Challenges African American Students Face at Predominantly White Institutions

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In the twenty-first century, African American (black) students will continue to enroll in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) at greater rates than black students enrolling at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs); yet, if this current trend continues, over half of black students at PWIs will fail to persist and graduate (Allen, 1992). Several factors can facilitate or frustrate African American students who wish to complete a degree at a PWI. PWIs can play a vital role in contributing to the success of their students. HBCUs have found a formula for success in graduating large numbers of black students and PWIs may find that utilizing the HBCU model will lead to significant increases in retention and graduation rates of African American students and reduce the challenges these students face.

The desegregation of public schools with the landmark Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954) decision granted African Americans access to white institutions of higher education. The goal of integration appeared to bestow equal opportunity to blacks to further their education. Moreover, the approaching implementation of desegregation seemed to suggest that African Americans would begin to matriculate speedily and graduate from PWIs at the same or greater rate that they had achieved at HBCUs (Arminio, Carter, Jones, Kruger, Lucas, Washington, Young & Scott, 2000). Prior to 1954, HBCUs housed the majority of black students; by 1973, three-fourths of black students attended PWIs. Despite the increased enrollment of African Americans at PWIs, HBCUs still graduate a disproportionate number of black students in comparison to their historically white counterparts (Allen, 1992;
Easley, 1993). What inhibits black college students from fulfilling the goal of integration and what policies and philosophies of PWIs have kept the accessibility of a college degree to a bare minimum for black students?

Arguments have surfaced regarding the inequity in higher education for African American students. In general, black students seem academically, culturally, and economically incompatible with the PWI model of education (Hunt, Schmidt, Hunt, Boyd, & Magoon, 1994). The PWI model caters to individuals

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who academically meet white-created standards, such as high grade point averages and standardized test scores (Delgado, 1998; Easley, 1993; Sedlacek, 1999; Suen, 1983), who have culturally assimilated into mainstream society, and who possess the financial resources to pay for the rising cost of education. In effect, any student who does not identify with the tenets of the dominant paradigm in the United States can potentially struggle at PWIs. To cope with this system, some African American students have developed unique mechanisms to increase their chances of persistence (Kimbrough, Molock, & Walton, 1996), while many others who fail to establish those tools of persistence have fallen short in overcoming the challenges they face at PWIs. Some challenges that many blacks encounter at PWIs are hostile campuses, culturally ignorant students and staff, limited and decreasing economic assistance, lack of black faculty, and cultural alienation and isolation (Easley, 1993; Hawkins, 1989; Nagasawa & Wong, 1999; Taylor, 1989). By classifying and understanding the issues faced by African Americans at PWIs, the United States system of higher education can assist African American students to graduate and participate equally in education today.

THE CHALLENGES

When legally mandated to open their doors, PWIs admitted cultural outsiders with relatively little thought given or action taken to accommodate the ‘stranger’ (Saddlemire, 1996; Taylor, 1989). With no real change in the PWI model as more blacks were admitted into white institutions, tension between cultures escalated (Taylor, 1989). The unchanging nature of most PWIs conveyed to some that white institutions were superior and students attempting to maneuver through them must conform to the institutional standards rather than evolving standards more appropriate for the needs of a diversifying student body (Taylor, 1989). According to Saddlemire (1996), African American students continue to perceive PWIs as hostile, unsupportive, and unwelcoming. One way that hostility manifests itself at white institutions is through
peer culture. Fellow students’ negative attitudes about the presence of blacks produces an unfriendly environment for blacks to reside and learn (Saddlemire, 1996).

Faculty and staff aid in constructing an adverse atmosphere for African American students (Kobrak, 1992; Saddlemire, 1996). Some faculty and other front-line college employees maintain elitist attitudes toward education; professors and other staff view their role as research and academically-oriented rather than as a retention agent or facilitator (Kobrak, 1992). The lack of African American faculty and staff also contributes to the problems that African American students face at PWIs (Allen, 1992). Another significant factor in formulating a stressful college climate for African American students is
individual and institutional racism. What black students experience in the classroom with instructors serves as a catalyst for racist behavior by students and other faculty (Kobrak, 1992).

At PWIs, African American students confront ignorance about black culture (Allen, 1992). The curricula, teaching styles, student services, and the campuses in general are tailored to white students (Taylor, 1989). For example, when black students read history books or are taught math, the curriculum is usually derived from a monocultural perspective. Most of the curriculum reflects the dominant culture’s perspective and generally excludes nonwhites’ cultures and perspectives (Taylor, 1989). Moreover, even when the minority voice is conveyed in the classroom, it is piecemealed into the learning process as a “side dish” to the white American “entrée” (hooks, 1992). Consequently, when non-white students embark on the educational process at PWIs, they are met with indifference because their perspective is not incorporated into the fabric of the university (Easley, 1993).

Ignorance not only plagues PWIs’ administrations and staff, but also incubates within majority students. Saddlemire (1996) conducted a qualitative study of white students’ attitudes about African Americans. His findings indicated white freshmen had little or no contact with African Americans, yet they harbored negative assumptions about blacks and black culture. These students felt that black students intentionally secluded themselves from whites. Several indicated they rarely interacted with African Americans on their college campus. However, when these students did have positive interactions with black students, it was always stated as an exception. The exceptions that were mentioned were African Americans who culturally identified as white (Saddlemire, 1996). Current literature about white student attitudes regarding African American students is scarce. Although many researchers assume that majority students harbor negative feelings toward black students, the literature is actually inconclusive (Saddlemire, 1996). Although Saddlemire’s results
are not generalizable, they can help people realize the kinds of attitudes white students have towards blacks.

