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The Beat of a Different Drum: Retention Issues Students of Color Face in Higher Education

Abstract

Retaining students of color has been a challenge at predominantly white institutions since the mid 1960s. This presentation includes findings from a qualitative approach from students of color attending a predominantly white institution in the Midwest. Included are the voices, implications for implementing changes, recommendations, and suggestions that are beneficial in working with this student population.

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Retaining students from initial enrollment through to graduation remains a challenge to institutions nationwide. African American students are attending predominately White colleges and universities “armed” with little to no understanding about how to transition into their new setting nor understanding how to academically survive in the classroom. In a day and time when more people are going to college, access to higher education for African Americans is a cause for concern. For those who are attending these institutions, issues of retention and graduation are also cause for concern. Yet, there is some good news in that more federal funds may be allocated for college retention programs (Khumoetsile-Taylor, 2000).

The good news is that more minorities, including African American youth, have access to and are making it into college. More specifically, according to *Two Decades of Progress: African Americans Moving Forward in Higher Education Report* (UNCF Report), African American undergraduate enrollment in four-year colleges and universities over the past twenty years has increased at a faster pace than the enrollment rate for white undergraduates (UNCF 2). Yet institutions still grapple with issues relating to African Americans preparations for and access to higher education. In order to try to develop a model of best strategies for institutions to implement, I shall take on a different challenge and asked Students of Color and females their experiences with retention.

Bad News

Even though African Americans are enrolling in higher education institutions, their enrollment rates are not exceeding their retention and graduation rates. The ironic part of all of this is that with some performance measures tied to retention and graduation rates many institutions may face shrinking resources. The national percentage of first-year students at public four-year colleges who return for the second year was more than 72 percent in 2000, up from 70.4 percent in 1988. However, national graduation percentages fell, however, from 48.5 percent in 1987 to 41.9 percent in 2000 (*Recruitment and Retention in Higher Education*, 2001).

Arguments continue to surface regarding the inequity in higher education for African American students (Benton, 2001). In general, Black students seem academically, culturally, and economically incompatible with the PWI model of education (Hunt,

Schmidt, Hunt, Boyd, & Magoon, 1994). The PWI model caters to individuals who academically meet White-created standards, such as high grade point averages and standardized test scores (Delgado, 1998; Easley, 1993; Sedlacek, 1999; Suen, 1983), who have culturally assimilated into mainstream society, and who possess the financial resources to pay for the rising cost of education. Yet, Black students have unique coping skills and abilities to adapt and increase their chances of persistence (Kimbrough, Molock, & Walton, 1996), while many others who fail to establish those tools of persistence have fallen short in overcoming the challenges they face at PWIs. What Black students experience in the classroom often serves as a catalyst for racist behavior by students and other faculty (Kobrak, 1992)?

This presentation will include sharing of findings from a survey and student focus groups that was presented the Department Heads and Deans from the nine colleges on campus. For this research, I generated several questions relating to Students of Color and females experiences on a PWI campus in the Midwest. Although this is a preliminary study to a larger study campus-wide exploration centered on retention, the questions explored areas such as personal experiences, challenges and barriers, relationship building between faculty and Students of Color and females, and academic opportunities. A sample question asked: *how would you describe your experiences in your college, department, and at this university as a student of color or female?*

I shall conclude with strategies of best practice that were generated from the focus group discussion, in addition to suggestions for resources that might be beneficial for working with this camp population.

Presenter

Dr. Be Stoney has worked in the field of education for the last 15 years in the areas of Special Education and Multicultural Education, in public schools and higher education. She is currently an Associate Professor in the Department of Secondary Education at Kansas State University where she teaches Multicultural Education/Diversity. Dr. Stoney also has a part time appointment with the Midwest Equity Assistance Center where she serves as the Race Coordinator in K-12 school districts for Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska.