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The Importance of Community and Its Impact on the Quality of Campus Life and Success for African American Students

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"While we are accustomed to viewing special programs as efforts to ensure the success of underrepresented students, we may overlook that what these programs communicate about these students are part of the structure of higher education that they must struggle against."

Colleges and universities have made significant contributions to the inclusion of non-Anglo students in higher education. The responsiveness to a compelling need to facilitate minority access to higher education is, in part, attributable to the academy's entrepreneurial nature, which has translated into a willingness to design and implement educational programs that respond to the specific social circumstances and needs of prospective student populations.

The necessity of doing more is not in question. Minorities remain underepresented in higher education as a whole. The enrollment of some minority groups has declined in recent years and it remains true that African American males in colleges and universities are outnumbered by those who are incarcerated in our nation's jails and prisons. The retention of those who are enrolled is made problematic by factors ranging from minority students in general, and African American students in particular, perceptions of the campuses as a hostile environment to special treatment that sets them apart from their Caucasian classmates. The campus climate for African American students on traditionally white campuses has continually been described as hostile and has been cited as a major concern and barrier to success. Climate can be defined as perception how it feels to be in a community and not simply what happens.

While African American students are not a homogeneous group and experiences differ, climate continues to be problematic. When discussing the experience of African American students, climate comes into focus - climate and experience are inseparable. Climate refers to the quality of life that also affects academic performance, growth and development and the nature of socialization among students. The environment significantly impacts the student's level of satisfaction and can make a difference on student success.

This proposal reports the results of a study that tests the premise that African American college students and African American male degree completers view both the ideology and practices of specialized programs as part of the complex forces against which they perceive themselves to be struggling. The narratives of African American male completers do in fact support this premise, but also suggest the messages these programs communicate to the campus community and the larger society diminishes the credibility of the credentials they earned. The results of this study suggest the need for

further research in this area, and they alert us to the broad consequences of programs grounded in generalizations about the members of various populations.

The various practices that constitute the business end of specialized programs for certain under-represented groups are well institutionalized within higher education. The fundamental assumption underlying many of these programs has also been institutionalized. The assumption is that the members of certain populations are socially, culturally or educationally deficient; that they lack emotional, social or educational skills to compete in academia without special supports. While we are accustomed to viewing special programs as efforts to ensure the success of under-represented students, we may overlook the fact that what these programs communicate about these students are part of the structure of higher education that they must struggle against.

This study seeks to sketch an approach to the critique of the ideology and practice of specialized programs that alter the campus experience for certain groups of students, creating a climate which sets them apart from others; holding them out as different and less worthy of belonging than others. That approach is grounded in the experience of those students who are struggling against higher education to become accepted as a fully contributing member of the campus community with the requisite attributes to succeed - and those that struggled in and against higher education, those who persisted and met their educational goals in spite of the conditions and perceptions of separateness that confronted them throughout their educational experiences at traditionally white institutions of higher learning.

PRESENTER:

Robert W. White is an assistant professor of Social Work in the School of Education and Human Development at Binghampton University in Binghampton, New York. Dr. White has developed and taught courses on multicultural issues, and lectured on the history of African American males attending traditionally white institutions of higher learning. He has an extensive practice background in social work, criminal justice and administration.