Understanding the frame of reference that many black students come from may shed light on their current situation in higher education. In comparison to white students, African American students have parents that generally live in urban areas, acquire fewer educational degrees, labor in lower status jobs, make less money, and divorce more often (Allen, 1992; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988). Furthermore, black students at PWIs have higher attrition rates, poorer academic performance, and are less likely to pursue graduate degrees than white students (Allen, 1992).
A key component in comprehending African American culture is understanding how blacks generally fashion their cultural values and beliefs. Often, African Americans who attend PWIs are accused of self-segregating (Stewart, Russell, & Wright, 1997). However, what is seen as separation can be interpreted as a coping mechanism. African Americans tend to construct their social values more from a family or group orientation (Kimbrough, R. M., Molock, S. D., & Walton, K., 1996; Thompson & Fretz, 1991) than other ethnic groups. Hence, when black students enter a PWI which possesses an invalidating and hostile environment, some blacks resort to their social values and seek out other black students to create allies amidst opposition (Fleming, 1984). Thus, white students and staff assist in creating an atmosphere where feelings of alienation, marginalization, and isolation are common among blacks who then find it necessary to establish their own social networks (Allen, 1992; Nagasawa & Wong, 1999; Willie & McCord, 1972). These social outlets include black student unions, historically black fraternities and sororities, and other such organizations (Culbert, 1988; Kimbrough et al., 1996). The genesis of many of these black organizations stemmed from exclusion from the larger campus community (Williams, 1994).

An additional facet of black life at PWIs entails the duality of black students' existence. Dubois (1965) pointed out that African Americans must not only look at society through their own eyes, but also they must look at it through the majority culture’s eyes in order to survive in the majority-dominated society. Black college students must be able to balance both cultural worlds (Kimbrough, R. M., Molock, S. D., & Walton, K., 1996; Thompson & Fretz, 1991). However, some students would be labeled 'black' in societal terms, but do not identify easily with black culture. These students are not the individuals that the research studies. The problem arises when black students who wish to retain their cultural identity struggle to operate successfully in a predominantly different culture without being marginalized.
PAST SUCCESS: LOOKING AT THE HBCU MODEL

Poor campus climate, attitudes of indifference, ignorance, and other issues all emerge as challenges that African Americans deal with at PWIs. However, PWIs have been touted and assumed to be the best places for black student development (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984). A negative stigma clouds the success of HBCUs (Lang, 1994). In terms of prestige and values in this society, degrees from PWIs seem to carry more clout than degrees from HBCUs (Lang, 1994). Despite this notion, blacks who have successfully completed degrees from black colleges have gone on to lead successful lives. The continued
dominance of HBCUs in graduating proportionately more black students is significant (Lang, 1994). The model that HBCUs utilize appears to be a successful formula for black student graduation that PWIs could learn from and adapt (Robinson, 1990).

In the HBCU model, colleges attempt to educate and graduate all students who are admitted. Financial disadvantage, low SAT or ACT scores, or mediocre high school grade point averages do not always hinder HBCUs from admitting students (Robinson, 1990). The HBCU philosophy asserts that they take students where they are and help them get to where they need to be. On the other hand, PWIs generally look for just “the best and the brightest” and weed out students that cannot meet the standards. Black students that attend HBCUs have significant identity development advantages over their counterparts at PWIs (Lang, 1994). Some of these benefits are that African American students at HBCUs are more psychologically adjusted, perform better academically, and have a better sense of their cultural identity (Allen 1992).

CONCLUSION: ACTION PLAN FOR PWI'S

There are various factors that affect any student’s ability to successfully complete a college degree. In terms of African American students attending PWIs, unique challenges have continued to stifle the numbers of black graduates at PWIs. These challenges range from hostile environments to societal issues. Given the HBCU model, concrete strategies can be used to eradicate some of the obstacles that blacks encounter at PWIs.

One of the major challenges for African American students is the campus environment. Human development models suggest that humans develop best in surroundings where they are valued, feel safe and accepted, and have social networks (Allen, 1992). Currently, PWIs fail to provide black students with an environment that values them on a consistent basis. Recruitment of black students to some PWIs is a purely cosmetic endeavor (Hawkins,
1989). Some African American students believe they are getting a cruise boat with all the fixings because PWIs imply they have many black students or substantial services for students of color. However, when black students step foot on predominantly white campuses, they get a tiny tugboat, like black student services being located in an obscure place and very few black students in attendance. Because PWIs possess the ability to empower individuals through education, the people they employ must recognize they have the power to facilitate or frustrate student success. With that in mind, PWIs need to consciously reevaluate the campus environment in which students learn and grow. For PWIs to realistically provide education and service to the entire
student population, a commitment to diversity must come from the highest administrator (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Predominantly white institutions should judge the worth of college as more than an academic function. Teacher-student relations can promote a healthier climate; African American students need those relationships because they can ultimately determine a student’s academic success (Kobrak, 1992). Moreover, colleges need to take deliberate steps to understand why African American students are not succeeding and devise plans to encourage success.

The lack of success of African American college students at PWIs points to a larger societal issue. To totally understand the predicament of African American students at PWIs, there must be comprehension of the plight of blacks in the United States (Allen, 1992). Black students undoubtedly face challenges at PWIs. There are concrete solutions to help ease the problem. Hiring black faculty and staff (Karpinski, 1996), providing support services that target black students, implementing cultural and social services, and devising comprehensive retention plans all will be steps that can facilitate black student achievement at PWIs (Arminio et al, 2000).

REFERENCES


