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Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic and racially charged public killings in 2020 created a nexus of stressors for Black graduate students that highlighted the structural difference between their communities of origin and their academic institutions. Organic, student led-solutions can inform institutional response.

Introduction

Despite the compounding stressors experienced by Black graduate students in an anti-black academic community, they still need to maintain a high level of academic performance while being repeatedly exposed to racialized trauma with little institutional understanding or support. This lack of institutional support significantly diminishes Black students' sense of belonging, which educational theorists have identified as a vital component for academic success. Studies have shown that the creation of affinity groups and spaces focused on the empowerment of minoritized graduate students **enhances resilience, resistance, and positive racial identity**, which is associated with better **retention and academic performance**. Focusing on organic, student-led empowerment of Black graduate students to identify their evolving needs while in graduate school, may help students create pathways for finding resources they need to excel.

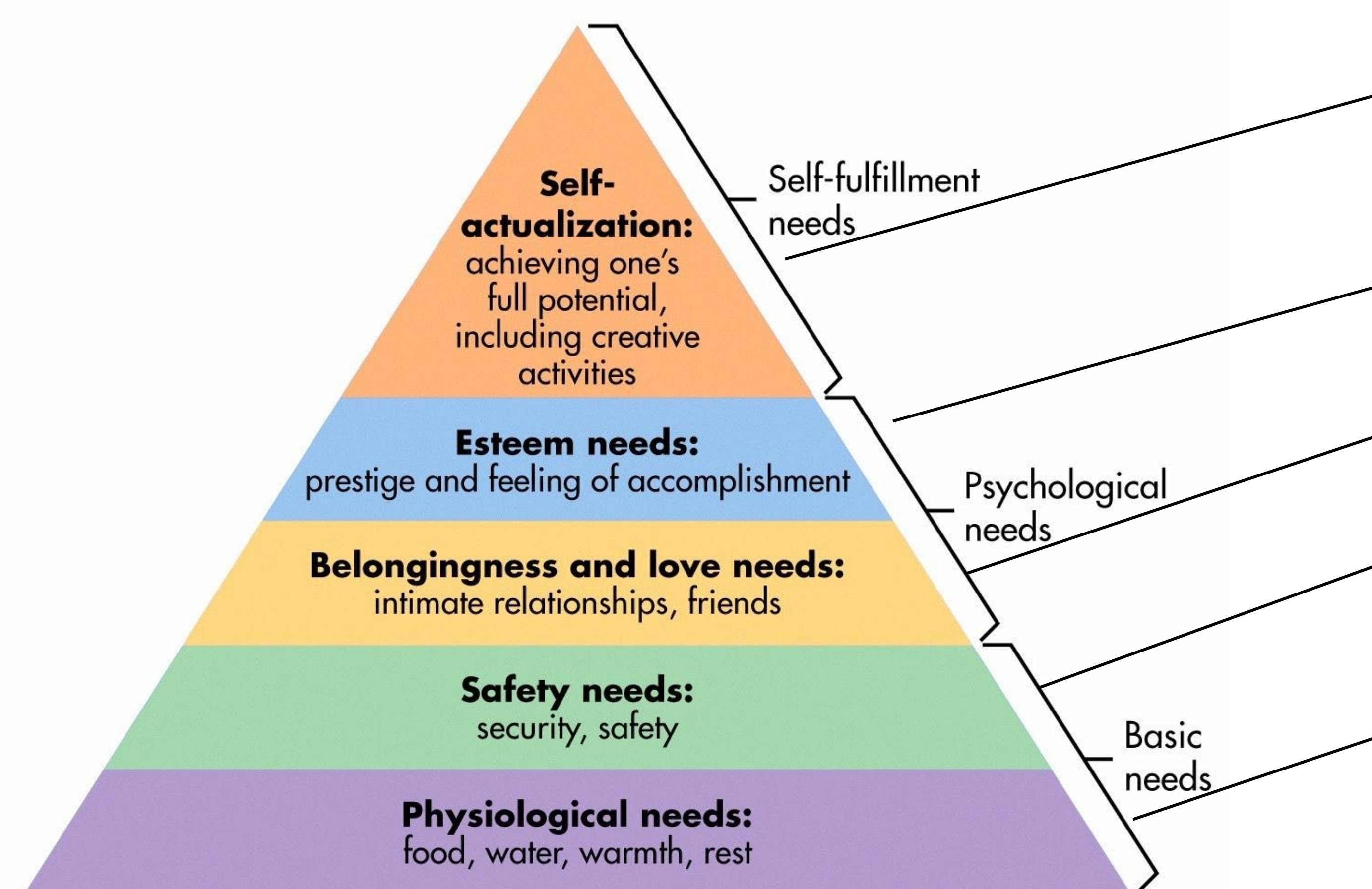
Description and Methodology

An interdisciplinary collaboration of four Black graduate students formed organically to discuss their needs within the institution and move forward despite compounding challenges. They developed a 4-hour interactive workshop based on the Socioecological Model and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to encourage peer networking and self-empowerment for Black graduate students. The goal was to provide tools to help their peers methodically identify and address their needs.

What does self-actualization mean to you?



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Examples of Needs

Graduate / Getting the job or Post Doc/ Having a greater sense of self
Getting funding for my research, consistent hair-stylist/barber
Community of like-minded folks, people to do happy hour with, great therapist
A roommate you can trust, anti-racist police force, reliable transportation, affordable health care
Brita filter, favorite blankie, 8 hours of sleep every day + midday nap time, fresh air and sunshine, nutritious food

Discussion

Students were successfully able to contextualize their individual needs and define self-actualization in their own terms, thereby, creating a personal framework to define their own success. Workshop leaders identified that student-led self-empowerment was much needed for this group and is feasible for future iterations.

