

Linking the Emancipatory Pedagogy of Africana/Black Studies with Academic Identity Outcomes among Black Students Attending PWIs

by

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Abstract

African-centered scholars have highlighted the deleterious impact of the environment experienced by many Black students attending predominately White institutions (PWIs). While these researchers have detailed how this institutional context negatively affects Black students' academic and social outcomes, much less information is available on how the academic identity of Black students in this setting is affected. Another unexamined area is the role that the emancipatory course content and pedagogical strategies utilized in the Africana/Black Studies discipline influences academic identity among Black learners who partake in this culturally-grounded learning experience. In this article, we detail the potential links between the emancipatory pedagogical content and teaching practices of Africana/Black Studies discipline and the academic identity outcomes in Black collegians. Additionally, we describe how this enhanced academic identity is connected to improved student-faculty interactions and subsequent academic and social engagement for this population. We conclude by providing strategies for invested stakeholders who desire to increase the recruitment, retention, satisfaction, and engagement of Black students.

Over the past three decades, the majority of Black undergraduates matriculated into predominately White institutions (PWIs), with recent data indicating only 11% of Black undergraduates are enrolled in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs; Gasman, 2013). Despite the increased enrollment of Black students in postsecondary institutions, the six-year graduation rate for Black undergraduates entering college in 2005 stands at 39.9% compared to 58.7% for all collegians (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). This demographic shift of Black students from HBCUs to PWIs has increased the focus on the needs of Black students in the tertiary pipeline, particularly those students attending PWIs.

African-centered researchers have encouraged attention to institutional factors that may contribute to the diminished academic outcomes of Black students at PWIs (Adams, 2005; Cokley, 2006). These scholars have highlighted the deleterious impact of the environment experienced by many Black students attending PWIs (Asante, 1991; Cross & Slater, 2004; Guffrida & Douthit, 2010). While these researchers have detailed how this institutional context can negatively affect Black students' academic, intellectual, political, social, psychological and emotional outcomes (Guffrida & Douthit, 2010; Shujaa, 1994; Woodson, 1933/2000), much less information is available on how the academic identity of Black students in the predominately White institutional setting is affected. Another unexamined area is the potential role of the emancipatory course content and pedagogical strategies utilized in the Africana/Black Studies (ABS) discipline on the academic identity and development of Black learners who participate in this culturally-grounded learning experience. This manuscript seeks to address these shortcomings in the psychological and educational literatures.

Key words: Africana/Black Studies courses, academic identity, academic self-concept, student-faculty relationships

Impact of PWIs on Black Students' Outcomes

Since the desegregation of educational institutions, African-centered scholars have directed attention to the institutional contexts where Black students are educated (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984). These researchers recognize the powerful influence the social and cultural milieu has on the subsequent outcomes of Black learners. Given that the majority of Black students are entering historically White educational spaces, it is vital to critically examine the characteristics of these spaces and analyze how they influence the academic, social, emotional, psychological and spiritual development of Black collegians.

Echoing the findings of earlier Black researchers (e.g., Woodson, 1933/2000), Critical White Studies scholars who focus on higher education contend that one of the distinguishing characteristics associated with PWIs has been the presence and practice of White supremacy and racism on campuses (Gusa, 2010; Leonardo, 2004). They contend that White supremacy is reflected in the curriculum, traditions, customs and everyday practices of PWIs (Bourke, 2010). Considering that the original mission of many of these institutions was to nurture and develop the White students they enrolled (Wilder, 2014), one legacy of this history of White-focused educational practice is that the needs of Black students are often ignored, dismissed or minimized. Often, the ubiquitous practices of White supremacy and White racial superiority in these “colorblind” higher educational spaces are not acknowledged (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Harper, 2012), which negatively affects the experiences of Black (and other minoritized) students.

