

A close association of African-American parents and universities can benefit the parents, the universities, and African-American students.

# African-American Parents: A New Partnership with Higher Education

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## Introduction

African-American parents have sought partnership with institutions of higher education for years. This partnership, when it has occurred, has involved several areas of university life. In general it has meant parental provision of emotional, spiritual, and financial support for their children during college attendance. While it is commonplace for institutions to involve parents and acknowledge their participation, African-American parents have been silent, unrecognized partners. Because they have not been recognized fully by institutions, African-American parents' partnership has been an adversarial one fraught with conflicts, condescension, and disagreements. Sadly, it has been an inequitable one with institutions receiving the most visible benefit while African-American parents received little gain. These parents have found it difficult to be accepted as full partners in higher education, unless they were financial donors, alumni, or have produced student-athletes.

This unbalanced partnership has not existed without some pain and hurt for African-American parents who sometimes have experienced negative feelings and hurt emotions from their attempts to become involved with colleges and universities. Some may even experience psychological distress, depression, anxiety and other behavioral or affective symptoms as well as a loss of psychological self-esteem. These emotional concerns can be communicated to students, thereby lowering self-esteem and jeopardizing motivation.

Failing to adequately respond to African-American parents can affect colleges' efforts to attract African-American students and thereby college enrollment. Colleges can not afford to alienate prospective supporters. Neither is it positive public relations to be unsupportive of parents' participation in their [minority] children's educational endeavors.

It is possible for colleges and universities to mature and grow themselves as a result of their partnership with African-American parents if institutions recognize and respond to African-American parents' needs. This paper ar-

ticulates African-American parents' roles as partners in predominantly white universities. Development needs of African-American parents are described, and suggestions are made as to how institutions may respond to those needs appropriately. Lastly, recommendations for future parental involvement are outlined.

## Characteristics of African-American Parents

### A rainbow coalition

African-American parents represent an aggregate of American ethnic minority cultures who have diverse family constellations, cultural and linguistic styles, economic backgrounds, and emotional needs. African-Americans, like other minority students, [and their parents] are from diverse living environments: inner city urban areas; rural or migrant communities; and from suburbia (Wright, 1984). Not only are their living environments diverse, but they are diverse in their linguistic styles, social customs, daily behavioral practices and interactional patterns. No longer can it be said that African-Americans are a monolithic cultural group with one set of beliefs, practices, and customs. A perusal of our top ten American cities would reveal considerable variations in African-American traditions as you travel from Seattle to Miami, New York to Los Angeles, from Port Arthur, Texas to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. In the truest sense, we are a "rainbow coalition," with all hues in the "color" spectrum represented.

Yet despite these variations on an African theme, one value has remained constant throughout the years: African-Americans continue to place a high premium upon education, even when it is not readily affordable nor accessible to them. Universally across this country and across all classes of African-Americans, the importance of education, including higher education, is a message parents instill within their children early. It has been perceived as a means of social mobility (Porter, 1974), a way out of impoverished surroundings, and a means for improving family circumstances.

### Family composition

African-Americans coming to college vary in their family constellation patterns. While African-American students do come from traditional two-parent families, other family constellations have emerged in recent years. They may include grandparents, stepchildren, godchildren, non-kin members, nieces or nephews living in one household. Similarly, parents come in all sizes and shapes ranging from a single, unmarried person having primary child care responsibilities; a single parent with a "live-in" partner (same or opposite sex); step-parents; a divorced single parent with co-parenting responsibilities; godparent (non-kin); grandparent, aunt or uncle. Given this diversity in family composition and "parent roles," it is difficult to create one profile of the "typical" African-American parent, creating new challenges for colleges who are dedicated to involving parents in the college educational process.

Most parents or guardians have never had the pleasure of attending college; only a select few African-American parents have children who are second-generation college enrollees. That reality has never stopped them from promoting college opportunities for their offspring students. Of course, parents' support for their children's college has meant many were forced to work long hours and sacrifice many personal comforts so that their children, stepchildren, godchildren, nieces, and nephews could attend college. African-American parents often have worked two or three jobs to support their children financially. They have

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washed dishes, picked cotton and sweet potatoes, and operated small business while working two and three jobs to finance their children's college educations. African-American students enter college feeling strong support from parents, guardians, and other family members.

### Cohorts of the 1960s

African-American parents may have been cohorts of the 1960s civil rights and other reform movements. These persons were among those who staged sit-ins at Southern lunch counters, participated in Vietnam demonstrations and fought there too, and were the "first" to integrate northern suburbs. They grew into early adulthood on the heels of the Vietnam conflict and were disciples of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party, and Angela Davis. Still others relocated here from developing nations such as Haiti, Cuba, Panama, and Puerto Rico who have established themselves firmly in the U.S. through "blood, sweat, and tears."

If these African-American parents attended college, they were probably among the first to integrate the universities of Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, and Texas, or they continued the proud traditions of historically black colleges (HBC's) by attending Morehouse, Spellman, and Howard University. Often their primary and college educations were obtained under presidential mandate with national guard intervention. More often than not, an education was not without fear for one's personal safety. Despite the personal and emotional risks of attending white institutions, African-American parents have valued a college education highly and have become accustomed to fighting to obtain it.

