Given the declining college enrollment of Black students, strategies are outlined to promote excellence and educational growth.

Promoting Academic Excellence of African-American Students: Issues and Strategies

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During the 1980s the challenge in higher education was to deliver quality education. Current reports suggest that the challenge for the 1990s remains the same (Nelson, 1989; One Third of A Nation, 1988). Any institution, says Beal (1987), that can help students to find their talents and help those talents grow may be viewed as a quality institution. However, the implication of this charge holds unique challenges for colleges and universities attempting to understand and meet the needs of ethnic/racial students in the decades ahead.

With respect to ethnic/racial students, the past three decades have witnessed interesting trends in American public institutions. Perhaps the trend that created the greatest impact on the educational system was the equality movement of the 1960s. This movement supported the concept of access to higher education for disadvantaged or oppressed groups within society. The decade of the seventies witnessed an increase in the number of underrepresented or unrepresented ethnic or racial groups in higher education. However, by the mid-eighties participation rate of blacks (enrolled in college) showed a remarkable decrease. According to Wilson (1989), despite the slight increase in black enrollment from 1984 to 1986 (by about 5,000 students), this rate did not appreciably make up for the loss of over 30,000 black students from the peak of 1980. He further points out that this increase was at the graduate level, whereas blacks at the undergraduate level showed little or no increase during this period. It follows that the recruitment drives of the sixties coupled with reenrollment (retention) efforts of the seventies have not resulted in black student academic achievement and growth in the eighties.

In view of the current needs of blacks in higher education, such declining college enrollments and low participation in teacher education, science, and math and the prediction that more than 80 percent of black students will continue to attend predominantly white schools in the future (Wilson 1989), this article identifies and discusses issues and concerns related to promoting the academic excellence of black students. This discussion of the issues thus serves a twofold function. First, it establishes a framework for examining the current levels of program effectiveness. Second, it provides underlying principles and guidelines for promoting academic excellence.

Black Students and Academic Success

The academically successful student is one who experiences learning as a fulfillment of intellectual and personal development. Not only is learning exciting to such students, but they demonstrate evidence of this learning in terms of new knowledge and skills. Current reports indicate that for some black students, academic success is elusive if not totally non-existent (Carmody, 1988). This mixed picture of success extends from high school, if not earlier, to college. According to the Seventh Annual Report of Blacks in Higher Education, between 1976 and 1986 the percentage of young adults between 18 to 24 years of age who completed high school has improved more for blacks than any other group. Moreover, according to this report, black females completed high school at a higher rate than black males, although black males experienced a greater gain in high school completion. However, approximately one-fourth of all blacks continue to leave high school before graduation. Juxtaposed against this background are reported increases in the numbers of blacks participating in the Scholastic Test, the Advanced Placement Test, the American College Test, and the Annual Report National Assessment Educational Progress as well as their test scores (Wilson, 1989). Additionally, it is said that the 1988 cohort of black high school graduates is the largest and best prepared of any black group in history (Seventh Annual Status Report, 1988). Yet despite these optimistic changes, black college enrollment declined steadily from 1976 to 1986. This decline in enrollment is compounded by the loss of blacks in four-year colleges (Wilson, 1989). However, black enrollment in professional schools has maintained a steady improvement from 1977 to 1986. This cohort enrolled in professional schools includes only 14,000 students or 5.2 percent of the total enrollment. The implication of this untenable situation is that colleges and universities must find creative solutions to promoting the academic success of blacks currently enrolled, as well as those not yet enrolled.

Issues in Black Academic Success

Much has been written about factors or conditions impacting the quality of higher education for blacks. In part, some of the issues are unique to blacks and some are shared in degrees by all college students. Those issues reported in the literature and anecdotally as having the greatest impact on the education growth of black college students are (1) social and academic adjustment, (2) negative stereotypes, and (3) lack of financial resources.

