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African-American college students: The struggle for identity and acceptance

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Abstract

Promoting cultural diversity is of nation wide concern on college campuses. There have been many articles written on the need for diversity on college campuses. Unfortunately, despite having recognized the value of cultural diversity, many institutions have failed to adequately fund or support programs which are meant to achieve diversity. This paper will examine the treatment of African-American students. Pertinent issues considered will be societal pressures, African-American racial identity issues, financial pressure, and the effects of racism. All of these issues are important because they determine student success in college. The paper will conclude with recommendations for the future.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS:
THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY AND ACCEPTANCE

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Teri Koehn

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Promoting cultural diversity is of nation wide concern on college campuses. There have been many articles written on the need for diversity on college campuses. Unfortunately, despite having recognized the value of cultural diversity, many institutions have failed to adequately fund or support programs which are meant to achieve diversity. This paper will examine the treatment of African-American students. Pertinent issues considered will be societal pressures, African-American racial identity issues, financial pressure, and the effects of racism. All of these issues are important because they determine student success in college. The paper will conclude with recommendations for the future.

Societal Pressures

Many scholars consider the Reagan era to represent a marked change by diminishing the attention to the promotion of cultural diversity (Bell, 1991). Reflective of this resurgent conservatism such issues as equality and social justice seemed of less importance to many policy makers. A Reagan appointee to the Justice Department contended: "The fact is, racism no longer accounts for the problems faced by most members of minority groups. The real barriers to opportunity are drug abuse, street crime, teenage pregnancy, family deterioration, illiteracy, and inferior education" (Eastland, 1988, p.A52).

The Reagan administration supported the idea of parity. "Parity is based on the rationale that without discrimination minorities and women would be represented in all levels of all organizations proportionate to their existence in the workforce" (Bell, 1991, p.332). Under a parity based system, college administrators analyze their students and employees to determine if women and minorities are for under utilized. If so, an affirmative action plan is implemented to change the situation. The end results of utilizing this type of system are explained by Stetson (1984):

> I am left with one very basic and disturbing conclusion: Our universities have spent more time in validating the process than achieving progress and until or unless that changes; we will continue to publish and monitor lengthy affirmative action plans that do little more than justifies the absence of minorities and women. (p.10)

An affirmative action program only works when the program is part of a serious effort with commitment by all parties to making it successful.

James D. Williams, writing for Crisis, quotes Helen Lefkowitz's observations concerning cultural changes on college campuses that have occurred since the 1970s:

> Increased minority enrollment meant one thing when the
> economic pie was growing larger. But as it shrank, some
> white undergraduates felt their privileges were being eroded
> by opening up admission and financial aid to blacks and
> browns and by compensatory programs; and they turned hostile
> to any indication of reverse discrimination. (1990, p.23)

The concerns of these white students tended to mirror those of
whites who were feeling threatened by the effects of affirmative
action programs in the job marketplace. The importance of
economic self-interest allowed these individuals to disregard the
need for undoing injustices which have been perpetrated against
minorities throughout the course of American history. African-
American student development has helped to understand how these
injustices effected their development as a race and as
individuals.

African-American Racial Identity Issues

African-American student development evolves around issues
of race and how skin color may define one's role in society.
Parham (1981) and Cross'(1978) theories attempt to explain the
process or cycles of racial identification. They emphasize that
the culture of a race serves to influence racial identity, which
impacts overall personality development.

Parham (1981) centers his thoughts on the concept of
"psychological Nigrescence." He fails to clearly identify the
concept except to say that it is somehow connected to the movement
from the racial epithet Nigger to Black. Smith criticizes this
concept and contends it is not clearly explained and "conjures up
a troubled period in history" (1989, p.279). Smith recalls the
following story to explain her feelings:

> I can still hear Malcolm asking: "Do you know what a Black
> person is with a Ph.D.--a Nigger. It makes no difference at
> all how much education you get. In the eyes of most Whites,
> you're still just a Nigger. (1989, p.278)

Smith goes on to suggest that the concept should be renamed
because of negative stigma attached to the word.