### Research on African-American Parents

The research literature on African-American parents' roles in colleges and universities is sparse. A recent unpublished literature search revealed fewer than twenty citations about African-American parents' participation in universities. Most of the literature which has been written described parents' financial contributions to their children's enrollment at predominantly white institutions or discussed the significance of parents' educational level to student persistence. Rarely has the literature discussed parents' roles on university governing boards, *ad hoc* advisory committees, alumni associations, or athletic policy committees. Rarely have parents' developmental or psychological needs as they relate to their involvement in college been defined or investigated.

One book which illustrates this shortcoming is *Minorities in American Higher Education* by Alexander Astin (1982). In this treatise, Astin makes casual reference to parents and describes them as moderator variables related to student persistence in college. Nowhere in his discussion does he speculate as to the importance of college to the parents. Neither does he highlight ways in which parents may become involved in white universities so that they and the campus can mutually benefit. Another example, a published sourcebook on college parents, (Robert Cohen, 1985), makes no mention of African-American parents, in spite of the fact that it was intended to be the definitive work on the subject. Imagine a state-of-the-art book which entirely neglects an entire group of college parents!

Among minority researchers, African-American (or other minority) parents' contributions to colleges have been ignored, too. Researchers have not regarded African-American parents as a central ingredient in the college process and, thus have not written about this group. Clearly, African-American parents have been neglected in the research literature. There is a tremendous need to research

these and other minority parents' involvement on college campuses more thoroughly. A beginning step would be to understand African-American parents' needs.

### Developmental Needs of Parents

College parents experience apprehension and concern as their children grow into young adulthood, separate from them, and leave home. This transition results in lifelong changes for parents and children. Healthy parents may experience some initial sadness and grieve for the "growth" of their "little child." They will experience all the stages of grief before finally reacquainting themselves with the young adult college student. Questions such as "Will my child continue to need me once she/he goes to college?" are common among college parents at this stage.

Similarly, African-American parents must learn to manage these life transitions. For African-American parents these developmental tasks may be expressed as ethnic or cultural identity concerns. African-American parents may wonder "Will those cultural values and attitudes which I have taught my children change as a result of their attending a white college? Will I continue to have anything in common with my children once they have resided on white campuses away from our African-American neighborhoods? Will my children lose his/her cultural or ethnic identity if he/she lives in a predominantly white campus environment? Will I be able to converse with my child if they become more literate than I? These and other thoughts are believed to be representative of adults in the developmental stage of generativity. In discussing parents, it is important to understand adult development at this stage.

### Generativity

The noted psychologist Erik Erikson characterized the middle adult period, roughly between the ages of 30-45, as the stage of generativity. During this stage, adults experience the greatest level of productivity and reach full work potential. They engage in activities which require sustained application and utilization of skills and abilities; they invest new energy and ideas into new pursuits. Adults at this stage develop a sense of continuity with future generations (Troll, 1982, p. 18-19). The rearing of children is an integral task accomplishment during this stage. Work productivity and altruistic concern for future generations are characteristic of this period.

Failing to achieve generativity may result in emotional stagnation, which may be described as a sense of personal impoverishment and failure. An adult in stagnation may do little more than one's normal daily routine of work and is unusually preoccupied with self. When stagnation occurs, the adult ceases to develop emotionally. African-American parents in generativity may desire active involvement in their children's education at college. Fulfilling their developmental needs may be complicated by the fact that their children are entering an environment which may be unfamiliar to some parents. For others it may resemble a past learning environment in which they may have experienced some emotional distress. Sharing their children's excitement and exuberance toward college may be difficult for these parents. This unresolved emotional distress may lead to role stagnation unless colleges help African-American parents to become involved in the college experience in age-appropriate ways.

### Culture-Specific Developmental Needs

Awareness of and sensitivity to the development needs of African-American parents is an important consideration for predominantly white colleges. Culture-specific needs of

these parents which colleges should be aware of include the following:

- a) Sense of commitment to an institution.
- b) Sense of concern for the welfare of others, especially one's own ethnic or cultural group members.
- c) Recognition that their contributions are valued by institutions.
- d) Sense of personal respect, e.g., "I am valued [as a person] by the institution."
- e) Sense of altruistic concern for equitable social conditions, e.g., advocacy to eradicate racism, sexism, or institutional injustices.
- f) Affirmation of entitlement. "I have a right to participate in my child's education."
- g) Renewal of personal self-identity. "I am proud to be African-American."
- h) Affirmation of culture-specific parental roles.
- i) Desire to continue cultural traditions via children.

Once these minority parent needs have been identified, the next step is for institutions to decide how best to meet them. If African-American parent involvement in college is a desirable goal as several educators have argued (Dept. of Education, 1980), then corrective action may be necessary now to ensure that parents become involved, active partners in the college educational process.

