

The Value and Necessity of Mentoring African American College Students at PWI's

by

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Abstract

It is probably more common than not that most faculty of color teaching at PWI's mentor students of color without it being a formalized process. These faculty members see the drive in these students but recognize the lack of adaptation skills needed to succeed at college. The academic setting can be described as a foreign place with a different language (academic) and expectations than high school. Now add the issue of being an African American student in attempting to navigate the complex nature of issues, and challenges, of the academic environment. One must require a new skill set including advanced study skills, socialization skills, research skills, and the ability to exploit networking contacts. Some of these skills may be foreign to many, particularly to first generation minority students.

The psychosocial climate of a university setting has been found to have a tremendous effect on student perceptions and outcomes, especially those from culturally-diverse backgrounds (Shocket, 1985; Sodano & Baler, 1983). The necessity of having mentors assist in navigating this 'new' setting is an essential factor in assisting students succeed. The connection between African American faculty mentoring African American college students is a topic that needs to be addressed in an effort for college/universities to recognize best practices for retention and student satisfaction. This paper will attempt to address formalized and informal mentoring and how these practices serve as beneficial skills learned and utilized for all involved. Concepts of African Americans socialization and mentoring as well as critical race theory will be utilized.

Keywords: Mentoring, African American College Students, PWI.

The Impact of Race

Racism, defined as the inherent belief in the superiority/ inferiority of one group over another (Roger & Kitano, 1970) has impacted the social, economic, and emotional well-being of African Americans (Asante, 2003; Better, 2007; Franklin & Moss, 2000; Karenga, 2002; Reid-Merritt, 2010). The construct of race, socially defined as the ability to separate and categorize individuals based on the color of their skin, has been used as a barrier to participation for the African American community since the earliest inception of the nation (Karenga, 2010). Over a period of more than 300 years, numerous efforts have been made to foster feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, low self-esteem, and social isolation in members of the Black community. Marable (2003) notes that the cultural history of Blacks in the United States consists of the struggle to maintain their own group's sense of identity, social cohesion, and integrity in the face of policies which have been designed to deny their common humanity and particularity. Surviving and thriving in a racially charged social environment has been an ongoing challenge for the African American community. Thinking of race strictly as an ideological construct denies the reality of a racialized society and its impact of this construct on everyday lives; one must be cognizant of racism that African Americans must face in different facets of their lives, including education. Education may not be the only opportunity towards social mobility, though it is an important one. Education provides some "equilibrium" on multiple levels within the African American society (Harris & Harper, 2012). African American students experience a multitude of problems ranging from micro aggressions to institutional racism that exists on the schools campuses; racial tension is a visible reality on many college campuses. The academic setting can be described as a foreign place with a different language (academic) and expectations than high school. Now add the issue of being an African American student in attempting to navigate the complex nature of issues, and challenges, of the academic environment. One must require a new skill set including advanced study skills, socialization skills, research skills, and the ability to exploit networking contacts. Some of these skills may be foreign to many, particularly to first generation minority students.

Some African-American students who attend predominantly white universities (PWI's) can also experience internal tensions regarding their cultural identity and their desire to acclimate. Dubois (1999) acknowledged 110 years ago the significance of a college education for the African-American. In, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Dubois made the poignant point that "If White people need colleges to furnish teachers, ministers, lawyers, and doctors, do Black people need nothing of the sort?" (p. 132). For Black students, thriving and surviving academically despite numerous encounters with racism may necessitate developing a coping strategy in order to succeed academically. W.E.B. Du Bois coined the concept of "double consciousness," whereby a black people are essentially forced to have two identities and pressured to view themselves as they're perceived by their non-black peers.

History of Forced Integration

Throughout their history, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have answered for the aspirations of their African American students. From the late nineteenth century through the mid twentieth century, HBCUs enrolled more than 90 percent of African American college students educated in the United States. From the 1950s and 1960s following the *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation decision, HBCUs were a main access point for African Americans who sought to achieve economic and social mobility through higher education. A consequence of desegregation was the declining enrollments at HBCU's. Reductions in the purchasing power of federal aid have been a major factor in this, as have reductions in the level of state support on a per-pupil basis.