Black students' evaluations of the racial, social and academic climate at many PWIs tends to convey the same sad story: compared to their White peers, Black students report encountering more barriers due to their racial group membership on their respective campuses (Fisher & Hartmann, 1995; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). These studies indicate that Black students frequently have the most negative evaluations of the campus climate and often feel marginalized, excluded and invisible on their campuses. White peers and professors are often identified as sources of this racial marginalization (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald & Bylsma, 2003). When students must deal with racial stereotypes and biases frequently, their perceptions of cultural fit or match on campus can be compromised (Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007). The dearth of same-race professors, staff and administrators can exacerbate these feelings of cultural incongruity or mismatch for Black students in the classroom and on-campus (Gloria, Hird & Navarro, 2001).

The cumulative burden of dealing with these racial stressors—while also handling the ordinary tasks of being a college student—can contribute to compromised psychological well-being and mental health for Black students (McClain et al., 2016). Battling these environmental, psychological, interpersonal and sociocultural hassles can undermine salubrious outcomes for this population in addition to detracting from the positive academic identity exploration and development processes common to this phase of life.

Academic Identity Outcomes for Black Students

Academic self-concept. Developmental psychologists affirm that academic identity development is a key developmental process that begins early in life and continues into young adulthood (Juntunen & Schwartz, 2016). Cokley's (2002a) work identified academic self-concept as a key component of students' academic identity and a key factor in the academic success of Black college students. Academic self-concept, or the learner's global evaluation of their ability to be successful in an academic setting, has consistently been linked to positive academic outcomes for Black students (e.g., Awad, 2007). For Black college students, academic self-concept represents one of the strongest predictors of academic success regardless of institutional type (Cokley, 2000; 2002a). Cokley's research also documented unique contributors to the academic self-concept of Black students attending HBCUs and PWIs. The quality of one's relationship with faculty was the best predictor of academic self-concept for Black students attending HBCUs, whereas cumulative GPA was the best predictor of academic self-concept for Black students at PWIs. These findings suggest that institutional differences between PWIs and HBCUs may affect the academic identity development of Black learners.

Although academic identity outcomes are influenced by individual, intrapersonal and interpersonal and institutional factors, the academic identity of Black students is not often explored in connection with contextual and environmental variables. Available research suggests that incorporating academic identity outcomes is an important endeavor in understanding the academic success of this group (Cokley, 2003). Black educators have long acknowledged the centrality of positive academic identity for the success of Black pupils (Akbar, 1998; Perry, Steele & Hilliard, 2003). In the absence of positive academic identity, we witness several identity-related dilemmas that detract from overall scholastic achievement and engagement, namely "the burden of 'acting White'" and academic disidentification.

"Burden of 'acting White'". Since the publication of their study on the "burden of 'acting White'" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), many educators have narrowly focused on accusations of "acting White" among Black learners and its pernicious impact on their academic identity (Fordham, 2008). Fordham asserts that throughout U.S. history, Black students have been inundated with deficit-oriented, pathology-driven messages about their intellectual acuity and scholarly aptitude. Within a White supremacist nation, they are socialized to see Whiteness as superior and link positive academic, economic and social outcomes with the dominant racial group. Fordham contends that Black students are rewarded for mimicking Whites by valuing their arts, history and culture above the contributions of African descent people.

After centuries of these noxious assaults on their academic abilities, some Black students have internalized and even regurgitate the White supremacist ideology they have received about their supposedly limited academic skills as well as the reduced scholarly prowess of other Blacks (Cokley, 2002c). Master narratives of “the achievement gap” continuously reinforce this myth of Black intellectual inferiority (Leonardo, 2004). As a result, these messages can undermine the development of a strong academic identity for some Black students and augment the “acting White” myth that links educational success primarily with Whiteness.

Academic disidentification. In addition to internalized beliefs related to “acting White”, educational psychologists have identified another negative identity outcome that occurs in institutional settings where Black students’ academic identity is not cultivated and nourished (Osborne & Jones, 2011). Among academically healthy students, we often find a strong association between their overall self-evaluation, identification with academics and their current GPA. When this relationship is absent, educational psychologists categorize this condition as academic disidentification. Academic disidentification involves three worsening conditions (i.e., devaluing academic outcomes, discounting educational assessments, and disengagement from school-related activities) that deteriorate students’ positive academic identity to a total disconnection from academic pursuits.