Universities can augment orientation by investing in ongoing peer-led wayfinding programs. This may provide an opportunity to keep Black graduate students engaged and informed about professional and extra-curricular opportunities available to them. Future efforts to increase student self-empowerment should include deeper qualitative methods like focus groups to further inform culturally relevant programming. Additionally, quantitative evaluation of outcomes may provide more insight into efficacy of this and future workshops.

Implications

Culturally relevant learning environments matter

- Black students' intersectional identities and academic competencies are strengthened in counterspaces and affinity groups.

Centering curriculum around students matters

- Academic engagement and self-efficacy were supported by connecting curriculum directly to Black history and culture.

Experiential learning matters

- Peer-led discussions were rooted in the experiences of Black students in higher education to uplift their epistemologies and strategies for overcoming systemic barriers to success and well being.

References

[1] Strayhorn TL. *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students*. Routledge; 2018.
 [2] Maslow AH. *A Dynamic Theory of Human Motivation*. In: *Understanding Human Motivation*. Howard Allen Publishers; 1958:26-47.
 [3] Gupta GC. *Student Attrition: A Challenge for Allied Health Education Programs*. JAMA. 1991;266(7):963-967.
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Workshop leaders utilized historical and cultural experiences of past and current Black scholars and community leaders to highlight the students' position in a continuum of Black achievement.

Learning outcomes for participants were:

- Define self-actualization and understand how it applies to their careers as graduate students
- Apply the concept of self-actualization to defining and advocating for their needs
- Utilize an iterative framework to define their needs and inform a personalized vision of success

Results

The programming was sponsored and delivered at the university Black Graduate Student Orientation to 40 Black graduate students of various disciplines. The content was delivered online in one-hour increments and was centered around culturally relevant historical examples of Black academics achieving excellence under difficult circumstances. Participants discussed applying Maslow's framework both in self-reflection and in small group discussions. They identified their most urgent individual needs and ways to meet them with campus resources. Participants expressed a need for mentorship within and outside their field to help them navigate the graduate school environment.

Participants were provided resources on Black-specific self-care, mentorship, guidance, and way-finding techniques while in academia. This served as a model of peer-led wayfinding.