

## CHAPTER TWO

# ENHANCING THE ACADEMIC CLIMATE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE MEN

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Gunnar Myrdal (1944), in his attempts to conceptualize the minority experience in the United States, coined the term *an American dilemma*. What Myrdal viewed as the nation's espoused approach of promoting equality for all while truly embracing this concept for only a select few, parallels the current experiences of many African American students in education. For the African American student in general and the African American male student in particular, experiences in the K-12 and higher education contexts have been at best chilly and at worst hostile. According to Hrabowski, Maton, and Greif (1998), "Almost everything we read and hear about young Black males focuses on the problems of crime, violence, drugs, teenage pregnancy, and poor academic achievement" (p. 3). Hence, the operating framework used by schools to interface with African American males is often constructed based on lists of perceived problems, using an approach that identifies pathologies instead of promoting promise.

Fostering academic achievement and promise among African American males in public schools continues to be a formidable task. Hopkins (1997) found that at K-12 institutions, Black male student populations experienced political, cultural, and economic inequalities almost daily. The outcomes of these disparities continue to result in significant numbers of these students failing,

stopping out, dropping out, or generally losing interest in scholastic endeavors (Gibbs, 1988; Hale-Benson, 1986; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Irvine, 1990).

Past experiences of African American males in public schools mirror much of what exists for this population today. White and Cones (1999) found that "From the middle of elementary school and continuing into high school, Black males lead all other groups of students in suspensions, expulsions, behavioral problems, and referrals to special classes for slow learners. In most inner-city high schools, the dropout rate for Black males is over 50%, and those who remain in school are four to five grades behind in reading and math" (p. 259).

Like its K-12 educational predecessor, higher education too has presented a major stumbling block for many African American males. Allen (1992) asserted that among African American and White collegians, significant differences were found in areas of persistence rates, academic achievement levels, enrollment in advanced degree programs, and overall psychosocial development. These differences translate into what Cuyjet (1997) has referred to among African American males as "'underpreparedness' for the academic challenges of postsecondary education" (p. 6). Further evidence supporting this claim is the ever-widening chasm between African American females and African American males within the academy, the former representing a 24 percent higher enrollment rate than the latter (Nettles & Perna, 1997).

Although the myriad issues African American males face span the educational continuum, context notwithstanding, the confluence of a number of very specific factors has been found to promote a climate of success for these men. This chapter illuminates each of these critical factors: peer group influence, family influence and support, faculty relationships, identity development and self-perception, and institutional environment. Each factor is discussed in turn to provide the reader with information regarding its relative impact on the institutional climate experienced by the African American male college student. In addition, policy and programmatic recommendations are described that should encourage the development of initiatives leading to positive academic outcomes, particularly as they relate to the creation of higher-quality education climates engendering African American college student success (Watson et al., 2002).

## PEER GROUP INFLUENCE

Peer groups constitute an important source of support for students attempting to negotiate the rigors of the undergraduate experience. According to Astin (1993), "The single most powerful source of influence on the undergraduate student's academic and personal development is the peer group . . . the amount of interaction among peers has far-reaching effects on nearly all areas of student learning and development" (p. 8). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) also suggest that peer groups influence college student attitudes, occupational choices, and persistence decisions. These groups are important in that they often expose students to viable social circles of similar achievement-oriented peers, thereby reifying these students' aspirations and goals (Bonner, 2001).

The peer group essentially serves as an audience, a virtual training ground to test out assumptions and ideas, strategies and plans within an encouraging and safe environment. The peer group for the African American student in college takes on an even greater level of significance in their matriculation experience. Unlike the postsecondary experiences shared among their nonminority peers, for most African American students there is the added burden of establishing a sense of agency within a milieu that differs quite markedly from their ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic background. In particular, what ostensibly is accepted behavior (such as assertiveness, aggressiveness, candor) among White male collegiate populations is often viewed as unacceptable behavior among African American male collegiate populations (Wilson-Sadberry, Royster, & Winfield, 1991). Therefore, it is the peer group that serves to "meet the need for belonging, feedback, and new learning experiences" (White & Cones, 1999, p. 214).

