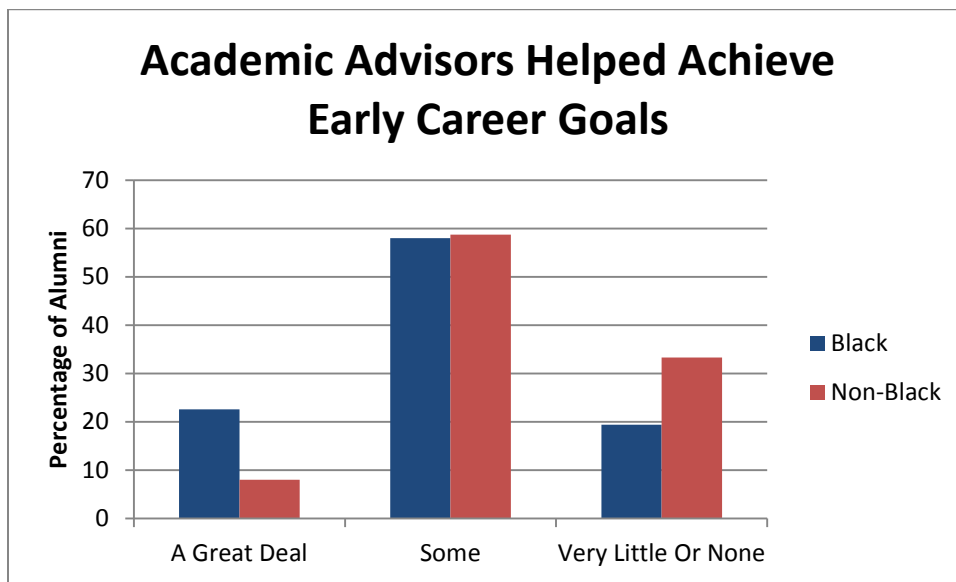


Figure 4. Alumni responses about the extent to which academic advisors helped them to achieve their career goals.

### Possible Explanations

There are a number of causes that could account for these unexpected results. For one, white students could not have needed as much guidance from their academic advisors as non-whites. Trinity is a school in which most people that make up the student body are fairly wealthy. For this reason, there may have been other people that white students could go to for guidance or advice other than their academic advisors. Since white students may have expanded networks or connections from their parents, they may have been able to go directly to someone who they

know in the field that they wish to study, and therefore may have not utilized their academic advisors as much as non-white students.

Along with this explanation, there is also reason to believe that the size of Trinity also makes a difference in the contact and relationships between advisors and students. Since Trinity is a smaller school, it would make sense that any student would be able to have a close relationship with their advisors, the main difference to account for the inconsistency between blacks and non-blacks is in the way and frequency that the students seek out their advisors. Taylor and Olswang (1997) found that because the size of the school they studied was so small, students found that the faculty was approachable but many students did not sense sincere commitment from faculty, and others could not tell. Therefore, there is no correlation between the amount of contact that a student has with the faculty member and the quality of the relationship between the student and the faculty member. Taylor and Olswang (1997), do, however, say that the size of the school does facilitate the accessibility of the faculty members. It should be expected that all students who attend a school like Trinity that is relatively small will have very little problems setting up meetings and actually building somewhat of a relationship with advisors.

### **Insignificant Results**

There were other questions that were expected to have a significant difference in the way that blacks and whites answered that were not noteworthy. For the questions that asked about feeling a sense of community, there was no significant difference in the responses from blacks and the responses from whites. This was surprising because prior research would lead one to believe that blacks would feel out of place at a predominantly white institution because they report feeling isolated, and ostracized in school. However, black alumni did not report feeling

less of a sense of community. This could possibly be because Trinity College is located in an urban area. Since the school is located in Hartford, blacks see other minorities on campus who live in the surrounding area. Also, since the campus is open, blacks often see other blacks on campus, even if they are Hartford residents. The fact that blacks frequently come in contact with blacks and other minorities could lessen the feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Other questions that were taken from the Trinity Alumni Survey that were relevant to the research topic asked about how much the respondent believed that Trinity contributed to the importance of relating well to people of different races, nations and religions in his/her life, how much Trinity contributed to the importance of identifying moral and ethical issues in his or her life, how often the respondents reported having faculty contact outside of class.

The lack of differences in how much alums reported that Trinity contributed to the importance of relating well to people of different races, nations and religions is maybe because all students, regardless of race, graduated the school with the same feelings and opinions about others as they had when they entered the school. These results could be good because the interactions in the school did not make people view other races, nationalities and religions more negatively. However, the lack of changed opinions could be seen negatively because the school did not encourage students to view others more favorably.

The results about Trinity contributing to identifying moral issues in the students' lives can be explained in the same way. The student's views about certain issues may not have changed over time maybe because by the time the students reached college age, they had already held their own rigid views about certain topics. The fact that there is no difference in the way that whites and blacks reported this is evidence that the school overall did not do a good job in swaying the ideas of the students.