The notable 1954 Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruled that all segregation in public schools was "inherently unequal." The doctrine was extended to state-supported colleges and universities in 1956. In 1961, two Black students registered at the University of Georgia but were suspended due to student disorders; they were later returned under a federal judge's order. Violence erupted in 1962 in Mississippi when James H. Meredith, a Black student supported by federal court orders, registered at the University of Mississippi. A mob assembled and attacked the force of several hundred federal marshals assigned to protect Meredith; two people were killed. These incidents of violence and rejection were not in isolation and occurred on many campuses in the South as well as in many other areas in the United States. When African Americans initially attend PWI's, the hostility was quite blatant and overt, now though individual and institutional racism does exist, one may experience more experiences of micro aggressions which contribute to the attrition rates; micro aggressions includes verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (Allen & Eby, 2003; Cuyet, 1997; Cuyet, 2006). Between 1960 and 1970, African American student enrollment in southern PWIs had increased from 3,000 to 98,000 students.

The enrollment of African American students increased significantly With the passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964), and the continued utilization of the GI Bill (1944) by those returning home from military service, (Mingle, 1981). According to Hine, Hine, and Harrod (2004), between 1960 and 1977, the college attendance of African American students increased from 227,000 to 1.1 million. Unfortunately, once African American students entered PWIs, most of the students felt alone and alienated (Gay, 2000; Callins, 2007; Willie & McCord, 1972). Their experiences on campus were marked with feelings of rejection and social isolation (Patton, 2005). In the 21st century, African American males at PWIs continue to face a unique set of social circumstances, leading to the same feelings of social isolation that were prevalent during earlier times.

Critical Race Theory and Institutionalized Racism in PWI's

A theoretical framework that truly recognizes the intersection of the construct of race and its impact on the oppressed individual is the Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory offers a critical examination of society and culture, including the intersection of race, law, and power. It began as a theoretical movement in U.S. law schools in the 1980's as a reaction to legal studies. Critical race theorists acknowledge the centrality of race in every aspect of culture in the United States. In particular, this theory serves as a framework to challenge the notion that educational institutions are "race-neutral" settings. The first tenet of Critical Race Theory acknowledges the centrality and normality of racism in the educational system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Harper, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998). One can hypothesize that since educational institutions are a huge component of reinforcing and teaching the ideologies that are embedded in the American culture i.e., (historical and cultural events) it possesses the power to encourage all students of all races, classes, and backgrounds to conform to the dominant culture. For African American males, this forced conformance creates a cultural dissonance (the uncomfortable sense of discord, disharmony, confusion, or conflict experienced by people in the midst of change in their cultural environment) (Gordon, 1999).

Achievement Gaps Facing African American Male College Students

African American male students' retention rates in colleges are extremely alarming; the Postsecondary Education Opportunity (2001) noted that "African American men had the lowest retention rates (33.8 percent) among both sexes and all racial and ethnic groups in higher education (Cuyjet, 2006; Cuyjet, 1997; Strayhom, 2008). Although their absence is more apparent at historically black colleges and universities, or HBCUs, African American male students are scarce at colleges everywhere. The national college graduation rate for black men is 33.1 percent compared with 44.8 percent for African American women, according to the U.S. Department of Education. More than two-thirds of all African American men who enter college leave before earning their college degree, resulting in the highest rate of attrition among all races and both sexes (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Much of the research on the achievement gaps facing African American male college students has focused on identifying specific challenges that negatively affect their academic experiences (Owens, Lacey, Rawls, & Holbert-Quince, 2010; Palmer & Maramba, 2011; Strayhom, 2008). Many Black undergraduate men are less prepared for rigorous college-level work than their peers from other racial groups, resulting in low retention and graduation rates in higher education institutions (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). Acculturative stressors, the psychological impact of adaptation to a new culture, involves a lack of having a sense of belonging and a lack of a strong support system. These stressors have been identified as key factors that explain why institutional environments are viewed unwelcoming from the perspective of African American college students (Smith, 1997).