Academic and Social Adjustment

Much has been written about black students' transition from a close, supportive home environment to an often unfriendly, predominantly white school environment that projects the unspoken message: "We are not sure we want you here, but we had to recruit you." Several studies about black students' adjustment to college life have simply affirmed what is generally known about the impact of racial rejection on social, emotional, and intellectual capacities (Astin, 1982: Fleming, 1984). It is a given, regardless of racial overtones, that if students are placed in environments that

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do not acknowledge them fully, they will begin to feel lonely and isolated. The situation is simply compounded when the environment is predominantly white and unfriendly or hostile. Oftentimes students remain in such non-nurturing environments, but at a severe price. James Comber, an award winning child psychiatrist and brilliant educator, spoke of this predicament in the context of his educational experience:

> ...it was crystal-clear to me that being a good student could save me from some of the indignities that my black friends experienced in school. The word was out. White equaled good and smart. Black equaled bad and dumb. If you were smart and black you might salvage a little. For this reason, being the best, being perfect, became very important—too important. Too many black students work under this pressure even today (Comer, p. 113–114).

It seems clear from the above situation that it is natural for black students to want to excel academically. However, when the process of excelling consumes the product, the question of whether it is worth it becomes paramount. In other words, is the psychological distress and interpersonal conflict experienced worth it? Several have observed that too much anxiety, stress and tension can lead to severe emotional and physical disturbances (depression, schizophrenia, ulcers, migraine headaches).

The learning styles of black students are another critical factor that plays an important part in academic adjustment. Although a great deal of caution must be exercised in generalizing about black students' learning styles, some evidence exists that supports a field-sensitive style of learning or cooperative learning (Rodriguez, 1983). Within the context of an environment experienced as hostile or unfriendly, black students have isolated themselves and are not connected to their most effective and natural resource, a collaborative/cooperative learning style. It follows that a non-nurturing campus environment and unsupportive instructors will lead to lower satisfaction with college, poor academic performance, and a premature exit from college without a degree.

Negative Stereotypes

The negative stereotypes connected with education and learning begin at the elementary and secondary school levels and continue beyond college. Black children attend schools where most of their peers, if not themselves, are labeled by the professionals as "culturally deprived," "high risk," "learning disabled," "stupid" and "crazy" by their classmates (Comer, 1988; Keniston, 1977). Their parents are referred to as uncooperative, a disgrace to the community, or as problem parents (Logan, 1990). Even when such descriptors do not fit students and their parents, the prevailing attitudes still affect their well-being. The negative stereotypes continue and are reinforced through the curriculum and by the school's faculty. The U.S. educational system is Eurocentric and does not in any appreciable way educate its student body to fully explore and appreciate their ethnic and racial differences as well as their traits (Rodriguez, 1983). More specifically, such diversity is not incorporated and infused throughout the curriculum as a given. From the perspective of the faculty, the tendency is to expect less academically from the black student and to assume that nearly every black student does not meet the standard academic requirements of the university (Brookover, Beamer, Efthim, Hathaway, Legatte, Miller, Passalacqua and Tornatzky, 1979; Forrest, 1987). This view of black students as well as students from other racial or ethnic groups is subtly reinforced by certain organizational programs that are designed to "compensate for deficiencies in earlier education" (see, for example, Weisman, 1968). Oftentimes students are earmarked for these programs simply because they meet the criteria of being black, and also because the program must attract certain numbers of black and other racial or ethnic students in order to be funded. As a result, these students resent these specific university initiatives that are designed, according to most universities, to "improve the academic performance of ethnic minorities."

Lack of Financial Resources

As previously indicated, numerous factors impact the educational progress of black students. However, a very significant factor in the reduced black college enrollment rates is the lack of availability of financial aid. Between 1980 and 1988, there was a 4.1 percent drop in student aid from all federally supported programs. Additionally, between 1980 and 1983 there was an 18 percent drop. Although federal aid has been increasing since 1983 it is still less than it was in 1980. Overall, the loss in federal aid has increased the importance of supplemental grants, college work study, direct loans and state student incentive grants.

These changes in financing for college education have a disproportionate impact on black and low-income students. For example, according to Current Population Reports (1988), in 1985 more than one-fifth of black college students came from families with an annual income of less than $10,000, compared to less than six percent of their white peers.

It seems obvious that the issues discussed so far are interrelated, and must be addressed as a unified whole. The next section of this article addresses these issues in the context of critical conditions that are needed for ensuring black academic excellence.