The need for belonging is often addressed within the African American peer enclave through the establishment of key social clusters—fraternities, athletic groups, student associations, and academic study groups. Both the frequency and quality of student interactions in these clusters are found to be positively associated with persistence (Astin, 1993). Also, a key consideration for these students is being connected to peers who will provide them with critical feedback related not only to their academic progress, but also to their nonacademic progress. These sociocultural influences are often cited as being more critical to the success of African

American students in educational settings than the more intellectual pursuits traditionally highlighted (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985). Finally, peer group influences on new learning experiences for African American males become manifest through increased levels of academic development, problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, and cultural awareness found in these student-to-student exchanges (Astin, 1993). Educators must also continue to play a role by emphasizing high academic achievement and encouraging peer support and peer reinforcement for academic success.

By attempting to understand the composition, structure, and mission of peer group subcultures, institutions of higher education will be better equipped to meet the needs of all student communities. In speaking to the topic of "what works" in campus diversity efforts, it was Smith (1997) who posited, "Opportunities for interaction between and among student groups are desired by virtually all students and produce clear increases in understanding and decreases in prejudicial attitudes. Such opportunities also positively affect academic success. The conditions under which interactions among individuals are likely to be beneficial include institutional support, equal status, and common goals" (p. vi).

Hence, ensuring that positive interactions occur within and between peer groups on college campuses is an important part of the matriculation process. Although this is a necessary goal to implement for institutions across various cultural groups, it is particularly important for those student populations that, much like the African American male, are attempting to integrate both academically and socially into an environment that for all intents and purposes does not coincide with their constructed worldviews.

One way to ensure that men are spending more of their time pursuing academic growth and less time learning interpersonal coping strategies is to form a Black male support group that functions much like a freshman seminar, with the purpose of enlightening and exposing all Black men to the tribulations of a predominantly White campus. If men are informed about what to expect and are able to use each other to share experiences and provide support, fewer will voluntarily leave school (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Hood, 1992), and more can focus their attention on intellectual pursuits without a cloud of deception. In addition, the support group allows its members to take pride in academic achievement and intellectual competence without the

added burden or stigma of feeling as if they are “acting White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

## FAMILY INFLUENCE AND SUPPORT

White and Cones (1999) reported that, from a psychological perspective, the family meets needs for safety, emotional security, affection, and guidance—the family is the very first unit to which humans are exposed. These familial units serve as key sources of support for African American male college students. Numerous studies (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Hughes, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1986; Wilson & Constantine, 1999) have documented the relative impact of the connection among African American collegians and their families on issues such as psychosocial development, racial identity, academic success, resilience, and self-esteem. According to Wilson and Constantine, familial relationships for many African American students have a particular impact on the development of a positive Black racial identity. The establishment of a positive identity for the African American male student is significant in that it serves as the foundation upon which the student can develop some sense of agency and in turn determine where he “fits” within the academy.

Ostensibly, this notion of fit and of belonging is often experienced quite differently for African American male collegians than for White males and for all females, primarily due to the reasons previously articulated—alienation and isolation, absence of peer connections, and a lack of support. According to Harris and Nettles (1996), “Minority students’ efforts to cope with feelings of alienation and isolation take various forms. Many students withdraw psychologically from the university but continue to complete basic tasks in a perfunctory manner” (p. 337). It can be a challenge to find the necessary agents within the institution who are capable of connecting with these students on a very personal level to circumvent these feelings. Tracey and Sedlacek (1985) posited that for many African American students, finding a viable support structure and a sense of belonging typically occurred away from the campus (that is, with family). Therefore, the familial network is used as a frontline defense unit to assist the student in strategically moving through the postsecondary minefield. It is this unit, this cultural and community framework (Fries-Britt, 1998), that provides

these students with some sense of familiarity and support, ultimately promoting their development.

