

Engaging African American Males in their Educational Process at Predominately White Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

This paper explores 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 in Americus, Georgia by Dr. Tyrone Bledsoe in 1990. The author looks at the structure of the program and the roles of the advisors and students in the success or failure of the model. To document the effectiveness, the researcher used theories, models, current literature, individual interviews, and a group interview. These methods assisted the researcher in presenting the effect that the intervention has on the retention and persistence of African American males in college.

African American male students need a resource that recognizes the uniqueness of their experience and needs, while offering them potential solutions to their academic problems. Attrition is often not due to lack of ability, but to a lack of a social support system that is both accessible and knowledgeable regarding African American male college students (Wright and McCreary, 1997).

The plight of African American male college students is the subject of increasing concerns in higher education based upon the growing attrition rate of the group. Attrition rates for African American male college students reportedly range from 40 percent to 75 percent (Hunt et al., 1994). Only about 12 percent of African American males who attend college actually receive a degree (Irvine, 1990).

There are many college campuses with academic intervention programs designed to address the attrition rates of minority students. Dropping out of college is a little like the weather: something everyone talks about but no one does anything about... this predilection for talk over action is reflected in much of the research on dropouts, which has focused more on counting, describing, and classifying them than on seeking solutions to the problem (Astin, 1975).

However, many campus administrators are perplexed by the reluctance of African American males to use the services available to them. Instead of creating new and innovative programs that will attract African American males to use the services, programs tend to maintain established practices (Wright and McCreary, 1997).

The staggering low numbers of those who actually attend college further complicates African American male college students' attrition rates. African American male college students have the lowest male-female ratio of all minority groups. Regardless of the reasons that so few African American males make it to college, those who do arrive on campuses may need some special assistance to help them adjust and succeed (Cuyjet, 1997). The need for the mentoring of students of color is a major discussion item on college campuses that are serious about the recruitment and retention of African American male students. Mentoring has been found useful in retaining African American males in higher education (LaVant, Anderson, and Tiggs, 1997; Steel, 1991).

On several college campuses mentoring initiatives such as Student African American Brotherhood (S.A.A.B) play an integral role in an effort to mentor and retain African American males in higher education. There exist several interventions, which can be used, in efforts to retain African American males in higher education. The other side of the discussion asks why certain populations are targeted for special attention and whether it is fair.

One approach to addressing the retention of African American male college students has been to provide the students with African American male faculty and staff role models on campus. This study will explore one particular mentoring intervention that attempts to assist in the retention of African American male college students on several different campuses.

The concept of mentoring has existed for several hundred years. The word mentoring has been used to refer to various roles throughout time such as an advisor, educator, employer, sponsor, and supervisor. In the context of the college campus, the use of the term mentor refers to a relationship that transcends the roles usually associated with the aforementioned roles; a mentor proactively engages his or her students in the educational process (Grant-Thompson and Atkins, 1997). For the purpose of this study, a mentor is defined as a faculty, staff member, or student, who extends the educational process beyond the formal classroom or work environment in efforts to assist students to improve retention and development on college campuses (Borman and Coloson, 1984; Levinson, 1978; Tice, 1996).

Why S.A.A.B.?

Today, the question of racial preference attracts much attention and debate. In 1994, the case of *Podbenesky v. Kirwan* decided that the University of Maryland could not maintain a scholarship program exclusively for African Americans (Moeser, 1997). The most noted case to date, *Hopwood v. Texas*, generated much attention from proponents and critics of racial preference on college and university campuses.

Cheryl Hopwood, a white female, and three other white Texas residents filed a discrimination suit against the University of Texas School of Law alleging that the admissions process violated their Fourteenth Amendment's rights. The law school separated and reviewed preferred minorities' applications differently than non-preferred minorities. The law school admissions officers individually discussed each preferred minority applicant. They did not do the same for other applicants who were straddling the admit/decline line (Moeser, 1997). The law school never compared the preferred applicant to the non-preferred applicant, thus using race as the dominating variable for acceptance or denial.

