SEM▼WORKS

Providing the Conditions for the Success of African-American Students

Guess Who's Coming to College . . . unprepared to face the stark realities presented to them upon arrival?—African-Americans and other racial minorities. College, a microcosm of the American "melting pot," is still ironically hampered by racial identity issues and separatist racial politics. This is particularly evident at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), which now openly welcome students of color inside their doors, but often leaves them to succeed without the necessary support. When identifying achievement stresses in college, minority students frequently point to one common theme among their litany of examples—race: (1) not enough professors of my race; (2) few students of my race; (3) racist institutional policies and practices; (4) difficulty having friendships with non-minorities; (5) rude and unfair treatment because of race; (6) discrimination; (7) people close to me thinking I'm acting "white."[1] This paper will identify several challenges minorities face in achieving at the college level including academic preparedness, campus climate, commitment to educational goals and the institution, social and academic integration, and financial aid. However, the principal theme, as introduced by the stressors above, is that of isolation based directly and indirectly on race. The paper will attempt to address strategies for closing the gap to bring everyone together. And while the focus is primarily on African-American students, the implications are significant for all students and families that intend to embark on the college endeavor.

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[1] Swail, Watson Scott. "Retaining Minority Students in Higher Education: A Framework for Success," Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. (2003) 58.

Academic Preparedness and Support

Academic preparedness represents the educational ability demonstrated by grade point average, SAT or ACT scores, providing an estimate of the likelihood of the entrant's ability to be successful in college upon matriculation from high school.[2] Low income and minority students are far more likely to be educated in under-resourced, understaffed schools that expect far too little of their students and therefore, get minimal effort in return.[3] Thus, the expectations of college-level classes may come as a surprise to those same students. It is not so much that this particular group is failing but that they have been failed. Without the requisite skills needed to survive the rigorous curricula of most college campuses, many students underachieve and leave college during their freshman year or before their sophomore year begins.[4] Swail highlights a key point—*underachieve*—which is to fail to attain results commensurate with one's assumed potential. To allow students to plateau without that opportunity, fails the promises of our educational system more than it does each individual student.

The article further asserts that rigorous high school courses help students amass the reading and critical thinking skills that best prepare students for college-level classes. This, along with support of peers, family, and friends, are among the most significant factors contributing to whether students are prepared for and motivated to enroll in college, regardless of race, ethnicity, income, or

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[2] Henderson, Floyd and William Allan Kritsonis. Graduation Rates at Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A Review of the Literature. *National Journal for Publishing and Mentoring Doctoral Student Research*. (2007) 6.
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] Swail. "Retaining Minority Students in Higher Education: A Framework for Success." 51.

almost any other background variable.[5] This reaffirms the premise that it is not that students of color lack intrinsic motivation or ability to achieve, but that many children are not surrounded by the positive psychosocial network to reinforce behavior that emphasizes education. As Swail notes, such a lack of positive reinforcement may cross all ethnic boundaries. However, to the extent that a disproportionate number of African-American or Hispanic students find themselves in this quandary, the more the development gap will persist. It also provides the first indicator of campus climate challenges to be discussed next.

Solutions:

1. Expect more from all students in the K–12 curricula. No Child Left Behind should allow all children to get ahead.
2. Reinforce the need for positive friend and family networks.
3. Invest in mentoring programs.
4. Reinforce good behavior; work to resolve negative attitudes.