Research has also documented the influence of family on not only the psychosocial and social development, but also the academic development of African American male college students. Several studies (Cuyjet, 1997; Fleming, 1984; Wilson-Sadberry, Royster, & Winfield, 1991) attempt to dichotomize the matriarchal and patriarchal influence; however, the unifying theme across all studies in this area is that familial influence from one or both parents is a significant factor in these students' matriculation success. Encouragement and support from the family unit, through accolades and admonishment, is translated into student academic commitment and persistence.

Familial support structures for African American male college students develop during their precollegiate matriculation (Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998), and these structures are carried forth into their postsecondary experiences. The familiar refrains "hang in there" and "you can do it" often provide the extra push to spur these students on to academic success. It is the complex combination of these nonacademic and noncognitive variables (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985) that also provides these students with the wherewithal to tackle deep-seated issues such as campus-based racism and prejudice (Wilson & Constantine, 1999), while simultaneously achieving academic success.

In order to make the family a viable component in the collegiate matriculation experience of the African American student, institutions must be proactive in their approach. As one set of plausible strategies to address this issue, Bonner (2001) asserts,

Orientation officials at the university-wide and departmental level should promote initiatives that include family members and parents in the admissions and retention process. Bridging the knowledge and expertise of the student affairs professional in the area of campus-based orientation programming with the acumen and intuition of the academic affairs professional in the area of department/domain specific orientation programming could serve to meet the varied developmental needs of all students. Bridging should be enacted with the family serving as the supportive scaffolding, primarily through their participation in programming initiatives. (p. 15)

## FACULTY RELATIONSHIPS

African American students who attend predominantly White institutions (PWI) often describe the classroom and institutional environments as inhospitable (Smith, 1997). According to Sedlacek (1999), this inhospitality often stems from the inability to get straightforward information from faculty concerning their academic progress. Berry (1983) reported that Black students in college classrooms are often excluded from informal conversations among their White classmates and complain of being ignored in class discussions. Gossett, Cuyjet, and Cockriel (1996) indicated that Black students experienced feelings of being marginalized in the classroom due to perceived pressures of having to serve as the spokesperson for their race. Additionally, Sedlacek (as cited by Gregory, 2000) found that faculty was less likely to provide praise to African American students commensurate with the degree and quality of praise provided to their nonminority peers.

Davis (1999) acknowledged the isolation that Black men often feel due to their unwillingness to interact with faculty or classmates outside of the classroom. These feelings are usually based on negative in-class relationships. In a recent qualitative study of Black students attending a PWI, Fries-Britt and Turner (2001) reported that 100 percent of the participants in the study perceived that there was a "proving process" required in the classroom setting, essentially to validate their intellectual competence. In particular, many Black men inherited the burden of having to rebuff stereotypes regarding their status as athletes in addition to having to prove their intellectual competence.

To circumvent many of the problems African American males are experiencing in college, purposive initiatives aimed at pairing these students with viable faculty mentors are essential. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1979), the frequency of student-faculty informal contact accounted for increases in freshman year persistence. Astin (1993) further added that, second only to the peer group, faculty-student interaction represents the most significant aspect of a student's undergraduate development and institutional commitment. By inference, Black men should benefit from these interactions as all other students do, despite the special efforts that may be required to ensure that it happens.

Unfortunately, Black men (1) are perceived by society to have poor academic socialization and low expectations for their academic achievement (Gordon, 1994), (2) are less likely to seek out faculty for assistance (Hood, 1992), and (3) assume they will be subjected to some form of mistreatment by faculty (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993)—thus, a purposeful attempt at bringing these two groups together must be the guiding *modus operandi*.

Although not always possible, the optimal arrangement would be to connect African American male students with African American male faculty. It is imperative that the Black male faculty selected to participate in these programs serve in a dual capacity, as both academic escort and social nurturer. Unfortunately, Black male retention is also a problem in the faculty ranks, so a critical mass of mentors may be lacking in the PWI. Black students have been calling for the increase of Black faculty and staff at PWIs for many years, yet the call sometimes falls on deaf ears.