Parham (1981) suggests through his stages of development
that racial identity is more important than human identity:

> the first stage might be conceptualized as movement toward
> the aggressor--the desire for acculturation and assimila-
> tion. The second stage might be viewed as movement against
> the aggressor-- White people are the enemies now. The third
> stage might be conceptualized as movement away from the ag-
> gressor, and the fourth stage is a stage of incorporation.
> (Smith, 1989. 280)

Clearly racism and how one does or does not deal with it make up Parham's stages. Parham appears to say that the process of development for many African-Americans is significantly different from the universally shared american Caucasian process.

Cross' developmental theory has four stages. The first is called the "preencounter stage," during which it is "characterized by a limited self-awareness about difference and dependence upon majority groups for a sense of worth and by an attitude toward the world and self that is determined by the majority group" (Upcraft & Moore, 1990, p.57).

The second stage is the encounter stage. During this stage there is a perception between the differences in majority and minority groups. This awareness usually comes about because of a specific event. Also there is a search for a African-American group identity and a reinterpretation of perspective that can deepen the blow of discrimination (Upcraft & Moore, 1990).

The immersion stage or the third stage allows for the extinction of the old identity and the veneration of the new identity of a minority group. During this stage, members may "behave as though the majority group were not human, feel a very strong attachment to the minority group, confront the system, and participate in political action on behalf of their group" (Upcraft & Moore, 1990, p.57).

The fourth stage is the "internalization stage." There is an internalization of the new identity and "the individual can renegotiate with the majority" (Upcraft & Moore, 1990, p.57). Cross and Parham's stages seem to be similar in nature. These stages help the professional understand how complex the developmental processes of African-American students are and how their experience may be different from other groups of students.

Financial Pressures

Hostility toward anything with a connotation of reverse discrimination is demonstrated by a "cover story in the April 26, 1989, Chronicle of Higher Education which observed, that on many campuses, white 'students believe that minority group members today enjoy unfair advantages and that whites are being victimized by efforts intended to correct past discrimination'" (Lynch, 1990, p.66). One white female student reflects this animosity:

> At Pennsylvania State University, blacks not only get
> special preference in admissions but they are also eligible
> for $500 "Black Achievement Awards" for maintaining a "C"
> average and $1,000 for maintaining a "C+" average, "When I
> hear stuff like that, it really angers me." (Lynch, 1990,
> p.66)

The rise in white resentment towards affirmative action programs has coincided with harsher economic conditions. Furthermore, many

whites feel they should not have to atone for past generations discriminatory actions.

Resentment aside, financial need prevents access to a college education for many minorities. "Sudarkasa (1988) claims that the recent decline in federal financial aid is a major reason for the decreased enrollment of black and Hispanics in higher education" (Brown, 1991, p.225). Another contributing factor is that very often financial aid awards consist primarily of loans instead of grants. Blacks are often reluctant to borrow large sums of money for an education that could potentially burden an already financially disadvantaged family with large long term debts.

Even though the number of financial aid awards to lowest-income students remained fairly constant between 1974 and 1981, the amounts awarded failed to keep abreast with inflation and actually decreased in size during this period. Unfortunately, blacks suffered disproportionately due to these cuts in aid. "Although black students were more likely than white students to receive an aid award in both 1974 and 1981, black students were more likely to receive a smaller award, but white students were more likely to receive a larger award in 1981 than 1974" (Davis & Johns, 1987, p.164). The consequences are a serious drop-out problem on college campuses among African-American students.

The Drop-out Rate and Student Experiences

The percentage of blacks enrolled on college campuses has continuously declined since the late 1970s. In 1978, the enrollment of full-time black undergraduate students peaked at 10.6 percent but there has been a steady drop each year since. By 1984, the total enrollment of blacks at all levels was a mere 8.8 percent (Wharton, 1988, p.4).

Clifton Wharton, the former Chancellor of State University of New York, explains that the decline in enrollment is due to the "obscenely high dropout rate in our [high] schools" (1988, p.5). Solomon Arbeiter suggests that instead of entering college, blacks have chosen to "enter the armed services, to work in business or industry, or finish their education in noncollegiate post secondary schools" (1987, p.16).

