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Tiffany J. Davis

S.M.A.R.T Program Coordinator, Bowling Green State University

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Supporting Students of Color: A Residential Peer Mentoring Model

Abstract

Improving the collegiate experience for students of color remains a central concern in higher education. The Students of Color Mentoring, Aiding, Retaining and Teaching (S.M.A.R.T.) Program was developed by the Office of Resident Life to assist the retention and academic achievement of students of color. This presentation highlights this peer mentoring program, its distinctive features, and its assessment results indicating positive impact on retention and academic achievement.

Tiffany J. Davis

S.M.A.R.T Program Coordinator, Bowling Green State University

Alana McClelland

Assistant Director of Residence Life for Leadership Programs, Bowling Green University

Increased college student racial and ethnic diversity is one of the most prominent changes in the past 30 years (Light, 2001). As we entered the new millennium, American higher education continues to experience racial and ethnic diversification in the study body. Improving the quality of minority students' college experience remains a central concern in higher education. Two major concerns are retention and academic achievement.

Various strategies have been employed to address these problems. Tinto's (1993) theory suggests that social and academic integration is key to first-year student retention in general. Meanwhile literature on college impact (Pascarella, & Terenzini, 1991) emphasized the importance of peer culture. Indeed, Astin (1993) argued that "the student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (p. 398).

Researchers (Brown, & Wright, 1999; Furr, & Elling, 2002; Fries-Britt, 2002; Gasman, 1997; Good, Halpin, & Halpin, 2000; Holt, Mahowald, & Devore, 2002; Nagasawa, & Wong, 1999; Newman, & Newman, 1999; Pope, 2002; Taylor, & Miller, 2002) identified additional factors positively impacting minority students' retention and academic performance, among which are: the presence of social and academic support networks including peer mentoring and role modeling, leadership opportunities, a sense of mattering, involvement in cultural activities, and satisfaction with college experience including residential living. On-campus residence, as a locus of students' out-of-class activities, can potentially serve as an important sphere of influence on minority student retention and academic learning, in that it provides abundant opportunities for peer interactions and social integration.

Guided by research, the Bowling Green State University Students of Color Mentoring Aiding Retaining and Teaching Program (S.M.A.R.T. Program) was developed by the Office of Residence Life to assist the University in attracting and retaining students of color while helping them succeed academically. As a predominantly White residential

institution, the need exists to continue to provide intentional support to these students within the living environment.

The SMART Program began as an Office of Residence Life initiative in the Spring of 1999. The mission of the program was to match first-year students with successful residential upper class students who would aid the first-year students in making a successful transition to college life on the BGSU campus. This mentor relationship would help serve as a foundation for helping to retain and ultimately graduate these students of color on the campus.

In its seventh year, SMART's ultimate goals are to assist first year students of color with their transition to BGSU, to increase the number of students who return to the University for their second year, and to provide a forum for discussion of the residential experience in order to make it as positive and rewarding as possible. The purpose of this presentation is to share the rationale for the S.M.A.R.T. Program, its distinctive features, and how multiple assessment tools are utilized for continuous program improvement. The primary method of this presentation is lecture combined with reflection activities for the audience.

The following is an outline of the session:

- Introduction and a brief review of key literature on factors affecting minority students' retention and academic performance
- Overview of the history and rationale of S.M.A.R.T.
- Description of the design and major program components of S.M.A.R.T.
- Report of assessment results: Impact on retention and academic achievement as demonstrated through longitudinal data and comparison with a control group
- Challenges and lessons learned over the six years
- Questions, closing comments, and evaluation

This presentation is intended for institutions considering creating similar peer mentoring programs for their students of color. Participants in this presentation will meet the following learning objectives: (a) recognize the unique role that residential educators can play in enhancing minority students' learning; (b) learn about S.M.A.R.T. Program and its purpose within the goals of BGSU; (c) understand how multilayered assessment tools are incorporated into S.M.A.R.T. evaluations.

Presenters

Tiffany J. Davis is the current S.M.A.R.T Program Coordinator. She directly supervises SMART team leaders and mentors and is responsible for coordinating structured programs and activities for SMART participants. She is a second year Master's student in the College Student Personnel program at Bowling Green State University. In addition to her duties as SMART Program Coordinator, she also serves as a Greek House Director for Delta Zeta Sorority. Currently, Tiffany also serves on the planning committee for the Ohio College Personnel Association (OCPA) Careers in Student Affairs Conference and will copresent at the NASAP/ACPA National Summit on Black Greek Letter Organizations in Little Rock, Arkansas, this fall.

Alana McClelland serves as Assistant Director of Residence Life for Leadership Programs within the Office of Residence Life at Bowling Green State University. She is responsible for supervising the SMART Program Coordinator and implementing leadership efforts within the office. She is currently working on her doctorate in Higher Education Administration. Alana most recently co-presented at the ACPA Annual Meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, and served as facilitator for the Summer 2005 Undergraduate Interfraternity Institute sponsored by the North American Interfraternity Council.