In the absence of viable African American faculty to serve as mentors and advisors to African American students, it is imperative for institutions to develop cadres of non-African American faculty to serve in these roles. Although many students lament the lack of availability of faculty who share common gender, cultural, ethnic, and racial background experiences, the bottom line is that some sense of connection with a faculty person, regardless of background experiences, is better than none. In a research investigation by Lee (1999), she discovered that for African American students, "having an African American faculty mentor was less important than having a mentor in their career field. Students reasoned that they could get the cultural connection they needed outside of the university, when necessary, by simply going home" (p. 33).

To overcome the frequently negative impact of the issues facing African American males in the K-12 system, researchers cite a multicultural curriculum as one viable means of ensuring their success in college. An added benefit of having African American faculty—or faculty who are at least apprised of the background experiences these students bring to the academic setting—is their willingness to integrate the worldviews of these student cohorts into existing classroom curriculum (Bowser & Perkins, 1991; Goddard, 1990; Ogbu, 1981; Osborne, 1999; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993; Taylor, 1994). Specifically, the lived experiences of African



American males are integrated into the classroom environment to facilitate learning. In addition, teachers must infuse their presentation of the curriculum with cultural perspectives. Identifying the accomplishments of African Americans in the sciences, history, politics, and mathematics aids students in realizing the endless possibilities of their educational pursuits, and it can fend off the onset of academic disengagement.

Foster and Peele (1999) supported the integration of Black males' personal experiences within the classroom environment. They added that those who successfully teach Black males must be caring and persistent, and they must develop productive relationships focusing on the efforts students have expended rather than solely on their actual abilities or academic achievements. In a qualitative investigation of Black and Hispanic high school students (sophomores, juniors, and seniors), Bowser and Perkins (1991) reported that mentors who took a personal interest in these students and in some cases treated them as members of their families enriched their high school experiences. These findings parallel the experiences of these same student cohorts in higher education, and it becomes readily apparent that it is the combination of culturally relevant curricula and student-centered teachers who genuinely care about their students that will potentially assist in countering the academic problems facing African American males in the elementary and secondary educational systems.

Fostering positive classroom environments is yet another important means of ensuring the successful matriculation of African American male college students. Dawson-Threat (1997), in her research highlighting strategies to enhance the in-class academic experiences for African American men, suggests that faculty must concern themselves with three major issues: including a safe space for expression of personal experience, facilitating and promoting the understanding of difference, and providing the opportunity to explore Black manhood issues. Although faculty may feel some sense of uneasiness in tackling these issues, they must be addressed to ensure that these students identify viable pathways leading to success (1997). Through a concerted effort to understand the needs of this student cohort, faculty members can create student-faculty liaisons that establish a basis for a shared sense of understanding and trust (Adams, 1992).

## IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND SELF-ESTEEM

Researchers have identified several environmental conditions that can explain why African American males perform poorly in elementary and secondary schools: academic disidentification, lack of academic resilience, stereotype threat, and cool pose. Steele (1992) advanced the concept of disidentification, which he defined as the absence of a relationship between self-esteem and academic performance. Students found to exhibit low levels of academic performance were also found to exhibit low levels of motivation to succeed. Essentially, it was noted that their self-esteem was directly linked to academic performance. These students are neither rewarded for good academic performance nor punished for poor academic performance and are at a higher risk for falling through the cracks and dropping out of school.

Although all students, regardless of race, are susceptible to academic disidentification, students of color have the additional anxiety of combating negative stereotypes about their academic ability. Osborne (1997) used the concept of academic disidentification in a study comparing African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian high school students. His results clearly support the notion of race as a factor in the academic disidentification of African American males. Although all students except Hispanic females demonstrated some level of disidentification between tenth and twelfth grades, Black males demonstrated a statistically significant and dramatic increase in disidentification, which began at the eighth grade and escalated as they progressed toward their senior year. Osborne (1999) reported that this dramatic disidentification gap among African American male populations has not always existed. Osborne first observed this widening disidentification gap in a similar study of high school seniors between the years 1972 and 1992. These results parallel findings cited by other researchers (Demo & Parker, 1986; Lay & Wakstein, 1985), who also found a correlation between low academic performance and low self-esteem among ever-increasing numbers of African American students.