Campus Climate

Subarctic! Campus relations can be quite frigid as colleges seek to strike a balance between diverse student populations and a welcoming atmosphere. The normal challenges of indoctrinating oneself through college are often difficult; however, minority students at PWIs encounter additional stresses.[6] Often, minority students, already faced with academic insecurities may be faced with "culture shock" as they are unprepared to meet the challenges of a new

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[5] *Ibid.* at 57.
[6] *Ibid.*

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environment. Students of color often feel trivialized on their own PWI campuses. Gonzalez reports that many college administrators did not accept their styles of bilingual communication, dress, and music, and excluded physical and academic representations of their culture from campus life. The pervasiveness of these types of marginalizations serves to demean ethnic minorities on campus.[7] As a result, some African-Americans and Asian Americans perceived and experienced greater pressure to conform to stereotypes and had less favorable interactions with faculty and staff.[8]

A nurturing environment for black students is helpful in having a positive impact on black student retention rates. For instance, Brown University and University of California at Berkeley have both had their share of racial incidents on campus. However, Brown has notably taken initiatives to make its campus a better place for African-Americans. In contrast, Berkeley is perceived as less welcoming due to the small number of blacks on campus as a direct result of the institution's abolition of race-sensitive admissions.[9]

The presence of a strong and relatively large core of black students on campus is, thus, important. Among the highest-ranked colleges and universities, institutions that tend to have a low percentage of blacks in their student head count (e.g., Cal Tech, Bates, Davidson, and Carleton) also tend to have lower black student graduation rates.[10]

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[7] *Ibid.* at 59.
[8] *Ibid*.
[9] "Black Student College Graduation Rates Inch Higher But a Large Racial Gap Persists," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. http://www.jbhe.com/preview/winter07preview.html. (2007)
[10] *Ibid*.

That said, graduation rates at HBCUs tend to be a mixed bag. The graduation rates at HBCUs tend to be much lower than the graduation rates for black students at some of the nation's most well-regarded institutions. While a high percentage of black students by itself is likely not a primary indicator of student success, it proves to be one variable that effects the potential of said students to achieve. This becomes more apparent at selective institutions in which black students may feel particularly out of place absent a significant support network. Also, notably, the graduation rate at a significant number of HBCUs overall is well above the national average for black student graduations. Spelman, Fisk, Claflin, Hampton, Miles College, Howard, Morehouse, and Elizabeth City State students performed especially well.

In sum, prestigious PWIs with an above-average percentage of African-Americans and relatively well-endowed HBCUs seem to be of the most benefit to African-American students.

Solutions:

1. Foster greater social integration of racial minorities at prominent PWIs.[11]

2. Develop bridge programs, structured campus residences, and mentoring designed to help students transition to college.[12]

3. Examine and improve the institution's relationships with community minority organizations.[13]

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[11] Swail. "Retaining Minority Students in Higher Education, " 61
[12] *Ibid*.

4. Provide orientation programs that actually help integrate minority students into campus culture, rather than separatist programs initiated in the name of "comfort."

Commitment to Educational Goals and the Institution

The level of institutional commitment exhibited by a student depends on the congruence between the students' educational goals and the institution's mission.[14] Students who believe that education is important for their later success are more engaged in school and receive better grades.[15] In essence, to the extent that a student is able to identify with their school, the more likely that student will succeed. Unfortunately, due to some of the previously mentioned factors, minority students often have trouble integrating into a college campus environment. One study notes that black students prefer religion and family to identity and career pursuits.[16] I would argue that these preferences are more of an outlet to which they turn when feeling marginalized by their very own campus environment. Religion and family often prove to be an empowering alternative.

Like any relationship, both parties must show a willingness to work toward a common goal. To the extent that the university's message is dissonant from its policies and to the extent that minority students disengage from the learning process rather than embrace it, the goals of the individual and the institution will remain stratified.

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[13] *Ibid.*

[14] *Ibid.* at 62,

[15] Thornton, C. Value Orientations: A Study of Black College Students, *College Student Journal*, 38(1), 103–110 (2004).