In an optimal learning environment for Black students, we hope to find students with a strong academic identity or high academic self-concept. However, based on the low retention and graduation rates witnessed among this group, it is clear that for some Black students at PWIs academic disidentification and disengagement is a reality. As concerned educators, we must proactively address this pressing concern. Rather than identifying strategies that will minimize the historical assaults on the academic identity of Black students at PWIs, many researchers focus primarily on deficit-oriented constructs, such as the “achievement gap”, academic disengagement and academic disidentification among Black learners. African-centered scholars, in contrast, acknowledge that even within oppressive milieus like PWIs, African peoples consistently formulate ways to cope with and resist potentially destructive social forces (Myers, 1993). We contend that ABS courses provide one venue to facilitate this optimal approach for dealing with racial hurdles and developing a strong academic identity.

Africana/Black Studies and Emancipatory Education Framework

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks (1994) describes the classroom environment as a space with the greatest potential to liberate and as the “most radical space for possibility” (p. 12). This philosophy is apparent in pedagogical approaches utilized within ABS. This liberatory stance has been highlighted by multiple scholars who collectively suggest that increased self and collective awareness undergirds Black students’ ability to succeed in school, and more broadly navigate White culturally dominated environments (Boggs, 1998; Chapman-Hilliard & Adams-Bass, 2015; King, 2004).

For example, Lewis and colleagues (2006) discuss emancipatory education (e.g., “freedom education”) as a pedagogical framework that aims to connect Black students with their African history and culture, liberating students from racist ideologies that may be present in the classroom context.

Common aims of effective emancipatory education pedagogy include: increasing school engagement, promoting involvement in social action, and increasing academic motivation and academic achievement (Lewis, 2004a/b). To achieve these goals, theorists like Shockley and Frederick (2010) contend that *cultural reattachment*, a deep structure analysis of African history and culture in relation to self and community, is necessary for Black students to excel academically. ABS courses provide precisely the kind of connection with history and analysis of that history which the aforementioned scholars discuss.

Emancipatory educational practices require educators to facilitate in-class environments that assist students in experiencing a radical transformation of their understanding of themselves (Potts, 2003). Emancipatory didactic interactions offer space to not only explore and understand the self, but also opportunities to engage in critical reflection on self-in-representation to others, one’s country and world history (Akbar, 1998; Freire, 2000). These encounters are critical for shaping the academic identity development and outcomes of Black learners. Borrowing from identity development theory (Cross, Strauss, Fhagen-Smith, 1999), we will highlight the liberatory potential of ABS along a trajectory of identity development and connect the emancipatory potential of ABS courses to these identity changes.

Africana/Black Studies Courses and Academic Identity Development

Identity development scholars posit Black learners will often be characterized by anti-Black and pro-White ideologies early on in their identity development (Cross et al., 1999). Similarly, ABS scholars contend that throughout the PK-20 educational system Black students are force-fed a White (male) supremacist educational diet that fails to nourish their intellectual drive and starves their indigenous curiosity (Asante, 1991). Within this oppressive scholastic milieu, it is more likely that miseducated Black students will articulate that educational excellence is “acting White” since they explicitly and implicitly receive these messages in their schooling. These scholars note that we should expect that some Black students would become academically disidentified with this type of course content generally and schools more broadly (Cokley, 2006). Recognition of the link between disempowering and culturally anemic coursework of “mainstream” or “traditional” educational settings and deleterious identity outcomes, ABS courses can provide an identity-affirming encounter that can drastically alter how Black learners see themselves and the world (Adams, 2014; Carter, 2007).

This encounter with novel information in ABS courses can motivate individuals to reexamine their previously held beliefs and assumptions (Cross et al., 1999). This second stage of identity development involves a reanalysis of prior beliefs, which can be pivotal for academic identity development and resilience. The underlying roots of academic disidentification (devaluing academic outcomes, discounting validity of academic outcomes and academic disengagement) and the “burden of ‘acting White’” are analyzed within a sociohistorical context. Incorporating the discipline’s multidisciplinary approach, ABS directly challenges poisonous messages of White superiority by inserting the strengths-based narratives of Black people.