Self-esteem is also linked to the concept of academic resilience. Resilient students develop positive behaviors that improve their chances of being successful in school despite their membership in an at-risk group (Finn & Rock, 1997). Resilient students are found

to engage in behaviors that correlate with higher levels of self-esteem than those students who do not exhibit engaging behaviors—“coming to class and school on time, being prepared for and participating in class work, expending the effort needed to complete assignments in school and as homework, and avoiding being disruptive in class” (p. 231).

Still another concept posed by Steele (1997) has also been reported to have an impact on how African American males perceive their institutional environments. This concept, *stereotype threat*, “is a situational threat—a threat in the air—that, in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists . . . members of these groups can fear being reduced to that stereotype and for those who identify with the domain to which the stereotype is relevant, this predicament can be self-threatening” (p. 614).

If the threat becomes pervasive, it can trigger academic disidentification. Students who have high self-esteem and are performing well academically are more susceptible to stereotype threat. According to Osborne (1999), “for these individuals, a wrong answer is not only personally damaging but also confirms the negative group stereotype” (p. 557).

Finally, Majors and Billson (1992) suggested that when African American males are faced with situations that question or jeopardize their manhood, affirm racial stereotypes, or damage their sense of identity or worth, they adopt cool behaviors as coping mechanisms. Cool pose empowers Black males and gives them control. It is an attitude that conveys strength, visibility, and security despite obstacles and situations that would lead to the contrary. Cool pose is defined as “a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control” (p. 4). Cool behaviors were adopted during slavery to help Blacks to survive and subsequently have influenced popular culture through music, clothing, sports, and the media. Given the previously articulated educational difficulties facing African American males, it is likely that cool behavior is used by males to empower them in the classroom, an environment in which they are perceived by most to be powerless.

## INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Once African American males enter college, their interaction with the educational system does not get easier. Some of the issues, such as self-esteem (Constantine, Robinson, Wilton, & Caldwell, 2002; Demo & Parker, 1986; Lay & Wakstein, 1985), stereotype threat (Steele, 2000), teacher neglect (Berry, 1983; Sedlacek, 1999), and a homogenous curriculum (Bourassa, 1991; Dawson-Threat, 1997; Love, 1993; Sedlacek, 1999) are recapitulated throughout their matriculation experiences. However, students have an additional burden of coping and adjusting to an environment that may be less hospitable to their presence, particularly if they attend PWIs as opposed to HBCUs (Allen, 1992; Bonner & Murry, 1998; Cheatham, Slaney, & Coleman, 1990; Cokley, 2001; Davis, 1994; DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Fleming, 1981, 1984; Flowers, 2003; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Hughes, 1987; MacKay & Kuh, 1994; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Person & Christensen, 1996; Smith, 1997).

Although the literature is replete with information about the experiences of African American college students, it is bereft of specific attention to the issues impacting African American males (Cokley, 2001; Davis, 1999) or the differences these students experience on HBCU campuses compared with PWI settings (Jackson & Swan, 1991). This is quite a surprising commentary, given the societal, economic, and political pressures facing African American males that have been described in the literature and in the media over the last several years.

At HBCUs African American students, in general, report higher levels of academic achievement than do their counterparts attending PWIs (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Flowers, 2002; Nettles, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In particular, African American men are cited as being able to focus more on their academic pursuits without the distractions facing their peers who attend PWIs (Fleming, 1984, DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Berger and Milem (2000) found that African American men who attend HBCUs are at an advantage in developing self-concept—as defined by psychosocial wellness, academic

ability, and achievement orientation—compared with their African American female counterparts. Allen (1992) reported that African American men have higher occupational aspirations than African American females. The implication is that men aspire to more high-status, high-paying occupations than women. Additionally, Fleming (1984) added that Black men at HBCUs improve their competitive abilities and exhibit power and an intellectual presence in the classroom. In sum, HBCUs have demonstrated their ability to provide a quality academic experience for African American students (Bohr, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004), despite having fewer financial resources and faculty.