### Healing Past Mistakes

For those parents who suffered from the denial of full access to predominantly white institutions and whose opinions, ideas, and thoughts were never heard, some healing is needed. These parents may have experienced grief reaction, including [justified] anger and hurt which has remained unaddressed even today. Institutions should help African-American parents grieve for their lost self-esteem, self-respect, and missed learning opportunities. In addition, parents may need to grieve for other losses:

- a) familiar cultural surroundings
- b) intergenerational families reared in traditional customs
- c) language and linguistic tradition
- d) educational opportunities.

Before parents can benefit fully from their participation in college, they may have to complete their grieving process.

One way to facilitate parents "grieving" might be to provide them with a forum from which they can express these past frustrations, anger, and hurts. It might be an open meeting with small group discussion where parents may discuss present and past issues regarding their child's college. As a result, African-American parents may find renewed energy which they may reinvest in predominantly white institutions later. The following example illustrates how this healing may provide constructive feedback to institutions.

During a 1982 centennial celebration at the University of Texas at Austin, an African-American alumni weekend was held—the first ever. Attending were parents who were among the first African-Americans to attend the university; many had children attending the university currently. The weekend included panel discussions where parents recounted their personal experiences on the then-segregated campus. Throughout the weekend, parents recounted the fears, anger, frustration, and sadness which accompanied attending a university not fully accessible to African-Americans. It was also a time for reflecting upon the many successes of African-American alumni. The weekend was a catharsis time for some parents, allowing them to grieve for lost learning opportunities and to express unresolved anger, hurt, and feelings of betrayal. Simultane-

ously, it provided the university administration with a chance to hear parents' suggestions and ideas clearly. Programs similar to this weekend event can provide parents with an avenue to express past and current feelings, ideas, or suggestions. The result for both parents and administration at the University of Texas was a mutually gratifying and beneficial experience.

Of course, an alumni weekend is not the only way in which African-American parents can become involved with colleges and universities. Parents can play important roles across the entire campus.

### Strategies for Minority Parent Involvement

How then might institutions benefit from the involvement and participation of African-American parents in their learning process? What unique knowledge and skills will they offer to colleges and universities? Cohen and Halsey (1985) write that when parents are informed about colleges, they are more likely to participate in several ways. First, parents can become ambassadors and loyal supporters of institutions during good and bad times. Secondly, parents can serve as volunteers in several settings: recruiters, sponsors, hosts, advisors, and solicitors. Lastly, parents make significant contributions as financial donors, especially in capital and annual giving campaigns (p. 95).

While these traditional roles have been among those suggested earlier, there may be other academic roles for African-American parents to play:

(a) *As active financial contributors*, especially to scholarship and financial aid programs. African-American parents should be encouraged to contribute to alumni and endowment associations especially, and target their contributions to ethnic minority students and minority-related research activities.

(b) *On policy and decision-making committees*, especially those committees concerned with student admissions, readmission, graduation criteria, athletics, student affairs, financial aid, etc.

(c) *On curricula advisory committees*, especially in disciplines where minority communities are impacted, such as law, business, allied health, nursing and medicine.

(d) *On building and facilities committees*, especially where capital construction may involve land acquisition in minority communities.

(e) *On campus recruitment and retention committees*, especially in departments where minority participation is particularly low.

(f) *On athletic policy-making boards*, especially for men/women's athletic programs.

(g) *On homecoming and other campus-wide celebrations*. Celebrations on college campuses are an opportunity for students, alumni, and parents alike to join together in appreciating those who have supported the university and its programs and service offerings. Parents can take a key role in these celebrations.

While all the benefits have not been realized yet, one thing appears certain. The parent-institutional partnership can work, and it can be one of mutual benefit to parents and institutions alike. Before the partnership can grow, institutions must accept it as a legitimate learning tool. Then, the relationship between institutions and African-American parents can only mature. To best nurture the partnership, colleges and universities might investigate how other types of institutions interface with African-American parents.

One setting is especially important to examine in this regard as African-American parents have been partners with historically Black colleges since their inception. In those colleges, they have been involved in several areas of

campus life, from orientation to corporate fund-raising. Their participation has been essential to the survival of Black colleges in recent years, as several have come under severe economic and enrollment shortages. African-American parents have become ardent financial contributors, recruiters, and supporters to legislative and political boards whose lobbying efforts have saved several black colleges from serious cuts. Clearly, African-American parents represent the "backbone" to the success of these colleges. Other colleges may learn about the resources parents offer to a campus from their success rates with Black colleges.

### Summary

Colleges and universities have failed to recognize African-American parents and their potential contributions to the entire university community. In their omission they have shortchanged everyone: students, faculty, administration, and parents. African-American parents can provide a new energy on college campuses, the extent of which has not been seen for over two decades. The "new energy" of African-American parents consists of unique learning experiences they can provide, and their strong commitment to higher education. African-American parents possess multiple viewpoints and opinions, and the transfusion of their "new energy," i.e., ideas, suggestions, and views, may facilitate the resolution of numerous problems facing today's institutions, including those of declining resources and revenue and changing student demographics. African-American parents who become involved in colleges and universities renew themselves and ensure their continued development as productive, active, and caring adults.

The conclusion is simple: African-American parents and colleges can form a meaningful, productive partnership which will be mutually beneficial to all, particularly African-American students on predominantly White campuses.

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