Encounter experience(s) may spark a desire to immerse oneself in the African knowledge base and consume more information in this area (Cross et al., 1999). Academic identity development among young adults requires multiple opportunities to examine one’s individual and collective interests and passions (Cross et al.). This identity model emphasizes the value of immersing oneself in the history, culture, and traditions of one’s group as a key aspect of identity development. This immersive, identity-affirming educational experience is provided by ABS courses since they provide educational content that illuminates the pivotal contributions of African people to the development of the U.S. and the global community. As students recognize the invaluable contributions of African descent individuals, they are implicitly forced to challenge the “acting White” myths that minimize the links between positive Black identity and academic excellence. They also can replace the “burden of ‘acting White,’” which highlights the historical legacy of how mimicking Whiteness facilitates optimal outcomes, with a more culturally-informed perspective that recognizes the brilliance, creativity and genius of Black people in a diverse range of professions (Chapman-Hilliard & Adams-Bass, 2015).

The final component in the identity development journey is an internalized positive identity and a commitment to social action (Cross et al., 1999). Incorporating the principles of *Sankofa*, Black learners are encouraged to critically examine the lessons of our past and apply this information to present-day concerns (Watson & Wiggin, 2016). Attention to contemporary issues that directly affect Black communities is a key ingredient that ABS courses and pedagogy offer to the academic identity development of Black collegians. When students are able to see a clear connection between the learning transpiring in the classroom and translate this knowledge into actions that tackle current problems, they are less likely to devalue academic pursuits, discount educational assessments or disidentify with school. Consequently, academic spaces become sites of personal engagement, commitment and collective advocacy (hooks, 1994).

ABS courses can prepare Black students to effectively intervene in their own communities. Students in ABS courses can continue the discipline’s legacy of fighting for racial justice. Challenging mass incarceration, police brutality, the shootings of unarmed Black people, poverty, educational inequality and other pressing social issues requires the information students can acquire in ABS courses. Rather than passively learning information and regurgitating it for examinations, students will be excited about attending class and leave feeling empowered to affect change (Chapman-Hilliard & Beasley, under review).

This shift in attitudes toward education encapsulates the change from academic disidentification to the development of positive academic self-concept. Being provided the tools to act on these issues helps students to hone their academic abilities, combat academic disidentification, and promote positive academic identification. Clearly, ABS supports the positive academic identity development of Black students in multiple ways. While ABS course content is a critical aspect in the development of positive academic identity outcomes, prior research suggests that the individuals delivering the course materials play a key role in facilitating the benefits linked to these liberatory courses.

Africana/Black Studies Courses and Student-Faculty Relationships

Student-faculty relationships have been found to be an important part of the college experience (Cokley, 2002b). For Black students at PWIs, mistrust and social distance with faculty may create barriers in student-faculty relationships, as Black collegians at PWIs have been found to report less positive student-faculty relationships, more negative perceptions of academic performance evaluations, and an increased perception of faculty as culturally insensitive compared to those at HBCUs (Cokley, 2000; Turner & Fries-Britt, 2002). Black collegians who trust their faculty less have been found to have poorer academic outcomes (McClain & Cokley, in press).

ABS professors are uniquely positioned to have a positive impact on student-faculty relationships at PWIs. The exposure to the higher proportion of Black scholars within Africana Studies, alone, is likely to be beneficial, as Black students report more positive interactions with same-race faculty at PWIs (Chism & Satcher, 1998). Beyond race, scholarship suggests some professors are particularly successful in building stronger student-faculty relationships and drawing positive contact outside the classroom through their classroom behavior, including professors who help students feel personally stimulated by course content, use active learning strategies, create an environment where students can appropriately challenge a professors' ideas, and facilitate time spent working in groups (Cox, McIntosh, Terenzini, Reason, & Lutovsky Quaye, 2010; Hurtado et al., 2011).