The district court ruled that the law school violated the plaintiff's equal protection rights, but could continue to use racial preference in the application process. The court ruled that the law school could not use a separate admissions process for preferred minorities and other candidates. The law school did not use its admissions program to meet the goals of remedying past discrimination and achieving diversity. The Fifth Circuit Court ruled that the UT School of Law may not use race as an admissions factor in order to: "(1) achieve a diverse student body; (2) combat the perceived effects of a hostile environment; (3) alleviate the law school's poor reputation in the minority community; and (4) eliminate the present effects of past discrimination by parties other than the law school" (Moeser, 1997, p. 941). The Court decided that the equal protection clause opposed favoring one racial group over another and this was the case in the law school's admission process. The U.S. Supreme Court chose not to hear the appeal. Therefore, Hopwood stands as the law in racial-based admissions programs.

Michigan and California are following the trend in Texas and other states about the use of racial preference. In Michigan, four state legislators launched an investigation into the University's "racial preference" policies in its admissions procedures (Ramins and Plona, 1997). In California, Proposition 209 eliminated the use of racial preference in the state government. Proposition 209 states in Section 31: a) The state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public employment, public education (University of California, community college district, and school districts) or public contracting (Prop. 29, 1997).

The higher education system in this country began on the principles of separation. Blacks did not participate in the creation of higher education in this country and continue to experience widespread exclusion. Political and social conditions threaten to create further separation. Consensus does not exist as to practical solutions for this potentially volatile situation. Colleges and universities must prepare for a seemingly no-win situation.

African American Males in Today's Society

The statistics show a clear disadvantage to being black and male in America: Black males have higher rates than white males on mental disorders, unemployment, poverty, injuries, accidents, infant mortality, morbidity, AIDS, homicide and suicide, drug and

alcohol abuse, imprisonment, and criminality: they have poorer incomes, life expectancy, access to health care and education. (Majors and Billson, 1992, p. 12)

Higher Education and Economic Opportunities

African Americans are less likely than their white counterparts to go immediately from high school to college, despite most college students enrolling in college immediately after completing high school. The decision to enroll in college immediately after high school reflects the students' accessibility to higher education and the students' assessment of the relative value of attending college as compared to entering the work force (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996).

The greatest numbers of African American college graduates are women. African American women are responsible for most of the increases of the groups' participation in higher education. African American males are less likely to attend college, less likely to graduate from college, and less likely to attend graduate school. If these trends continue, African Americans will never reduce the economic gap between the races (Slater, 1994, Sanders, 1995).

In the 1970s African American men were more likely to attend college than African American women. In the past two decades, the participation rate in higher education has increased for African American women, white males, and white females, while remaining the same for African American men. Today there are nearly 300,000 more African American women enrolled in college than African American men (Slater, 1994). Slater (1994) suggested that African American males are impacted differently than African American females by the aftermath of the civil rights movement and racial integration. He suggested that this trend may be due to the following factors:

Race discrimination in employment is more intense against black men. The absence of successful black role models at home and in the schools is far more acute for black men than for black women. Black male role models are almost entirely absent in elementary and secondary schools. Often the media's portrayal of successful black men concentrates on athletes, musicians, comedians, and other entertainers – occupations that require little or no formal education. In corporate America, the employment growth for black women in professional positions was double the rate for black men in the 1982-to-1992 period.

Relatively lower levels of educational attainment have been identified as a factor in the economic disparities between blacks and whites and many of the economic improvements in blacks have been attributed to increased levels of education. Differences in education, however, do not completely explain the earning disparities between educated black and white males. African American male college graduates have lower median income earnings and higher underemployment rates than their white counterparts (Sanders, 1995, Staples, 1987, Black and Darling, 1994).

