The Academic and Social Experiences of African American Students at Predominately White Institutions of Higher Education

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EDP&L 834
Dr. Gordon
Curriculum Development Project
Spring 2010
The Overview

A wide range of studies have been conducted in order to understand the experiences of African American students at predominately white institutions of higher education (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). To fully understand the experiences of African American students, faculty, staff, and administrators must take into account students’ adjustment to the academic and social climate of the campus as well as assess how these factors influence the collegiate experiences of African American students (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Research has proven that the academic and social experiences of African American students at predominately white institutions directly affect educational outcomes (Loo & Rolison, 1986).

Institutional and Structural Hegemony

Many institutions of higher education across the United States of America are invested in maintaining the status quo and hegemonic structures within colleges and universities. Students of color such as African Americans have been denied the skills necessary to transition within these structures. As a result, African American students are often alienated, isolated, and unable to achieve academic and social parity within the dominant college environment. Williamson (1999) claims that predominately white institutions ensure the status quo is maintained through courses offered, the promotion of competitiveness and individualism, the type and structure of student organizations, the perpetuation of status quo ideologies, and institutional structures. As a result, African American students are unable to successfully transition, function, and achieve academic and social success within the larger university.
**Campus Climate**

Campus climate can be defined as an institution’s structures, policies, and practices. It can also include the perceptions of an institution’s faculty, staff, administrators, and students toward specific populations at the university and racial issues. Campus climate is critical because it affects the academic performance and the overall quality of a student’s educational experience (Feagin, 1992). Historically, the campus climates of institutions of higher education in the United States of America have denied the educational progress of African Americans. During the Civil Rights Movement, federal legislation eliminated segregation in education. This increased access and educational opportunities for African Americans (Williamson, 1999). However, despite these changes, campus climates at predominantly white institutions of higher education continually perpetuate subtle and overt racial discrimination against African American students (Feagin, 1992).

Furthermore, Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso (2000) conducted a study which revealed that when the campus racial climate of an institution was negative, African American students struggled with feelings of self doubt, frustration, and isolation both academically and socially. According to the study, when a campus racial climate is positive four elements are present: a) the inclusion of African American students and faculty into the academic and social components of the institution b) a curriculum that is reflective of the historical and contemporary experiences of African Americans c) programs to support the recruitment, retention and graduation of African American students and d) a mission that reinforces the institution’s commitment to diversity. These four elements can lead to
positive academic outcomes and increased social integration of African American students to predominately white institutions of higher education.

**Racism and Discrimination**

Acts of racism and discrimination against African American students are perpetuated within predominately white institutions of higher education. These acts are significant because they heighten African American students’ perceptions of not belonging to the university (Feagin, 1992). As a result, this directly affects the decision for many African American students to continue with their education. According to Feagin (1992) and Feagin & Sikes (1995), the experiences of racism and discrimination faced by African Americans cause feelings of alienation and hostility that result in wanting to withdraw. Feagin (1992) also claims that African American students who experience acts of racial prejudice and discrimination find greater difficulty integrating into the larger campus environment.

In a study conducted by Williamson (1999), African American students at a predominately white institution of higher education reported feeling as though they were “being drowned in a sea of whiteness.” In addition, the students stated that they “did not feel welcome to participate in student life and organizations such as fraternities and sororities, student government, or academic associations” (p. 95). As a result, this caused increased emotional distress and isolation of African American students.

Stereotypes are still a pervasive form of racism and discrimination against African American students at predominately white institutions of higher education. Steele & Aronson (1995) theory of stereotype threat, examines how negative stereotypes regarding African Americans can affect the academic achievement of African American students.
The study revealed that when African American students were asked to indicate their race before taking a standardized test, their test scores were significantly lower than when they were not asked to note their race. The study demonstrated that there was a direct correlation between stereotypes and the academic performance of African American college students.

**The Development of Social Support Systems**

Social support systems are generally used to facilitate the adjustment, retention, and progress of African American students (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Griffin, 1991, cited in Kimbrough, Molock & Walton, 1996). Many African American students experience a sense of isolation and alienation when they attend a predominately white institution. As a result, African American students find it necessary to create their own social and cultural networks to cope with the social segregation from the larger college environment. In the 1960’s, African American students began forming Black Student Unions. This was largely due to the growing racial consciousness among African Americans as a result of the Black Power Movement. These African American solidarity organizations at predominately white institutions went by many names such as, Black Students’ Association, African American Students’ Society, and United Afro-American Students. These student organizations were formed to create solidarity and unity among African American students and other people of African descent, expressing positive aspects of African American culture, and advocating for significant change on the colleges or universities on which they were located (Williamson, 1999).