Sinanan (2012) reported African American males' perceptions of and experiences with social receptivity at a PWI can have a significant impact on the students' learning experience. Research has indicated that when students are enrolled at institutions with supportive environments (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991; MacKay & Kuh, 1994; Zhang & Smith, 2011), they experience greater satisfaction with college and are more likely to graduate. Moreover, when African American males have the opportunity to participate in higher education, and when well-conceived and formalized support systems are put into place to promote achievement, they succeed in academic settings (LaVant, Anderson, & Tiggs, 1997). Similarly, when African American students participate in programs that address existing social environment concerns, enhanced adjustment and higher retention rates are found (MacKay & Kuh, 1994). Bakari (1997) argues that the development of a positive racial and cultural identity for students of color is critical for their overall student development.

Research on retention among African American males reveal that lack of interaction with faculty affect them negatively; conversely, faculty mentorship has been associated with positive retention (McKay & Estrella, 2008; Strayhom & DeVita, 2010; Tinto, 2006/2007). Knowing that African-American students need to make meaningful, personal connections on campus to increase chances for their success, colleges should making connecting African-American students with faculty and staff mentors a priority.

Benefits of Mentoring

Mentoring was prominent in ancient Africa, with its extensive kinship systems and rites of passage initiations that helped guide the youth of learning and behaving of the ways of the culture (Warfield-Coppock, 1992). We must learn from history and utilized what has worked in the past. Mentoring is embedded in the historical and philosophical foundations of African Americans. Formal mentoring programs in higher education have been utilized to help African Americans navigate unfamiliar academic settings (Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1994). Mentoring has a rich tradition in our general society and its importance is paralleled in the historical and philosophical foundations of African American adults and higher education. Therefore, it is evident that in order for higher education to become a reality for African-American males, they must be adequately prepared, given access to and properly supported by those that have already been through the similar experiences. Pope (2002) found that success of African American students, as well as other minority students, strongly depended on their integration into the academic and social systems of institutions of higher education, and one way to accomplish this task was via mentoring.

Tinto's (1993) theory on student retention offers an in-depth examination of how mentoring can serve as an effective strategy to assist with the social adjustment of African-American males in an academic setting. Tinto provides support for the case that when institutions make a conscious effort to make connections with students, it can positively impact the academic and social outcomes of students (i.e., having a sense of belonging and participating in more activities on campus). Mentoring research conducted over the last 20 years has suggested that there is a measurable positive correlation between students' participation in mentoring programs and their academic success and persistence in their degree program, indicating improved retention rates for students (Kelly & Llacuna, 2000; Campbell & Campbell, 2007; Gonzalez, 2001). Research suggested that any positive contact with faculty holds promising results for students such as increasing a sense of belonging and improved self-worth (Galbraith & James, 2004; Nora & Crisp's, 2008). A support network, specifically other students, staff, and faculty from a similar group, has proven to be of great value in facilitating a positive quality of experience for the African American college student. African American males, whose attrition rates are the highest among any population, need a strong supportive environment to establish their presence and sense of cultural identity (Akbar, 1991; Mincy, 1994). This is especially true for African American males who are one of the most underrepresented groups at PWIs. Although their absence is more apparent at historically black colleges and universities, or HBCUs, black male students are scarce at colleges everywhere. The national college graduation rate for African American males is 33.1 percent compared with 44.8 percent for African American women, according to the U.S. Department of Education, (2014).

Research suggests gender differences may exist among African Americans on college campus. Given that African American males are represented in fewer number on PWI campuses compared to females (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996), they may be more vulnerable to the impact of discrimination in that they may feel more hyper-visible and less socially connected, as there are fewer males like themselves to look to for social support when instances of discrimination occur. Another possibility for further inquiry is that for the African American women at PWIs, feeling hyper-visible may be less prevalent due to "gendered" classroom and institutional practices (Sandler, Silverberg & Hall, 1996).