“The marginalization and invisibility resulting from racism and discrimination, the effects of poverty, class alienation, under education, low achievement expectations by others, and cultural difference all interact to create a collegiate experience for African American male college students that is quite different from that of their white male counterparts” (Wright and McCreary, 1997, p. 45). Statistics show a significant difference between the college experience of African American males and other students. There are several implications from the number of African American males attending and graduating from college in relationship to African American female college students and to their male non-African American counterparts. There exists an alarming disparity between African American males and females (Cuyjet, 1997).

Data and Methodology

The purpose of this research was to provide data on the experience of African American male college students on predominately white campuses. The value of this research should be evaluated by its contribution to theory and explanations of the phenomenon of the African American male college students’ experience on predominately white campuses. This study was an exploratory attempt to gather information on the effectiveness of S.A.A.B. on predominately white college campuses. A qualitative research method was used in the study. In this multiple case study, the researcher conducted interviews addressing the role of S.A.A.B. on the persistence of the interviewees.

In addition, S.A.A.B. advisors were interviewed. The researcher also conducted a focus group with current S.A.A.B. members. Interviews were also conducted with African American male college graduates who did not attend a campus with a S.A.A.B. chapter.

Phase I included a focus group with current S.A.A.B. members. This group was purposefully selected to identify the experience of current S.A.A.B. members. Next, the purpose of Phase II was to compare the experience of current S.A.A.B. participants with those S.A.A.B. participants who had graduated from college. This was achieved through comparing individual interviews and the data collected from the focus group. Phase III featured the results of the advisors’ interviews. The advisors had the experience of working with those students who had graduated and the current participants in the organization. Most importantly, the advisors were able to provide insight into the organization and their observations of the students. The final phase, Phase IV, featured the experience of a couple of African American male college graduates who did not have the experience of a S.A.A.B. chapter. The experiences of the non-S.A.A.B. participants were compared to the S.A.A.B. participants.

Phase I – Focus Group

Phase I and Phase II were equally critical in telling the story of the S.A.A.B. participants. The data obtained from the focus group and the individual interviews proved to be rich. The experiences of the students set the tone for the study. The

themes presented below are the results from the focus group with the current S.A.A.B. participants. They were instrumental in providing focus for the interviews with the S.A.A.B. graduates and the S.A.A.B. advisors.

The Focus Group (FG) covered several aspects of the impact of S.A.A.B. on its current participants and S.A.A.B.'s impact on the participants remaining in college. The FG participants also were asked about their thoughts on what affects their persistence in college. Initially, the subjects of retention and persistence will be addressed, and then the emerging themes will be addressed.

S.A.A.B. as a retention model

The general categorization of S.A.A.B. by the FG participants was that of a student organization. The FG participants spoke of the organization as a resource, a support group, and an outlet for expression. The FG participants attributed S.A.A.B. for enhancing their collegiate experience and giving them something to return to each semester. Some of the participants attributed S.A.A.B. for their remaining in college, however most participants attributed their strong desire to graduate as being the main factor in remaining in college.

FG comments:

"It (S.A.A.B.) played a large role. I almost left the university, but after getting some help and advice from some of the brothers, I'm still here.

"I was already set on my goal to graduate and S.A.A.B. gives me that extra motivation."

Factors that affect persistence

The FG participants were very varied in their thoughts on the factors that affected the persistence of African American male college students. The FG agreed on the importance of personal drive and determination as being one of the major factors, yet disagreed on whether this factor alone was enough for one to be successful. The FG members tended to believe that campus and family support were extremely important in the success of students. Many of the FG participants believed that participating in S.A.A.B. encouraged them to persist in school.

FG comments:

"I have a responsibility to my family to graduate from college."

"I am determined to graduate from college and with support from my family and S.A.A.B., I know that I will."

Most important factors of mentoring

The FG participants overwhelmingly felt that the most important factor of mentoring was having someone who was available to you when you needed them. The FG expressed that it was important to have a mentor who they could go by and see on a

regular basis and not be made to feel as if they were intruding or disturbing the person. Being a role model and being trustworthy were also important to the students.