Conditions For Academic Excellence

The necessary conditions for excellence in educational growth have been identified as student involvement, high expectations and evaluation and feedback (Involvement in Learning, 1984). A creative learning environment is an additional aspect that has often not been considered.

Student Involvement. Student involvement has been defined in terms of the amount of time, energy and effort which students devote to the learning process. This process is generally operationalized in a variety of ways and describes students who devote a great deal of time to study, participate actively in student activities, interact frequently in a constructive manner with faculty and peers, and work at on-campus jobs.

Of course, student involvement requires quality time and energy—precious resources that must also take into consideration families and involvement with social activities. According to the National Institute of Education (1984), colleges and universities can help students to become better managers of their time by:

1. Altering the learning/teaching environment. For example, the faculty should be encouraged to adapt and incorporate teaching methods that require greater student responsibility for their learning. Additionally, such teaching methods must also address the learning styles of blacks and other ethnic or racial groups.

2. Suggesting and providing significant opportunities for trade-off. For example, provide greater opportunities through part-time work or other activities that connects the students' lives in a substantive way to the campus community.

High Expectations

The second condition of academic excellence is concerned with the educational outcomes sought by students and institutions. From the perspective of black students, this is a very complex condition. On the one hand we are talking about what students learn and how well they learn it. Also we are talking about whether what is expected of students is realistic. As indicated earlier, discrepancies sometimes exist between what faculty expect of blacks and other ethnic or racial groups of students and the general student body. In other words, the expectations are that black students may need remedial help or simply cannot perform at the same level as their white peers. Ultimately there must be a match between what students expect and need and what faculty expect and require. Expectations cannot be too high or too low, but need to be interesting and challenging.

Evaluation and Feedback

The third condition of academic excellence is concerned with the overall effectiveness with which students, faculty, and institutions carry out their learning and teaching goals and objectives. Essentially, this condition dictates that institutions be accountable for what they expect students to learn as well as for how well they have learned. Finally, provisions must be made for utilizing the new information gained through this process for enhancing the overall quality of the learning process, and the effects of certain courses and the impact of services and programs must be considered.

Creative Learning Environment

Implicit in the above conditions of academic excellence is the need for a creative learning environment. The foundation for such an environment consists of humanistic values, unconditional support, mutual respect and nurturance of differences. Available evidence suggests that students within a creative learning environment are provided the necessary opportunities and resources for thinking through their futures, discovering their talents, and growing emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually (Noel, 1987; Pounds, 1987; Wright, 1989). Noel (1987) describes this process as talent identification and talent development. This suggests that learning and growth can take place in a variety of arenas. These may include academics, dramatics, sports, or leadership and social activities, or any means that the university finds necessary to ensure students' growth and development. Of course, such an environment demands a radical redefinition of what is meant by quality and excellence in education as well as a creative vision. The focus must of necessity be concerned with individual student needs, and the ultimate preparation of students to become informed and fully functioning adults.

As a means of identifying factors characteristic of a supportive learning environment, in 1985 a survey of twenty-five black graduate social work students was done. Several factors were identified as contributing to students' academic success (Logan, 1985). The factors consisted of four broad categories. These were:

1. **Educational**
   1. On admission, special evaluation of skills in basic academic prerequisites: reading, writing, and speech;
   2. Appraisal of educational gap;
   3. Varied course loads arrangements.
2. **Tutorial**
   1. Faculty mentorship relationships;
   2. Buddy system with a higher level student;
   3. Writing workshops;
   4. Independent study;
   5. Collaborative learning.
3. **Financial**
   1. Tuition;
   2. Cost of living expenses;
   3. Extra expenses.
4. **Emotional**
   1. Support group;
   2. Networking;
   3. Individual counseling.

Coupled with these areas of concerns are campus climate and commitment of colleges and universities in terms of human and financial resources and leadership. Universities must actively and unequivocally promote the goals of building and sustaining a multicultural/multiracial campus community, and to prepare all of its students for effective roles as adults in a multiracial society. This goal must become an integral part of University educational mission.

Conclusion

It is obvious that entire university communities must make new commitments to ensure enduring growth and developments of all students, especially black students. An environment must be created in which a variety of cultural, and learning styles are embraced and students' talents are identified and developed. Such an approach to higher education will not only promote quality education, but everyone will be beneficiaries.

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