

Engaging Our Metropolitan Students: Orienting and Connecting Students in the Learning Environment

Tyrone Bledsoe, Guest Editor

A review of the literature reveals that urban universities are increasingly interested in experiential education-pedagogies that connect and engage students through academic reflection and out-of-class experiences. The communities within the campus and those surrounding our campuses offer resources for such experiential education and engagement. In higher education circles, the term learning community has become commonplace. It is being used to mean any number of things, such as extending classroom practice into the community; bringing community personnel into the school to enhance the curriculum and learning tasks for students; or engaging students with particular emphasis on underrepresented groups and adult learners, faculty, and administrators simultaneously in learning, to suggest just a few.

The urban space that often disconnects students from those who could assist them is problematic for higher education practitioners. For example, it is not uncommon for students from low income, poor, disenfranchised, racially segregated inner-city communities to rely on educational programs and services that are provided by faculty, administrators, counselors, and other staff who grew up in middle class, predominantly white suburban communities. However, the urban context offers a tremendous opportunity for human intellectual growth, development, and learning.

This issue introduces several interventions used by higher education practitioners to assist underrepresented and adult students. Most of the discussion here is situated in four-year metropolitan universities. The decision to primarily focus on four-year and postgraduate institutions was intentional in that these institutions often are focused on traditional-aged and adult students. Similarly, these universities share a common belief born of experience that diversity in their student bodies, faculties, and staff is important for them to fulfill their primary mission and to engage the entire campus community with particular emphasis on the “student.”

American colleges and universities traditionally have enjoyed significant latitude in fulfilling their missions. Americans have understood that there is no single model of a good college and that no single standard can predict with certainty the lifetime contribution of a teacher or a student. Yet, the freedom to determine who shall teach and be taught has been restricted in a number of places and come under attack in others. As a

result, some institutions have experienced precipitous declines in the enrollment of African American and Hispanic students, reversing decades of progress in the effort to assure that all groups in American society have an equal opportunity for access to higher education. Additionally, these institutions are challenges with growing adult enrollments and are in dire need of guidance about how best to serve this ever-growing population of students.

This volume seeks to create an awareness of the need to increase student engagement for our metropolitan students by developing a systematic approach to determining the needs of students of color and adult learners. It highlights the importance of bringing together faculty and students along with other campus constituents to aid in this process. Student success (including retention, achievement of desired learning outcomes, and completion of educational goals) depends in part on the degree and quality of each student's engagement in the learning environment, in and out of the traditional classroom. These institutions must have as a key priority the work of improving the success of under-prepared and adult students. Several themes emerge regarding the role of urban metropolitan universities in assisting students of inner-city communities to traverse the social, structural, economic, cultural, and technological borders that disconnect them from the more affluent communities in urban areas.

The first article in this volume by Frederic Jacobs and Stephen P. Hundley reviews the research findings concerning student attrition. The authors provide a thorough examination of the findings associated with students with nontraditional characteristics. Jacobs and Hundley point out that many institutions have developed intervention programs designed to identify and assist those students at greatest risk. Additionally, the authors point out that broader policy questions emerge from the realities of high attrition in addition to implementing intervention programs. The data provided in the article indicate two areas where the results are skewed: higher departure rates both in two-year public institutions and among students with some nontraditional characteristics in all three types of institutions. The authors bring attention to two emerging questions: How can the significantly higher departure rates be explained, and what if any remediation interventions are possible, and what are the policy implications of excessive rates of departure for students with nontraditional characteristics?

The second article, by Nuru-Holm et al spotlights the Cooperative Learning and Academic Success System (CLASS) Program at Cleveland State University. The program is designed to address the retention and achievement challenges of African American and Hispanic students through peer mentoring and academic support. The CLASS program started as a summer bridge program; however, it has evolved into a cultural identity group peer-mentoring program with a new focus of achievement and graduation of minority students. The authors do a good job of describing the evolution and systematic redesign of the program within the context of national data, institutional needs, theoretical constructs, program assessment and data based decision-making. As pointed out by the authors, the number of minority students entering colleges and universities nationally continues to increase. However, the graduation rates of these students are not increasing at the same rate with the exception of

students who attend historically black colleges and universities. Indicators of success in higher education by race and ethnicity are highlighted to include the following: high school completion rate, college participation, college enrollment, graduation rate, and degrees conferred. More alarmingly, the greatest challenges continue to be low high school completion rate; low college participation rate, especially for African American males; low college enrollment, and low six-year graduation rate.

