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When A Minority Rules: African and Hispanic American College Student Relationships

Lois Mendez-Catlin
Bryn Mawr College

"As administrators, we are often caught in the rat race web and there are truly not enough hours in the day devoted to listening. It becomes easy to assume that 'we' know what is right for 'them.'"

Introduction

It has become increasingly easy to hear but not truly listen to the voices of students. As college administrators, we are often caught in the rat race web and there are truly not enough hours in the day devoted to listening. This is especially rue when the stress of action is the ultimate looming goal. It becomes easy to assume "we" know what is right for "them." But on whose experiences are we asing those assumptions? For me, it would be a college experience in the mid- to late 70s. But we are not in the 70s and the students of today are probably dramatically different from the students of yesteryear. I firmly believe that to best serve today's generation, we have to listen to their descriptions of their joys, pains, needs, and experiences so that we can collaboratively (using the experiences of another generation as a foundation) brainstorm a solution.

The overall purpose of this study was to identify and describe the student culture(s) at a predominantly (more than 60 percent) residential and Hispanic servicing institution. A secondary purpose was to provide a greater understanding of the characteristics of college student peer group formations (cultures) and effects on academic, personal, and social development. The data was collected as part of the requirements for my doctorate.

Once on the campus, I immediately realized that a part of my study had to include the relationship dynamics between the African American and Hispanic students and the Hispanic town. Through a series of student focus groups, faculty interviews, observations, and questionnaires, a picture of the campus climate was generated. The statistics were devastating: 49 percent of the Hispanic students had witnessed overt racist acts on campus and about 12 percent had knowingly engaged in racist acts. Ninety-two percent of these acts were hostilities against African Americans. Each group I spoke with (including faculty and administrators) mentioned race relations between these two groups as a problem or cause for concern. All involved parties viewed the problem from very different vantage points. Several administrators saw the situation as isolated incidents that were no longer a focus. Students from all groups saw it as a current and recurring issue. The focus groups with the students were very revealing and a clear indication of why it is important to listen to the voice of our students.

The Hispanic students were insulated and the high numbers of Hispanics made it difficult for them not to have close Hispanic friends, surround themselves with all things Hispanic, and exude a strong cultural pride. In many instances, NMHU was

their first exposure to other cultures, races, religions, and ethnicities. The hostilities of the racist were driven by perceived racial injustices of the past and years of conditioning and insultation. The African American students were few in number and regularly victims of racism. They were stunned that they were not automatically accepted by the Hispanics and were still treated as minorities. Ninety-five percent of the African Americans at NMHU were not native Northern New Mexicans and expected the Hispanics at the college to act like their counterparts from home (e.g., New York, California, Florida, etc.). When this did not happen the Black students went into shock, which manifested itself in feelings of rejection, isolation, and a deep-seated unwelcomeness and distrust. They thus formed their own student culture and were seen (by the Hispanics) as promoting self-isolation, a vicious Catch-22 situation.

I intend to present the raw statistics of my research and the results of the focus groups with the African American and the Hispanic students. My goal is to make the participants more aware of the nuances of the assumptions of a minority group when entering an institution where another minority group is the predominant group, and the repercussions when assumptions of safety are incorrect. I also would like to generate discussion regarding the strategies and activities to better inform and prepare both parties to make the campus a welcoming and nurturing environment for all students.

PRESENTER

Lois Mendez-Catlin was appointed Assistant Dean at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania in August 1996. She has taught Developmental Education Skills in the City University of New York at both the senior and community college levels for more than 12 years. For three years, she held the Associate Director position for the Higher Education Opportunity at Adelphi University in Long Island, N.Y. She left Adelphi to enter the doctoral program at Columbia University. As part of her studies, she completed an internship as the Assistant to the Dean of Students at Queens College. Immediately upon completing her degree requirements, she was promoted to Assistant Professor of Development Skills at Borough of Manhattan Community College, where she had worked as an adjunct instructor for more than eight years.