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African American Racial Identity Development in Predominantly White Institutions: Challenges for Student Development Professionals

R. Sentwali Bakari

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The rapid growth and emergence of ethnic groups on college campuses challenges student affairs professionals to effectively serve these new students. Traditional methods and theories, once considered applicable to all students, are being challenged by an increasingly heterogeneous student population. The classical student development literature is being challenged on the grounds that its theories have been generalized to all student populations from samples that were predominantly White, male, and middle class.

Examined in this presentation is the challenge for higher education institutions to explore student development models that are culturally relevant to the students they serve. Particularly addressed is the racial identity development of African American students. Presented in this session are two developmental models designed to understand the racial identity development of African American students.

For African American students, racial and cultural identity are an integral part of student development. The development of a positive racial identity helps create a positive attitude and confidence in one's ability. Therefore, a positive racial identity is critical for the academic success and personal development of the African American student. A student is more likely to remain in college when he or she has a positive racial identity and knowledge of self.

Some institutions of higher education have made strides toward understanding racial identity development of African American students. Rather than taking a color-blind approach, some institutions are incorporating cultural differences into their student development scheme. These educational institutions, which focuses on cultural awareness and institutional change rather than changing African American students, reflect proactive student development.

However, most predominantly White universities fail to meet the challenge of cross-cultural student development. They continue to operate under the melting pot theory, where everyone is expected to fit into the mainstream (White, middle-class value structure). Mainstreaming for the African American, however, comes burdened with cultural and racial challenges. According to some student development professionals,

some of those challenges are developing ethnic and racial identity, interacting with the dominant culture, developing cultural awareness and appreciation, developing interdependence, fulfilling affiliation needs, surviving academically, and developing social responsibility. Ignoring these cultural challenges of African American students will lead to problems of retention and general frustration.

Too often, the experience of African American students attending predominantly White colleges underscores a general institutional ambivalence toward their educational needs, a lack of appreciation for their cultural heritage, and callousness toward values other than those held by the majority population. As a result, many African American students experience feelings of alienation, isolation, and racial hostility.

The ability to serve the needs of African American students is one of the greatest challenges for predominantly White institutions. The inclusion of racial and cultural identity models in the understanding and practice of student development may well be the starting point for these institutions to better address the needs of African American students. The inclusion of cultural identity typologies in our preparation programs and professional development programs will both expand our understanding of new student populations and enhance our ability to exercise leadership in developing an awareness of cultural diversity.

Two major cultural identity typologies may be extremely useful in understanding African American students on predominantly White campuses: Cross' Negro to Black Conversion model, and Asante's Afrocentric Cultural Identity model. The work of William Cross provides a theoretical framework for the development of racial identity. Molefi Asante's cultural identity development model focuses more on a collective consciousness of Black student empowerment. Both models were inspired by issues and concerns emerging from the civil rights and black nationalist movements of the 1960s and early '70s.

According to Cross, African American students must go through a process of growth and discovery in order to regain a positive African American racial identity. Moreover, for African American students, cultural and racial identity have a direct impact on their student development. The five stages of Cross' racial identity model are: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and commitment. A brief description of each stage will be provided.

The Afrocentric cultural identity model, developed in the mid-'80s, is based on the premise and ideology of Afrocentricity, conceptualized in the early '70s. African American scholars initiated the concept of Afrocentricity in response to the negative and destructive impact of 400 years of oppression of African Americans.

The purpose of Afrocentricity is to recapture and reconstruct the cultural, social, economical, political, and spiritual well-being of African Americans. The theory recaptures the traditional principles, values, and epistemology of ancient Africa and uses them to reconstruct the racial identity of African Americans.

According to Asante, Afrocentricity is described as a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person. Afrocentricity is defined as a methodology, orientation, and quality of thought and practice rooted in the cultural image and interest of African people. Afrocentricity encourages African American students to understand their racial identity through historical cultural values and wisdom of African ancestors. Thus, Afrocentricity is a source of power for redefining African American students' racial identity and quest to be self-determining.

Asante describes a five-level process of developing an Afrocentric cultural identity, which includes skin recognition, environmental recognition, personality awareness, interest concerns, and Afrocentric awareness. A brief description of each level will be provided.

As African American students continue to enroll at predominantly White campuses, their racial identity will playa dominant role in determining their academic success. Student affairs professionals are challenged to understand African American racial identity development. The Negro to Black Conversion model and the Afrocentric Cultural Identity model offer valuable insight into the racial identity development of African American students. Universities must recognize the strength of racial developmental models and embrace them as a means to foster a positive environment for African American students.

PRESENTER

R. Sentwali Bakari is a full time, first-year doctoral student in college student personnel administration at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, Colo. He works as a graduate assistant on multicultural student recruitment and retention initiatives at the University of Northern Colorado Graduate School. Bakari has served as Director of the Multicultural Student Services Center at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Assistant Director of Admissions at Texas Christian University, and Residence Hall Director at the State University of New York at Oswego. Bakari has studied at the University of Copenhagen in Copenhagen, Denmark, and has presented at a number of regional and national conferences.