Taylor-Heard highlights the notion that metropolitan universities are excellent educational options for adult students to complete their educational goals due to the geographic proximity of these institutions to work and housing. Further, she points out the fact that only a few studies exist that examine adult student engagement. Most of these studies are limited to the community college experience for this population. Taylor-Heard goes on to describe the student engagement experiences of three African American adult students on two different metropolitan campuses. The results of this study as pointed out by Taylor-Heard suggest the following emerging themes: previous college enrollment and workforce opportunity; family responsibilities; perceived receptivity of campus administrators and faculty; purposeful involvement, and institutional characteristics. Finally, she offers five recommendations for higher education practitioners concerning ways to enhance the adult student engagement. Taylor-Heard reminds us that metropolitan universities have the potential to provide adult students with a rewarding and meaningful college experience. The study of student engagement entails exploring ways in which universities can create campus environments that increase students' connection to academic inquiry and their learning experiences.

Gifford et al introduces the University of Louisville's International Service Learning Program (ISLP), which has provided an environment for more than 300 students to apply their classroom experiences to work in real world, intercultural projects. The article informs us that the research in the service learning area is often qualitative, as the outcome of engaged and involved learning is best described in the participants' own words in their reflective writing. The article spotlights several excerpts from reflective writing assignments submitted by adult students. Further, the article points us to the literature that highlights two primary benefits of service learning as outlined by Alexander Astin:

1. It serves as a "powerful means of preparing students to become more caring and responsible parents and citizens and of helping colleges and universities to make good on their pledge to 'serve society.'"
2. It has great potential for enhancing the learning process, both cognitively and affectively.

Gifford and colleagues stress the power of service learning in its capacity to engage students both cognitively and affectively.

Finally, Kevin Rome shares important data about his research involving African American males. Rome explored the effects of a specific mentoring program, Student African American Brotherhood (S.A.A.B.) on the retention of African American male college students on several different campuses. S.A.A.B was founded on the campus of

Georgia Southwestern State University during the fall of 1990. It remains one of the most dynamic organizations in the country established specifically to assist African American male students (K-12 and collegiate) to excel academically, socially, culturally, and personally. Rome presents literature that informs us that African American males have been an enigma in American society. African American college students often find themselves unaccounted for in the popular images of African American men.

As reflected in the article, African American men make extraordinary efforts to succeed despite societal forces that push them toward failure and which, in turn, blames them for inadequate responses to the failings of society. Many times African American college students are seen as either immune to the effects of minority status or as having lived beyond the challenges inherent in being a member of a “caste-like” minority group. The collegiate experiences for African American male college students are quite different from their white counterparts. Typically, there exist marginalization and invisibility resulting from racism and discrimination along with a certain degree of low achievement expectations by others. For many African American males, education has been deemed the panacea for escaping the realities impacting their lives. The overarching belief tends to be that attending college is a means of escaping and African American males who make it to college have what it takes to succeed. However, the literature quickly reminds us that access to higher education does not necessarily mean academic success.

For the African American male college student there appears to be an unmatched passion to face and endure all trials and tribulations and to maintain a profound level of pride as they stand on the shoulders of ancestors they are representing. Research indicates that the attrition rates for African American male college students range from 40 percent to 75 percent among men attending predominantly white universities. The inordinately high attrition rates for African American male students have become a major concern of many educators around the country. Also, the literature states that nationally only 12 percent of African American males who attend college actually complete requirements for a degree. Concerns about the performance of African American college students range from questions regarding ability to motivation and preparedness.

Researchers have discovered that once African American college students are admitted they are more likely to be successful if the institution addresses their concerns about marginalization and perceptions of discrimination. At universities across the country, there is a significant disparity between the presence of African American males and females. For example, *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2003* reported that 10.7 percent of first year students identified as African American females while only 8.2 percent identified as African American males (Sax, Astin, Lindholm, Korn, Saenz, & Mahoney, 2003). This is despite the overall increased enrollment of African American students. Some have argued that the absence of black males on college campuses is due to their increase in jails and prisons across the country (Kunjufu 1995; Maxwell, 2004). Exacerbating the issue, the American Council on

Education recently reported that the graduation rate of African American males is the lowest of any population (Maxwell, 2004). Given these disturbing statistics, it becomes increasingly important to understand the experiences of African American men in college. Research has shown that the campus environment is influential in determining the satisfaction level of students and creating safe and inclusive environments will aid in retention efforts (Strange & Banning, 2001). It should not be a surprise that the campus environment has also greatly influenced the experiences of black male college students.

Central to all the articles is the issue of addressing the needs of underrepresented and adult students from a recruitment and retention standpoint. This volume explicates the problems and challenges higher education practitioners confronted in assisting students of urban and low-income communities to access and utilize educational opportunities along with engaging them within the larger university community. The authors offer practitioners in the urban setting and beyond insight into the challenges and needs confronted by underrepresented and adult students. Additionally, it offers fresh perspectives and a few approaches to practice that can assist in engaging these students in our metropolitan universities.

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