

Article 21

Preparing and Supporting African American College Students

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In the 50 years since the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, African Americans have made substantial gains in educational attainment. In 2003 80% of all African Americans age 25 and older attained a high school degree, only 5% below the rate of White Americans, and 44.7% attended college compared to 52.9% of White Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

However, despite the fact that African Americans are more likely than ever to earn high school degrees and attend college, they continue to be far less likely than White Americans to attain college degrees. This continued disparity between the educational attainment of Black and White Americans can be blamed, in part, on the significantly higher attrition rates experienced by African American college students. Recent statistics have indicated that only 40% of African American students who begin college graduate compared to over 61% of White students ("The Remarkable and Steady," 2004). The college retention gap between White and Black students becomes even greater when focusing solely on the vast numbers of students enrolled in predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Additionally, Black students who graduate from PWIs tend to have substantially lower grade point averages than White students (Bowen & Bok, 1998). While providing African American students with access to higher education is certainly an important goal, there is clearly room to improve upon the ways in which counselors prepare and support African American college students.

A widely held notion is that the discrepancy between rates of academic performance and college retention between Black and White students at PWIs stems from lack of academic preparation, which has greatly impacted programs that counselors and others implement to prepare and support Black students. Recent research, however, has challenged the notion that inadequate academic preparation is the primary reason for low academic achievement and persistence rates among African American students at PWIs (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999). Additionally, Bowen and Bok (1998) found African American college students' class ranks

continued to be lower than White students at PWIs even after controlling for variables such as SAT scores, high school GPAs, and socioeconomic status. At almost every selective college in their sample, minority students' academic performance was below that of White students and at levels lower than predicted by their SAT scores. These data suggest that Black students face challenges beyond academic preparation and ability that impact their chances to succeed at college.

School counselors are in unique positions to prepare African American students and their families for the challenges they face when transitioning to college. Additionally, counselors working in college counseling centers and in various academic advising programs are ideally suited to provide the support that African American students need to succeed at PWIs. However, although counselors have become leaders in promoting equity in education and disseminating research on effective multicultural counseling, little attention has been paid in counseling literature toward helping counselors understand the African American college student experience.

There is, however, research available in higher education literature that has explored the African American college student experience. In particular, a number of researchers, including the author of this article, have learned a great deal about how African American college students at PWIs are impacted by relationships with faculty, involvement in African American student organizations, and relationships with families and friends from home. The purpose of this article is present this literature to school and college counselors so that they will better understand the African American college student experience at PWIs in order more effectively prepare and support African American students and their families for these challenges.

Experiences With Faculty

Research indicates that strong relationships with faculty are crucial to student success at college (Astin, 1999). Although relationships with faculty are

especially important to the success of minority students, research also indicates that Black students are often unable to form strong relationships with faculty at PWIs (Flemming, 1984). One reason is that Black students often perceive White faculty as culturally insensitive. Examples of cultural insensitivity on the part of White faculty include making stereotypical comments about African Americans, generalizing students' opinions in class as representing those of all African Americans, and failing to acknowledge and incorporate African American perspective into their curricula (Guiffrida, in press). For these reasons, it is not surprising that students of color are more apt to seek academic help from family, friends, or academic counselors who are minorities than from White faculty (Guiffrida, 2005).

However, Guiffrida (in press) has found that there is much more to successful Black student/faculty relationships than simply finding faculty who avoid egregious stereotyping and incorporate diversity into their curricula. In a qualitative study with high-achieving African American students, Guiffrida (in press) found that students perceived African American faculty as much more willing than White faculty to go above and beyond to assist students in succeeding at college by (a) providing students with comprehensive academic, career, and personal advising; (b) actively supporting and advocating for students at college and at home; and (c) demonstrating beliefs in students' academic abilities. While students also perceived supportive relationships with White faculty, they perceived White faculty as much less willing to go above and beyond their roles as teachers and academic advisers to assist them in their college success.

This study, however, revealed a surprising limitation that Black students perceived in some relationships with Black faculty, which revolved around a notion they referred to as "raising the bar." Students reported that Black faculty conveyed the message that Black students not only had to overcome burdens of being a minority, but that they also must perform at higher levels than White students to be viewed as equals. As a result, Black faculty enforced higher academic standards on Black students, held them accountable by continually monitoring their academic progress in their courses, and pushed them to reach new limits in their academic work. For several students, raising the bar was perceived as another way in which student-centered faculty went above and beyond to assist in their students' academic success. However, other students believed that imposing higher standards because of their race not only unfairly made the course more difficult for them, but also reinforced the stigma that they should be treated differently than their White peers. These findings provide a number of implications for

counselors seeking to prepare and support African American college students, which are described in the concluding section of this article.