Faculty contact out of class could not have been significantly different just because Trinity College is a small school. Almost anyone who wants to meet with a professor out of class probably would be able to. The fact that there is no difference in the answers from these respondents reflects positively on the school itself because it shows that there is no bias about meeting with a certain group of students as opposed to another group. This finding could also attest to the intelligence and independence of the students because not one group seeks faculty any more than another group, because if they did, it is very likely that they would receive this help.

### **Conclusion**

This study was done to determine if there was a difference in black and white student satisfaction at a predominantly white school. There were differences in a couple of aspects that would verify research that has already been done. Whites were more likely than blacks to report being satisfied with their undergraduate education and were more likely to recommend that a high school senior attend Trinity. The significant results that were not expected, such as black students reporting that their academic advisors helped clarify their goals and also helped them with their career goals gives an alternate view about the experiences of black students.

Further research would be helpful in actually testing the results that were found during this project. One change that may be helpful is to have a more representative sample. Since there were only 46 black respondents, there is no way that their responses could be generalized to represent the whole black population. Also, there could be a bias in the alumni that responded to the survey because they could have had strong feelings about Trinity College and therefore felt more compelled to fill out the survey. Therefore the views that were used for this analysis could represent both extremes of the spectrum- the people that were really satisfied with their college

experience or those who have very negative feelings about their college experience, but not the general feelings of most students who went to Trinity.

Also, it would be interesting to see if there is a change in satisfaction throughout the years since a wide range of school years were used. A closer analysis would give information about black satisfaction and see if they have reportedly had more or less satisfaction over the years. The fact that a wide range of graduation years were could also have potentially been problematic because there could have been a change in school policies and outside social factors that could have affected the students' happiness. For example, in the 1970's it was less common for blacks to attend colleges and universities so black people may have reported being more satisfied merely because they were grateful for the opportunity to attend a secondary school. On the other hand, the reactions from whites may have been extremely negative during the same time period because there may have been more overt discrimination and racism shown to them by their peers, which would explain a more negative recollection of their experiences, if those were the findings.

Another factor that must be considered is how the alums judged satisfaction. Since they are taking the survey sometimes twenty years after they have graduated, they may be judging their satisfaction according to their life success up to this point. If people see Trinity as a stepping stone to things that led them to be successful, then they would be more likely to say that they were satisfied with the education. However, other people may have thought of their actual satisfaction while they were a student in school. If people do not recall having positive experiences in school then it is not likely that they would answer the question in the same way as people who did have positive experiences.

For further research, it would be beneficial to look at a range of schools. For this project, only Trinity College was used which could impact the findings because of the specific aspects of Trinity College, such as the location and school size. The results from one school cannot be generalized to reflect students' feelings at all other predominantly white institutions. A more thorough study would try to investigate differences in student's sentiments depending on school location, school size, and demographic factors of the students. There would be an expected difference in student's responses if the college is located in an urban area as opposed to a suburban or rural area. Also, students who attend a bigger school may not say that they received a lot of help from their academic advisors because the large school size may make their advisors less available.

Another quality that would be interesting to compare is black student's feelings and if they differ based on that student's past educational history, their economic status and their home environment. From this study it is unclear whether the black students went to predominantly white high schools or predominantly black and minority high schools. Also, it would be interesting to take into account whether or not the black student went to public or private high schools and where those high schools are located. It would be hypothesized that black students who attended high schools that are similar to their predominantly white colleges would report more satisfaction than students who went to urban schools with a majority of other blacks and minorities because there would be a less drastic difference in the environments. Also, it would be thought that blacks who come from more affluent backgrounds may have grown up where they are the minority and are therefore more assimilated into the dominant culture. Black people who have always been in a situation where they are one of only a few minorities may not be that far removed from their comfort zone if they come to a predominantly white institution. All of these



factors would be interesting to note if a more expansive research project that was done that was still related to the topic of black students' satisfaction at a predominantly white institution.

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Appendix A.

Questions from the Trinity Alumni Survey that were used in research

1. Overall, how satisfied are you with your undergraduate education?

- Very dissatisfied
- Generally dissatisfied
- Ambivalent
- Generally satisfied
- Very satisfied

2. Would you encourage a current high school student who resembles you when you were a high school senior (similar background, ability, interests, and temperament) to attend your undergraduate institution?

- Definitely would NOT
- Probably would NOT
- Maybe
- Probably would
- Definitely would

3. How much do you believe that Trinity contributed to the importance of relating well to people of different races, nations, and religions in your life?

- very little or none
- great deal

4. How much do you believe Trinity contributed to the importance for identifying moral and ethical issues in your life?

- very little or none
- a great deal

5. How much faculty contact did you have out of class?

- none
- a great deal

6. I felt a sense of community at Trinity

- strongly agree
- agree
- neutral
- disagree
- strongly disagree

7. To what extent do you believe that academic advisors contributed to you clarifying your goals or interests?

- a great deal

-little or none

8. To what extent do you believe that academic advisors contributed to you achieving your career goals?

-a great deal

-very little or none