[16] *Ibid.*

Solutions:

1. Assist students of color to succeed academically by implementing interventions aimed at ameliorating psychosocial distresses. [17]

2. Integrate students into the campus culture early and help them clarify career and academic goals through extensive and collaborative academic counseling.[18]

3. Design orientation programs that help emphasize to students that they matter to the institution and will be supported as they matriculate.[19]

4. Offer activities or programs that bring students together to facilitate the development of social and learning communities.[20]

Social and Academic Integration

Social support is defined as the degree to which a person's basic social needs are gratified through interaction with others . . . basic social approval, belonging, identity, and security.[21] Black students must have these needs met in order to succeed in a PWI environment. Griffen explains that early integration into the social academic fabric of the institution not only is correlated with persistence in college but also is conducive to the academic and social growth of

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[17] Duncan, L. "Overcoming Biases to Effectively Serve African-American College Students: A Call to the Profession.,*College Student Journal,* (2005), 39(4), 702–708.
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] "Use These 14 Tips to Aid Student Retention," Enrollment Management Report. www.lexis.com (2005) 9(3).
[20] *Ibid.*
[21] Allen, W., Epps, E.G., Haniff, N. College in Black and White, (1991) 146–147.

the student.[22] Naturally, motivation to succeed increases as students become a part of an environment that promotes their own well-being.

New friendships and peer interaction help students bridge the traumatic first weeks of the freshman year and offer other areas of personal and academic support.[23] African-American students are particularly affected by a sense of belonging. These students who engage in social activities become a part of the social environment and are more likely to persist.[24]

HBCUs have been found to provide more positive social support for African-American students than PWIs offer.[25] These students have fewer adjustment problems and engaged in more social activities through student networking. Fisk University has initiated successful programs that target at-risk groups.[26] One provides extra academic advising for students on endowed scholarships. Another, Fisk Fellows, is meant for male students, who, administrators believe, have a harder time adjusting to college than do females.

Peer relations also affect academic integration into a university. Being academically involved is defined as the extent to which the students work hard at their studies, the number of hours spent in course preparation, good study habits, and interest in their courses.[27] Student support for each other likely helps students persist in challenging course work during their college career. One

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[22] Griffen, O.T. "The Impacts of Academic and Social Integration for Black Students in Higher Education, In M. Lang and C. Ford Editions, *Strategies for Retaining Minority Students in Higher Education* (1992).
[23] Swail. "Retaining Minority Students in Higher Education," 64.
[24] *Id.*
[25] *Id.*
[26] Fischer, Karin. "A Historical Black College takes a Hands-on Approach to Student Success; The Chronicle of Higher Education," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, (2007) 53(9), 21.
[27] Hutto, Claude P., Fenwick, Leslie T. Staying in College, Student Services and Freshman Retention (2002), 6.

intervention program that supports this notion suggests that peer relationships were important in keeping students interested in the sciences.[28] However, more than any other institutional characteristic, frequent interaction with faculty was related to student satisfaction with college. [29]

Solutions:

1. Implement program activities for first-year students that will have a significant impact on their academic achievement and persistence. For example, a first-year seminar might focus on learning skills and techniques used by successful college students, including time management, test-taking, note-taking, and stress management.

2. Be aware that students who master course content but fail to develop adequate academic self-confidence, academic goals, institutional commitment, social support and involvement may still be at risk of dropping out. Students must develop a strong affiliation with the college academic environment both in and out of class.

3. Recruit mentors from several departments.

Financial Aid

Economic theory and educational research suggest that for students to persist to a college degree, the returns for receiving the degree must outweigh

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[28] Swail. "Retaining Minority Students in Higher Education," 64.
[29] Hutto and Fenwick. Staying in College, Student Services and Freshman Retention, 6.

the costs—over time—of attaining it.[30] For many low-income and minority students, enrollment and persistence are driven by the availability of financial aid.[31] Even with the availability of financial aid, however, students from racial and ethnic minorities are less likely than whites to enroll in a four-year college and earn a bachelor's degree.[32]

In 2006, the median household income of African-American families was $32,132 and $37,781 for Hispanics.[33] By comparison, white households had a combined income of $50,617.[34] Thus, by definition, many African-American and Latino families will require financial assistance to attend and persist in college.[35] Colleges should take action to assist all students in their efforts to remain in school regardless of financial constraints. If schools do not make an effort, a culture of indifference that alienates students and keeps them from returning will result. In other words, I would posit that lack of financial resources does not have to be a primary hindrance to graduating if colleges worked to resolve the issue in conjunction with the families of students who otherwise show an interest in remaining.