In higher education, types of mentoring between student and faculty member vary depending on whether the relationship is formally established via a college program or informally established. Studies in the area of mentoring in higher education suggested that there are links between mentoring, formal or informal, and academic success such as lowered attrition rates and higher GPA's (Campbell & Campbell, 2007). Allen and Eby's (2003) findings with regards to mentorship type suggested that mentorship type, whether formal and informal, does not predict the quality of mentoring relationships.

Formal Mentoring

Formal mentoring programs are a structured mechanism and organizationally managed; typically the mentee and the mentor are paired by the college based on similar interests. Oftentimes formal mentorship programs offer mentor training with stated responsibilities and guidelines to meet expected behaviors, timelines, objectives, and outcomes (Tourigny & Pulich, 2005). Advantages to establishing formal mentoring relationships are believed to include the emphasis in providing mentees with specific goals and outcomes. Though proven to have advantageous effects on the student population, many colleges do not offer mentorship on a grand scale to fully assist students who need to navigate the academic system.

Informal Mentoring

An informal mentor, similar to the role of a formal mentor, offers the mentee a less structured, more casual relationship (Wright & Werther, 1991). Typically there is a self-selection of mentors and mentees; hence, making the relationship more authentic. Often faculty of color step in and informally mentor the students perhaps because they also remember being lost in this academic setting, seeing themselves in the students. Anecdotally, it has been discovered that at many PWI's the faculty of color realize and recognize the need for mentoring for students of color and typically this may happen informally either because the colleges may not have a true mechanism for mentoring, or recognize that some students are falling through the cracks without proper guidance. Multiple researchers have emphasized the importance of Black faculty, particularly in the retention of African-American students of White college campuses (Nora & Crisp, 2008; Tourigny & Pulich, 2005). African-Americans and other minority students on predominantly White campuses need to see role models that are reflective of their cultural group. Bakari (1997) believed that the development of a positive racial and cultural identity for students of color is critical for their overall student development. When these students begin to experience difficulty or a sense of becoming overwhelmed, they often have no one to turn to for guidance or support due to being first generation college students and/or the lack of fellow Black students on campus. Informal mentoring provides an avenue to deal with the academic challenges and social issues. More specifically, mentoring can help students develop their academic self-worth and gain a sense of much needed support and encouragement due to mentors providing guidance, support and focusing on the needs of the mentee.

Recommendations

In order for Black males to succeed at PWI's, schools need to promote and nurture supportive environments. One of the ways to achieve this goal is by employing more Black male and female professors in a variety of disciplines and by educating existing faculty and staff about the specific issues of concerns that have been raised by young Black male students.

Having the availability of more Black professors to serve as mentors can enhance the students' access to a supportive relationship in their educational experience. The programs should include a variety of factors that address both academic deficiencies and social and personal challenges African-American male students face in particular. The establishment of a robust, multi-faceted program that reflects the varied backgrounds of the African American male population it will serve requires dedicated staff to ensure that such programming occurs on a consistent basis. It is important for college staff to spend time becoming immersed and engaged in developing programs that will assist with the development of African-American males in order to provide outcomes that will result in a meaningful educational experience for these students.

Conclusion

It is clearly evident that mentoring relationships can help students overcome acculturative stressors and can serve to confirm students' initial career choices or provide support and direction to students who should make alternative choices (Lee, 1999). Because social and personal isolation and lack of belonging appear to be central factors in many African Americans' satisfaction and success on predominantly White campuses, school personnel must understand how these issues operate and develop effective interventions for these individuals. Research in higher education supports the notion that students who develop mentoring relationships with faculty are more satisfied with their college experiences than those who do not (McKay & Estrella, 2008). In addition, because many African-Americans pursuing higher education are first generation students, the social difficulties students face must also be considered as a factor to poor academic performance in college as well.

College students enter their educational journey with varying levels of academic preparedness. Faculty members, specifically faculty of color, see the drive in these students but recognize the lack of adaptation skills needed to succeed at college. The importance of Black faculty, particularly in the retention of African-American students of White college campuses, cannot be overemphasized. "African-American and other minority students on predominantly White campuses need to see role models that are reflective of their culture group" (Cuyhet, p.91).

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