This set of teaching strategies and experiences is in line with the pedagogy more likely to be used by ABS faculty. Tillotson (2014) notes that ABS courses should, ideally, be “clearly and distinctively cut from the cloth of the African-centered intellectual tradition, and those specific pedagogical articulations must be reflected in the classroom experience” (p. 208). One example of an African-centered pedagogy is *Kufundisha* (Neville & Cha-Jua, 1998). This model involves a method of instruction in which professors de-center themselves and actively engage students by emphasizing learning as a social process, seeking to develop an environment that encourages both constructive criticism and cooperation, and uses examples that reflect the experiences of Black students. Thus, ABS courses that emphasize Afrocentric teaching methods can help students build positive relationships with their professors as well as enhance their academic identity development.

Black students whose academic identity is strengthened through emancipatory pedagogy of ABS coursework may have improved student-professor interactions across disciplines (e.g., Adams, 2014). Although scholars generally focus on the benefits that positive student-faculty relationships has on strengthening students' academic self-concept, these may be mutually reinforcing constructs. The increased academic interest and intrinsic motivation of such students, as well as decreased devaluing of academic success that have been found to be associated with academic self-concept (Cokley & Chapman, 2008; Hurtado, 1994) may improve students' classroom experiences and relationships with instructors more broadly. Further, scholars suggest that an increased sense of success and academic competency may also be more likely to positively gain the attention of faculty members (Fleming, 1984), such that students are able to have more positive and constructive exchanges with faculty. These stronger student-faculty relationships not only enhance academic identity outcomes, but also contribute to strong academic and social engagement outcomes both in the ABS courses as well as other areas of Black students' development.

Africana/Black Studies Courses and Academic and Social Engagement

Higher education scholars report that academic and social engagement are variables that distinguish academically successful Black collegians from their less successful counterparts (Nelson Laird et al., 2007). A continually growing body of literature draws attention to the influence of ABS and similarly focused pedagogies on Black students' academic and social engagement in college (e.g., Adams, 2014). Specifically, the Africana/ Black Studies curriculum and the environment created in these classrooms has been cited as importantly contributing to the academic engagement and social adjustment of Black students at PWIs often by creating an environment of possibility and empowerment (Carter, 2007).

Recent studies suggest that Black Studies courses appear to have a positive impact of academic achievement in terms of grade point average and school engagement among Black students attending PWIs (Adams, 2005; 2009; Chapman-Hilliard & Beasley, under review). Adams (2005) conducted a study that examined the influence of Black Studies enrollment on Black collegians' academic and social experiences at a southern PWI and found that students endorsed increased academic achievement and greater interest in school after having been enrolled in Black Studies courses. Another study compared Black Studies majors and minors to counterparts who had not taken Black Studies courses and found that students who had taken multiple courses in ABS reported greater academic persistence and demonstrated higher graduation rates (Adams, 2009).

The pedagogical practice and the content emphasized in ABS courses may also importantly influence students' social engagement, adjustment and satisfaction. Black Studies courses have been identified as safe, intellectual spaces for Black students where they were less inundated by institutional racial prejudices (Adams, 2005).

Other research suggests that Black students enrolled in these courses describe them as spaces that facilitate their comfort in class and on campus, particularly in managing race-related issues that may arise on predominately White campuses (Chapman-Hilliard & Beasley, under review).

Taken together, we might consider the synergistic relationship among racial identity, academic performance, and emancipatory encounters, and suggest that as Black students connect more with emancipatory spaces, they become increasingly culturally conscious and critical of their environments which in turn may be associated with achievement-related outcomes as well as campus social engagement, adjustment and satisfaction. Furthermore, these spaces appear to enable Black students to challenge notions of academic inferiority and to validate personal and collective cultural narratives (Banks, 2004; King, 2004), which have significant implications for negotiating academic and psychosocial barriers in the college context and increasing subsequent academic and social engagement. These studies lend credence the relationship between enrollment in ABS and successful collegiate experiences. We strongly encourage faculty members, ABS scholars, and administrators to utilize the insights gleaned from this discipline to enhance the recruitment, retention and graduation of Black students.