On the other hand, at PWIs African American students face an array of environmental issues that impinge upon their academic success. The literature is saturated with accounts of Black students who perceive the environment at PWIs as hostile (Allen, 1988, 1992; Allen & Haniff, 1991; Bennett & Okinaka, 1990; Davis, 1999; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Love, 1993; Nettles, 1988, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Fleming (1981) wrote, “for Blacks college will be the greatest exposure to an integrated social environment” (p. 282). Yet what many African American students find in this integrated social environment is a strange and foreign atmosphere of cutthroat competition. According to Hughes (1987), “Such orientations are least likely to produce the best environment for Black students, for whom socially oriented climates are crucial for learning and growth” (p. 535). Thompson and Fretz (1991) added that competitive classrooms limit opportunities for Black students to share opinions and inspire others to learn about culturally diverse perspectives on a particular subject. In fact, “cooperative classroom settings may prove particularly valuable for Black students in White schools because traditional measures for evaluating performance . . . may limit their stylistic impact on the class and on the teacher” (p. 440).

Another major negative in the academic experiences of African American students is the stigma often associated with special academic support services tailored to meet their individual and collective needs. Providing academic assistance to help with the overall scholastic integration process is often a necessary component in promoting a successful transition for these students. Unfortunately, many campus constituents view these provisions as

indicators of African American students' lack of ability. Others view these provisions as manifestations of affirmative action mandates gone wrong. In speaking to this issue as it pertains to the experiences of African American men, Dawson-Threat (1997) asserts, "African American male college students are concerned about the negative stereotyping that overshadows their genuine identity as intelligent, young Black men on the rise" (p. 38).

Thus, it is imperative for programming and policy initiatives aimed at meeting the academic needs of African American students to not be cast in a negative light among campus-based constituencies. Differences cannot be touted as deficiencies; academic integration, not only for minority student groups but also for nonminority student cohorts, must be viewed as a viable part of the student learning, growth, and development processes. According to Moses (1994), there are a number of misconceptions reifying the notion that diverse student populations have an adverse impact on institutional quality—including the pervasive belief that "admissions policies are discriminatory in favor of diverse students, because there are 'set asides' or special admissions status for them" (p. 12).

At the core of the environmental issues that impinge upon student academic success is the concept of "student-institution fit" (Tinto, 1975). According to Tinto's model, the more a student assimilates into the college's social and academic systems, the more committed the student will be to the college. The initial strength of a student's commitment to an individual campus is linked to the successful matching of that student's background and the college campus (Paulsen, 1990). For example, Flowers (2004) discovered that not all student experiences of involvement positively influence the educational outcomes of African American students, and the involvement of these students is typically lower than that of their White counterparts. Although Flowers does not specify differences between men and women, anecdotal evidence indicates limited male involvement in extracurricular activities other than intramural sports or time engaged in informal games of basketball with peers in the campus recreation center.

African American students often struggle to develop coping strategies to fit in and succeed in PWIs, due to the lack of successful matching between their background experiences and the collegiate context. Consequently, many African American men become resistant to adopting strategies that would lead to their

successful matriculation (Hughes, 1987). According to Hughes, this pervasive mode of resistance is often due to the African American male's alignment with "masculine 'macho' principles" that they felt were necessary to defend instances of real and perceived racism" (p. 541).

Hughes' findings are analogous to the cool pose construct employed by African American adolescents, described by Majors and Billson (1992). In both instances, the end result is regaining a sense of control and power in an environment in which their inability to cope may lead to withdrawal, retreat, or dropping out. Also, the same stereotype threat that Steele (1997) applied to Black high school students can be attributed to college students, resulting in a further sense of isolation and alienation from the institutional context. Further, Steele (2000) reported that stereotype threat among college students could lead to the same academic disidentification articulated for high school students, yet for the collegian the stakes are often higher and the consequences more dire: namely, the loss of both personal and professional aspirations.

