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4-18-1997

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An Oasis in the Middle of the Desert: Cultural Centers as a Way to Survive at the Predominantly White Institution

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"Despite more than 40 years of lawful access to higher education, African American students continue to confront many issues that inhibit their success at predominantly white institutions."

One of the most enduring challenges of higher education has been to accept and subsequently structure a successful experience for African American students on the predominantly White campus. Since early desegregation rulings in the 1950s to the present debates over affirmative action and supposedly preferential admission for African Americans, no issue has been more hotly contested and debated than the situation presented by the African American presence at the predominantly White university or college.

Despite more than 40 years of lawful access to higher education, African American students continue to confront many issues that inhibit their success at predominantly White institutions. These issues are a manifestation of America's racist history, which continues to impact American society in general and higher education in specific. As a result, many African American students find themselves confronting not only the academic rigors of college life, but also the psychosocial pressures of being African American and living in a world often vastly different from their home environment.

This presentation addresses many of these cognitive (academic) and noncognitive issues such as alienation, feelings of inferiority, and inadequate learning techniques by presenting a model of holistic student development implemented through a student cultural center. This model develops the entire and current research on African American student development and retention.

A holistic cultural center model is presented as a means of empowering students and enhancing their abilities to survive and be successful at the pre dominantly White institution. Our approach is steeped in a thorough understanding of the historic emergence of African American-based services out of the Black Power era of the late 1960s and actively integrates many of these themes in this holistic model.

Specifically, the model is composed of four parts: (1) cultural—the enhancing of students understanding and identification with African and African American culture through

various presentations, lectures, topical discussions, and ethnic gatherings; (2) social—the gathering of students in an informal atmosphere where they can feel comfortable in an environment that approximates home and their private lives on campus; (3) curricular enhancement—the strengthening of academic skills by sponsoring group study sessions, group and individual tutoring, computer technology workshops, linkages to the Black world studies department, and individual academic counseling; and finally, (4) co-curricular enhancement—co-sponsoring and promoting student leadership excursions and special topical discussions.

To better illustrate the developmental benefits that students receive from this program and also to model our approach to student empowerment, two upper-class students who have been exposed to portions of this model at Miami University will present their experiences as African American students at a predominantly White institution.

The structure of the presentation will be lecture-driven utilizing Power Point Technology for diagrams and illustrations. Time will be allocated at the end of the session for discussion and feedback from the audience.

PRESENTERS

Bryan J. Cook serves as Assistant Academic Coordinator for the Office of Minority Affairs at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Cook has spent the past three years working in the Center for Black Culture and Learning, a building dedicated to the retention and academic enhancement of students of color.

During his tenure, Cook has been responsible for such programs as the Graduate Visitation Program, the Academic Enhancement Program, and the Miami Academic Achievers Program. Cook's other duties include the hiring and providing of tutors, teaching of computer skills, and academic advising. Cook is a member of the National Physique Committee and the Association for Black Faculty and Staff, and is co-founder of the Miami University chapter of the National Panhellenic Council.

Cook received a bachelor's degree from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and will continue his education next fall at the Center for Study of Post-Secondary and Higher Education at the University of Michigan.

Damon A. Williams is a doctoral pre-candidate at the Center for the Study of Post-Secondary and Higher Education at the University of Michigan, where he is pursuing an individually designed concentration focusing on issues of retention and academic enhancement for students of color. Specifically, he is interested in the non-cognitive and cognitive factors associated with the success of African American students at the predominantly White institution.

Williams is affiliated with the National Association of Black School Educators-Ann Arbor and the Black Student Leadership Community Crusade for Children. He has worked extensively with the summer Freedom Schools Program, a developmental program connected to the Children's Defense Fund and designed to encourage the

intellectual and psychosocial development of African American youth.

Prior to beginning his studies at the University of Michigan, he was a Graduate Associate in Multicultural Student Services at the University of Dayton. He has also worked as a Graduate Assistant in the offices of Scholastic Retention and Learning Assistance at Miami University, Oxford and Middletown, respectively.

Williams received his bachelor's degree in Black world studies and his master's degree in college student personnel services from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

Duane Moore is a senior majoring in Black world studies at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

Krystal Screvens is a junior majoring in education at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.