For those blacks who do choose to attend college, the drop-out rate is higher than that of whites. Academic retention programs are needed on all college campuses to correct this problem. The most successful programs are, not surprisingly, at predominantly black colleges and universities. They emphasize "the need to provide students with directions by taking them from where they are, both academically and personally, to where they need to be to become competent, self-assured, and successful in their academic pursuits" (Brown, 1991, p.227).

Addressing these student needs is particularly important during the freshman year of college, especially in helping black students on predominately white campuses. While necessary academic, social, and personal transitions can be quite difficult for all students during this period, black students are too often confronted with additional difficulties which can have long lasting ramifications:

> His freshmen year experience had corroded his sense of self like a running stream wears a rock down to a pebble. The first rejection came when he arrived from Virginia as a star basketball player but did not make the freshman squad. . . And that is what he talked about. Sure he feels good about what he has accomplished since then--a college degree, a standout in a European basketball league, a charming family, and high-paying job. But when he reviews his freshman year, the irrefutable ugly demonstration of racism subdues him even 25 years later. (Beckman, 1988, p.75)

It is imperative that supportive faculty, administration, and student peers, provide students help in dealing with the manifold problems confronting them. If institutions are serious in their intent to promote cultural diversity, they need to specifically address the needs of minority students in order to combat the higher drop-out rates among minorities.

Racism

Racism is a major problem on many college campuses. "Between the fall of 1986 and the beginning of 1990, the Baltimore-based National Institute Against Prejudice and Violence, tracked racial incidents, including potentially lethal assaults, classroom and dormitory harassment, personal insults, graffiti and property damage at approximately 250 colleges and universities" (Williams, 1990, p.22). While these overt racist acts are usually met with societal and institutional condemnation, more insidious forms of racism permeate many college campuses unwittingly fostered by ignorance and insensitivity.

While white students' insensitivity towards the feelings of minorities is often unintentional, there are occasions when it is intentional. There are numerous intentional acts of violence and racism:

> a white fraternity at Drexel University in Philadelphia had its pledges parade around the campus in blackface wearing Afro wigs, white fraternity members from the University of Mississippi were taken to a traditionally black school, Rust College, where they were paraded around the campus displaying KKK written on their chests, and at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, billiard balls were thrown

through the windows of the Black Cultural Center. (Williams,

1990, p.23)

While this kind of behavior did not physically harm anyone, it contributes towards racial tensions which deter the growth of a healthy racial atmosphere.

Conclusions

Our society is rapidly changing. The United States is experiencing a large wave of immigrants that are predominately from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia (Shaw, 1991). Adapting to these changes is difficult at best, and the nations colleges should lead the way in facing the challenge. To facilitate change, African-American student development and racial issues that concern every student, regardless of color, should be addressed in the classroom and through a healthy campus environment.

Charles Brown (1991) suggests several ways to increase the enrollment and graduation of minorities in four-year institutions of higher education. Attractive financial aid packages are a necessity due to the diminished economic capacity of most minorities. The existence of a healthy multi-cultural environment is helpful in attracting minority students to a college campus. It is also important that efforts at increasing the numbers of

minorities be complemented by efforts meant to insure the existence of a culturally diverse faculty and staff.

Brown asserts that there should be an academic retention program with "a clearly stated university policy, a high degree of institutional commitment, comprehensive services, dedicated personnel, systematic collection of data, strong faculty support and monitoring and follow-up of participants without stigmatization" (1991, p.226). It is important that faculty and staff be sensitive to the needs of minorities.

Lines of communication should be kept open between colleges and guidance counselors in predominately African-American high schools. The social climate on campus should include activities that are multicultural in nature. Finally, Brown suggests there should be an explicit commitment by the institution's governing board to increase the presence of minority students.

Instead of just offering idealistic platitudes concerning the value and benefits of cultural diversity, colleges need to take positive actions in order to achieve this diversity and provide a model for society as whole. While it is unlikely that any programs may be implemented which can instantaneously create a non-racist and harmonious campus utopia, there is no justification for maintaining the status quo.

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