Black Student Unions provided six critical services: a) they met the social, psychological, and academic needs not being met through traditional university
mechanisms b) provided a safe forum for the exploration of identity issues c) enabled the
development of collective African American values and ideological beliefs d) helped
develop a sense of collective competence and ability e) enabled collective action and
behavior on issues relevant to African American students and f) provided a training
ground for the development of political organization, participation, and leadership
(Williamson, 1999). As the number of Black Student Unions on predominately white
colleges and universities increased a growing number of African American students
began to actively participate and be involved. As a result of their participation, African
American students were able to find the predominately white college environment to be
more tolerable.

Efforts to Increase Academic Performance and Achievement

As the number of African American students attending predominately white
institutions increased in the late 1960’s and 1970’s; African American students expressed
uncertainty regarding the institution’s commitment to retention and their lack of
academic preparation in comparison to their white counterparts. Some colleges and
universities offered no academic support services and others had limited services for
African American students. As a result, African American students took it upon
themselves to be accountable for their own and each other’s academic survival by
developing academic support services such as, tutoring, academic advising and
departmental organizations at predominately white institutions (Williamson, 1999).

African American students enrolled in the same course would form study groups
to discuss the course materials, complete homework assignments and prepare for tests
and exams. This type of tutoring/study group revealed African American students
dedication to group rather than individual survival. African American students also formed an “underground advisement system.” This system consisted of upper classmen African American students offering lower classmen African American students information on professors, course content, and academic survival tips. Lastly, African American students formed departmental organizations such as the National Society of Black Engineers, Black-Pre Law Society and the Association of Future Black Social Workers. As a result of their alienation and isolation from the wider campus community, African American students were able to demonstrate their commitment to academic survival and academic excellence through these practices and organizations (Williamson, 1999).
Activities

Activity One: Brown v. Board of Education

In this activity students will watch a DVD titled Freedom’s Song 100 years of African-American struggle and triumph. The section that they will be asked to pay particular attention to is the unit on the Brown v. Board of Education case. Once students have finished watching the DVD they will be asked to discuss major events that were addressed in the film. Students will then write a brief 2-3 page response paper regarding the major ideas or concepts that were discussed within the movie. Educators can obtain a free copy of the DVD by going to the Association for the Study of African American Life and History website: http://www.asalh.net/FreedomsSong.html.

Activity Two: Book Report

In this activity students will read A Hope in the Unseen by Ron Suskind or Balm in Gilead by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot. Students will be asked to provide a summary of the book. In addition, in this summary, students will also be asked to explore how issues of race, class, and gender are addressed within the novel. Furthermore, students will be asked to discuss their thoughts, views, and opinions regarding the academic and social experiences of the African American student when he/she attended a predominately white institution.

The purpose of this activity is to encourage students to critically analyze and think about the academic and social experiences of African American students at predominately white colleges and universities in order to prepare them for Activity Three: The Interview, which is conducting an interview with an individual who is of
African descent that has or is currently attending a predominately white institution of higher education.

**Activity Three: The Interview**

In this activity students will conduct an interview with an individual who is of African descent that was a student or is currently a student that is attending a predominately white institution. Students will be asked to interview someone that is a member of their family, their community, or a faculty or staff member that works for the school that he/she attends. In addition, students will be encouraged to ask questions pertaining to the academic and social experiences of the individual that they choose to interview. Furthermore, the teacher will facilitate a classroom discussion regarding possible questions that the students may ask. The students will then be asked to pick at least 10 questions that were presented during the classroom discussion to ask during the interview.

**Activity Four: The Predominately White Institution of Higher Education**

In this activity students will be asked to identify a predominately white institution that is located in the city that they live in. Students will then be asked to research the demographics of the institution in relation to the African American student population. They can do this by going to the college or university’s website or by calling or emailing certain offices that may be able to provide them with information pertaining to the African American student population. Students will also be asked to find out what types of services, offices, and departments that are available for African American students at the college or university. Once the students obtain this information they will be asked to provide the teacher with a brief report of their findings.
**Activity Five: Campus Visit**

In this activity students will inform their teacher of the predominately white institution that they decided to research in Activity Four: The Predominately White Institution of Higher Education. The class will then decide which predominately white college or university they would like to visit. The teacher will then contact the appropriate office and/or department to arrange a campus tour for the students. In addition, before the tour, the teacher will facilitate a classroom discussion regarding potential questions students will ask faculty, staff, and students that they may meet during the tour in regards to the African American student population.

**Activity Six: Research Paper**

In this activity students will research a prominent African American in history that attended a predominately white institution of higher education. Students will be asked to write a 5 page paper discussing the history of the predominately white college or university and the life of the African American that they choose.
Bibliography