African American Student Organizations

Another factor that impacts African American college student academic achievement and persistence is involvement in African American student organizations such as Greek letter organizations, Black student government, and advocacy groups like NAACP. Several researchers have concluded that involvement in these groups facilitates social integration into the university, a key component to college persistence (Tinto, 1993); however, others have argued that such involvement can isolate students from the larger campus community and detract from academics (Flemming, 1984). In a qualitative study designed to uncover conditions under which involvement becomes an asset or a liability, Guiffrida (2004a) concluded that involvement in African American student organizations can hinder the academic achievement of students with hierarchical notions of leadership and who value service, systemic change, and leadership experiences over grades. Conversely, Guiffrida found students who had more systemic ideas of leadership (i.e., sharing the workload and ideas) and who valued academic achievement over service and systemic change received the benefits of involvement in African American student organizations without sacrificing their academic achievement.

Families and Friends From Home

Seminal college retention theory suggests that successful college students need to break away from their families and friends from home in order to become integrated into the social and academic realms of college (Tinto, 1993). Because African Americans are more likely than White Americans to come from low-income households and to be first-generation college students, it has been speculated that breaking away from families and friends from home might be even more important for them. Indeed, research indicates that close relationships with families and friends from home can hinder students of color at college; however, other research has challenged this assumption by concluding that family support was a strong predictor of minority student success at college (Guiffrida, 2005).

Recognizing the potential of families to be both an asset and liability to African American college student academic achievement and persistence, Guiffrida (2005) conducted a qualitative study to understand the conditions under which families support

and hinder African American college student academic achievement and persistence. The results revealed notable differences among the ways in which high achievers described the influence of their families on their academic achievement and persistence when compared to the perspectives shared by low achievers and leavers. Leavers and low achievers tended to perceive their obligations to their families as contributing to their attrition or poor academic performance and described little emotional and financial support from their families to stay in college. High achievers perceived their families, irrespective of their incomes or levels of education, as among their most important assets at college and described numerous ways in which family members provided emotional and financial support. In describing characteristics of supportive families, Guiffrida (2005) concluded the following:

While families of low achievers and leavers relied on students to provide them with emotional and financial support, supportive families strived to let nothing interfere with students' academic success. Instead of expressing fear or apprehension about losing them, supportive families allowed and encouraged students to change and grow socially and intellectually. Rather than being critical of their educational environment, supportive families attempted to understand students' educational surroundings in order to provide advice and direction. (p. 58)

Guiffrida (2005) concluded that it was important for African American students whose families provided emotional, academic, and financial support, and who allowed and encouraged their children to make healthy separations when transitioning to college, to strengthen these relationships to succeed at PWIs.

Similarly, African American students' relationships with their friends from home have also been found to relate to academic achievement and persistence (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1993). Guiffrida (2004b) concluded that friends from home had the potential to become a liability when they expressed fear or disapproval of students' adaptations to college or when they were unable to relate to students' college lives. Friends from home were described as assets when they could relate to students' experiences and/or expressed strong emotional support to students.

Implications for School and College Counselors

The research described in this article provides several implications for counselors seeking to prepare

and support African American college students. School and college counselors can begin by alerting students to the types of insensitivity they may experience when interacting with White faculty and help prepare them with appropriate responses. Counselors can also help prepare students for the tremendous support and challenge that may be posed to them by African American faculty who go above and beyond their roles as faculty and advisers with them.

Counselors can also encourage students to become active in African American student organizations to facilitate their social integration into college and, at the same time, caution students about the potential limitations of overinvolvement in student organizations. Counselors who work with students and families to understand their definitions of success at college and who teach students systemic leadership strategies will assist in helping students gain the benefits of these organizations without sacrificing their academics.

Finally, counselors can be instrumental in assisting African American college students in managing relationships with their families and friends from home. Helping parents understand the significance of their financial assistance, even assistance that requires minute financial sacrifices, may provide a wealth of motivation to students without making them feel guilty for taking away from scarce family resources. Most importantly, counselors can be instrumental in preparing students and families for the emotional losses they may experience as the students transition to college. Implementing support programs designed to include and collaborate with families in order to help them navigate the college environment will allow college counselors and advisers to more effectively serve their African American students.

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