Implications for Recruitment, Retention and Graduation

Instructors/Faculty members. Whether faculty teach coursework related to ABS or in divergent fields, faculty should work to enhance the experience and retention of Black students. Most Black students navigate their schooling, including higher education, without seeing their own cultural narratives and history reflected in course content and without being able to connect their schooling to how to make a better life for other Black people (Cokley, 2006). When professors are able to integrate material and examples that reflect the experiences of Black students, students are presented with course content that does not present a distorted view of the history and experiences of Black people. As such, students may not only be more likely to feel more interested in their educational experience, but also more connected to their instructors.

All faculty, particularly White faculty, should be mindful to seek out positive experiences with Black students, such as calling on a student when his/her hand is raised and soliciting time with students outside the classroom for both positive feedback and constructive criticism. Such feedback might include “wise” strategies seeking to convey to students that they are not being judged on the basis of stereotypes, but appreciated as capable individuals (Cohen & Steele, 2002). Faculty with smaller class sizes might require students to attend office hours so that they may solicit these positive experiences without having to single out Black students. Professors are also encouraged to utilize teaching techniques found to enhance student-faculty relationships and to connect with different student learning styles, including the integration of Afrocentric approaches in the classroom (Neville & Cha-Jua, 1998). This may include emphasizing learning as a social process and encouraging cooperation between both students and faculty.

Africana/Black Studies Researchers

Inherent in advocating for an African-centered emancipatory educational approach for Black college students is the hypothesis that affirming a student's cultural identity is associated with beneficial social and academic outcomes. ABS researchers must continue to document these benefits (Adams, 2009; 2014). Future quantitative and qualitative research must systematically examine the curriculum in ABS courses to identify the transformative aspects of these courses from content to student-faculty interactions. Researchers must also attempt to quantitatively assess the effects of ABS enrollment on academic and psychosocial outcomes of Black students, highlighting concepts such as academic identity, student-faculty interactions and academic and social engagement. Longitudinal studies that assess the long-term effects of taking these culturally-grounded courses are also sorely needed as qualitative findings from Adams (2014) suggest that graduates of Africana/Black Studies programs report long-term gains in shaping their lives and careers after taking these courses. Further, with the increased reliance on technology and the globalization of higher education, ABS researchers are encouraged to utilize contemporary technology platforms as emancipatory education tools to support the dissemination of knowledge and encourage students' to develop novel ways to learn by creating technology applications (e.g., King, 2014). Systematic evaluation of what pedagogical strategies are most effective should be documented and disseminated to other ABS instructors to maximize the benefits of these technological innovations as well as increase the interchanges between ABS researchers and instructors.

Higher Education Administrators

ABS courses play an important role in increasing academic success and decreasing psychosocial barriers to fully engaging the campus community at PWIs (e.g., Adams, 2014). As such, administrators of academic institutions are called to support programs that are consistent with the goals of an emancipatory education paradigm. While the specific needs of students may differ across campuses, the goals of emancipatory programming should aim to increase personal and collective autonomy of Black students. Hence, academic institutions might establish discernable guidelines about implementing emancipatory pedagogy. Namely, administrators should consider developing working groups made up of college/ university personnel to identify common elements of emancipatory education and explore how that content might be included in existing courses or programming both within ABS departments and other departments. Additionally, in the face of continued disinvestment in higher education, continued financial support of ABS is critical if we hope to accrue the positive benefits for Black students that are associated with this discipline. Drawing from the knowledge of ABS instructors and research from ABS scholars, administrators must be aware of the value of ABS courses and work to ensure their presence is an institutional priority.

Conclusion

If current trends continue, the majority of Black students will continue to enroll in PWIs. The identification of strategies that attend to their social, cultural, spiritual, academic development is a paramount concern. The emancipatory pedagogy and course content of ABS can be a critical piece to consider as higher education stakeholders grapple with the need to enhance the recruitment, retention and graduation of Black students. While we acknowledge that ABS courses do not represent the panacea for the problems facing Black students at PWIs, we want to emphasize the need for cultural and institutional changes that mirror the lessons gleaned from this discipline to maximize the potential of higher education for Black learners—promoting academic identification through educational emancipation.

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