

# Commentary

by

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Kevin Cokley, Ph.D. is a Professor of Counseling Psychology and African and African Diaspora Studies at the University of Texas-Austin. He is also Director of the Institute for Urban Policy Research & Analysis. Dr. Cokley's research and teaching can be broadly categorized in the area of African American psychology. He is the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Black Psychology*. He was elected to Fellow status in the American Psychological Association for his contributions to ethnic minority psychology and counseling psychology. He has been recognized as being among the top 10 Contributors to multicultural psychology journals (Lau et al., 2008) and among the authors with most publications in ethnic minority psychology (Hartmann et al., 2013). He is the recipient of the 2014 Regents' Outstanding Teaching Award, 2009 Charles and Shirley Thomas Award for mentoring ethnic minority students by the Society for the Psychological Study of Ethnic Minority Issues, the 2008 "10 Rising Stars of the Academy" award by *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, and the 2007 Association of Black Psychologists' Scholarship Award. He is author of the 2014 book "The Myth of Black Anti-Intellectualism" that challenges the notion that African American students are anti-intellectual. He has written several Op-Eds in major media outlets including the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, *Dallas Morning News*, *The American Prospect*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Conversation* and *The Hill* on topics such as Blacks' rational mistrust of police, the aftermath of Ferguson, the use of school vouchers, racial disparities in school discipline, and Black students' graduation rates.

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It is my pleasure to write this commentary for the *JPAS* Special Edition on African American student success. No other group of students has been more studied, more talked about, and more maligned than African American students. The subtext of virtually every discussion about the state of American education is closing the so-called "achievement gap" between Black and Brown students and White and Asian students. Discussions about African American student achievement are dominated by what Richard Valencia has referred to as "deficit thinking." Valencia characterizes deficit thinking as "blaming the victim" for school failure instead of examining how school structures do not promote learning among students of color. In fact, Valencia argues that school is structured to actually prevent students of color from learning.

A prominent deficit narrative has been promoted by John McWhorter, who has argued that African American students (and Black culture more generally), are anti-intellectual. In my 2014 book *The Myth of Black Anti-Intellectualism: A True Psychology of African American Students*, I challenge the deficit narrative regarding Black student achievement. I argued that Black students are actually very intellectual and engaged, especially when they see themselves reflected in the curriculum and are taught by culturally competent teachers and professors.

Consider a recent report by The Education Trust. This report provided data indicating that while there has been improvement in graduation rates at four-year public institutions for all students, the improvement is smaller for Black students, thus begging the question “Are all Black students falling behind?” However, I pointed out that the data did not consider private schools, which includes some of the highest ranking schools and highest-achieving Black students in the country. These data show that the graduation rate gap is much smaller at many highly selective colleges and universities, and that Black student graduation rates at private schools are considerably higher (in some instances higher than White student graduation rates). Statistics can tell multiple stories about African American students, and in this country we are too quick to use statistics that paint the most negative picture possible.

That is not to say that African American students don’t have challenges, because certainly they do. However, we need Africana Studies scholars to conduct more research that focuses on the factors related to African American student success. Africana Studies scholars that center the experiences of African American students in their own historical and cultural reality are best positioned to offer valuable insights into African American student success. This research needs to utilize every available methodological and disciplinary approach, because single disciplinary and single methodological approaches are too narrow and insufficient to comprehensively understand African American student success. Thus, an Africana Studies approach is perfectly situated to examine the academic successes of African American students.

I applaud the Guest Editor, Dr. Jessica James, and the contributors for creating such an outstanding and timely Special Issue. My intellectual mentor, Dr. Asa Hilliard, was an African-centered psychologist who was a leading figure in African-centered education. He taught me that Africana Studies scholars should passionately defend the humanity of African/Black students from the racist attacks that question their intelligence and capabilities. If he were alive today I believe he would be very pleased to see *JPAS* addressing such an important issue to which he dedicated his entire life.