## CONCLUSION

To create academic climates that foster the success of African American men, higher education institutions must focus on a number of issues that defy solutions of a singular nature. This chapter has attempted to shed light on the most salient factors impacting the success of these collegians. Although the role of the peer group has been investigated for college populations on a more generalized scale, particular attention must be dedicated to the special function these cohorts serve in the lives of the African American male college student. Negotiating membership within cultural and ethnic microcultures must be examined in terms of their overlap and influence dictated by broader university macrocultures. Are the peer groups these students belong to becoming integrated into the fabric of the institution, or are they relegated to academe's periphery?

An implication for academic as well as student affairs officials is the need to identify, in collaboration with these men of color, initiatives of interest. Perhaps capitalizing on many of the social (recreational sports, video games, card tournaments) as well as academic

(study sessions, group library meetings) venues in which these students naturally engage could create more participation and involvement. Additionally, it is critical not to overlook the old-fashioned approach (which is often marginalized in our fast-paced, technologically advanced society)—that is, making direct contact and a personal request for student involvement.

The institution must encourage a concentrated effort to focus not only on student-student interactions but also on student-faculty interactions. As the scholarly literature reports, it is the relationship that students develop with faculty that so often serves as the primary factor in their retention and success. For the African American male, identifying and connecting with faculty provides him with a knowledgeable liaison capable of assisting him with matters of academic importance. Depending on the nature of the relationship, this connection may even extend to matters beyond academics—issues involving psychosocial and social development could also be considered.

Again, both academic affairs and student affairs personnel can play a pivotal role in fostering these relationships among students and faculty. One means of accomplishing this task is to create residential student learning communities. A symbiotic relationship among faculty and student affairs is created in their efforts to meet these students' needs. An underlying message to the student is that the institution does not believe in the artificial boundaries that are often temporally as well as structurally created between these areas, but rather recognizes that the student is not at certain times academic and at other times social, but always some combination of both. Through these residential learning communities, the African American male student is provided with the opportunity to interface with the faculty member on a much smaller scale and in a more authentic setting. Note that these communities are not meant to circumvent the faculty members' need to connect with students in more traditional settings: classrooms, recitation sessions, and office hours.

The chapter also speaks to the importance of the family in the success of African American male college students. By continuing to cast a blind eye on the contributions of the family, higher education will keep missing the mark with this group of matriculants. As we have attempted to show in this chapter, the role of the family must



fit squarely into any equation designed to generate a successful outcome. Finding a way to integrate the family into various aspects of the student's postsecondary experience will only add to his chances of academic success and in turn promote goodwill between the family unit and the institution. It's very important to promote "family days" that expose the student and his family to the institution as a whole. Academic sessions aimed at providing insight on how to negotiate the programmatic, departmental, and collegiate-level terrain could be combined with student affairs assemblies that highlight the various student development opportunities on campus.

Finally, the last two factors, identity development and institutional environment, are in many ways connected. According to Lewin (1951), it is the interaction of individual and environmental variables that produces requisite behaviors. Thus the establishment of a positive identity for African American male collegians rests on their ability to establish some sense of agency within these milieus—one that not only recognizes the importance of the identity development process but also supports this process through altruistic dialogue. Both academic and student affairs personnel can initiate this process by "equipping themselves with the skill base to interact, teach, serve, and counsel students from a global and contextual perspective that takes into account their culture" (p. 110). A logical starting point might be constructing town-hall meetings or departmental forums that would allow students from these diverse backgrounds to essentially "speak their temporal realities into existence" for the uninformed masses. At a minimum, this opportunity would create an institutional climate in which these students feel that their voices and worldviews are not particularistic but part of the normal structure of the academy.

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