A series of financial aid policies in the 1990s led to a shift in grant and loan aid availability:

> (1) the reduced purchasing power of need-based grants, relative to increases in college costs; (2) more grant aid has come from state and institutional sources than the federal government; (3) the shift in federal

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[30] Swail. *Retraining Minority Students in Higher Education*, 67.
[31] *Ibid.*
[32] *Ibid.*
[33] Current Population Survey, A Joint Effort Between the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau, http://pubdb3.census.gov/macro/032007/hhinc/new04_001.htm (2007).
[34] *Ibid.*
[35] Swail. *Retraining Minority Students in Higher Education*, 67–8.

aid to student loan and tax credits; (4) shift of institutional and state grant aid from need-based to merit-based criteria.[36]

Need-based institutional grants tend to facilitate persistence.[37] Ninety percent of students who received grants in their first year, regardless of race or ethnicity or type of institution, were still enrolled in the second semester.[38] The highest completion rates were associated with aid limited to grants and packages consisting of grants, loans, and work-study.[39] Completion rates were lower for students whose packages emphasized loans.[40]

A major barrier to access and persistence is the lack of information for parents and students regarding, grants, loans, and scholarship opportunities.[41] Loans, in particular, are a standard component of most financial aid packages. However, some studies show that African-American and Hispanic students are less willing to finance their education with loans than their white counterparts.[42] As a result, the delivery of accurate and easy-to-follow information regarding loan availability regulations is an important factor for families.[43]

Financial counseling is the foundation for grants and loans programs.[44] Counseling allows campuses to reach out to families and students and offer a variety of avenues to finance college attendance. This ensures that families are a more significant part of the process, have a better understanding of the financial

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[36] *Ibid*. at 69.
[37] *Ibid* at 71.
[38] *Ibid*.
[39] *Ibid*.
[40] *Ibid*.
[41] *Ibid* at 94.
[42] *Ibid* at 72.
[43] *Ibid* at 94.
[44] *Ibid* at 95.

costs of their child's college endeavor, and hopefully have more incentive to profit from their education.

Solutions:

1. Review packaging procedures and ensure that students and families are educated about the loan process and that the loan represents a long-term investment against future returns.[45]

2. Be proactive in advising families of the price of college, selection criteria, and availability of financial aid opportunities.[46]

3. Apply for the federal government's College Completion Challenge grants, which support retention programs that combine academic and nonacademic factors. They are aimed primarily at high-risk, minority, first-generation and low-income students.[47]

Conclusion

This white paper highlights the angst surrounding the college experience, but emphasizes how those anxious moments are often intensified for minority students and particularly African-Americans. Such issues as academic preparedness, the student's relationship with peer groups and administration at the institution, and finances perhaps play a more significant role for such students than it does for their white counterparts. The paper does begin to offer

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[45] *Ibid*. at 94.
[46] *Ibid*.
[47] "Use these 14 tips to Aid Student Retention." Enrollment Management Report. www.lexis.com (2005) 9(3).

solutions to resolving some of these concerns, which includes an appeal to universities to be more accountable for poor retention rates for African-American students. Universities can begin to facilitate integrated orientation programs, offer mentors, and do a better job advising students and families about the financial aid process. Such efforts, however, also require the individual student to take greater pride in their education, make themselves aware of the school's financial, academic and social opportunities and engage in the process of learning outside of their comfort zone. Future research may compare and contrast the implications for other minority groups or offer case studies, which further profile colleges that have been relatively successful at easing the transition process for all students. Ultimately, welcoming a diverse student population is only half the battle, we meet them where they are and address their individual needs.