FG comments:

“I appreciate the mentoring provided by our advisors and knowing that they are there when I need them.”

“I know that I can talk with the S.A.A.B. advisors about what is going on in my life and not here about it on campus later.”

Major Themes

The focus group participants identified seven themes that related to their experience with S.A.A.B. The seven themes are presented in order of importance.

Leadership opportunities

The FG participants identified the leadership opportunities associated with S.A.A.B. as the most important aspect of the experience. The FG participants valued the opportunity to work on and develop campus programming. The students felt that this provided valuable skills and also provided a connection to the institution. The students also felt that the leadership skills would benefit them as they pursued other campus involvement and in their professional careers. The students referred to S.A.A.B. as providing practical leadership experience.

FG student comments:

“Provides a business like atmosphere.”

“Prepares you for the real working world environment.”

“Helps you to learn how to work well with others.”

“I gained experience working with various people from various backgrounds.”

Brotherhood

The FG participants highly valued the relationships formed through participation in S.A.A.B. The participants felt that they were able to form relationships with students that they otherwise would probably not meet. The students mentioned the dependence that they formed on each other. The FG participants referred to the relationships as similar to family bonds. Relationships were expressed as being very important in the organization.

FG student comments:

“Formed relationships with guys that I normally wouldn’t have met.”

“There is a family bond in S.A.A.B.”

“Brotherhood is very important.”

Advisors

The FG participants were most animated and expressive when talking about the advisors to the organization. The students felt that the advisors were essential to the organization. The advisors were said to keep the organization on track. The advisors were considered to be valuable resources for the students. The advisors were described as always being available to the organization.

FG student comments:

“Our advisors are there for us time & time again. Whether it be social, academic, or even athletic, they are there.”

“Our advisors serve as role-models.”

“They (advisors) play the role of parent, teacher, friend, and confidant.”

Mentoring

Mentoring was viewed differently based on the academic classification of the student. For those students who perceived themselves as mentors, it was a very rewarding experience. For those students who were receiving mentoring, it was perceived as a positive aspect of the experience. The concept of “giving back” through the mentoring process was very important to the FG participants.

FG students comments:

“Each one teach one.”

“Reach one teach one.”

“It (mentoring) gives me someone positive to look up to.”

“It (mentoring) makes me want to help others.”

S.A.A.B. meetings

The FG members perceived the meetings as the life-blood of the organization. The meetings were where business took place and students could practice their leadership skills. The “teachable moments” allowed the S.A.A.B. members to practice their public speaking skills. The meetings were described as a time of fellowship. The meetings also provided as sense of encouragement for the members to take into the next week.

FG student comments:

“There is a positive atmosphere at the meetings.”

“There is a commitment to having new brothers attend the meetings.”

“I always learned something new at the meetings.”

“The meetings provided a refuge for the brothers.”

High standards

Setting high standards for members was seen as a pervasive trait of S.A.A.B. The FG participants expressed initial opposition to having to wear neckties to the meetings and to be on time for all events, but eventually understood the rationale for setting a businesslike tone for the organization. The FG participants felt that the high expectations seem to cause some African American males not to participate in the organization. The organization requires a great deal of commitment and the FG participants seemed to have appreciated the demands of the organization.

FG student comments:

“People know that we hold each other accountable and some fear this.”

“S.A.A.B. will hold you to a standard.”

“Accountability is a very important aspect of the organization.”

“S.A.A.B. raises expectations and encourages.”

Encouragement/uplifting experience

All of the FG members expressed some sense of encouragement from participating in S.A.A.B. The FG members spoke of the organization as a bright spot in the day-to-day struggles of college. The students were encouraged by the openness of the members to share with one another their personal success and challenges. An adjective used repeatedly to describe the experience was “positive.”

FG student comments:

“S.A.A.B. helped me to know my self”

“Uplifting.”

“S.A.A.B. has raised my standards of education.”

“Each week when I leave the meeting I am encouraged.”

“Positive.”

The themes that emerged from the focus groups were instrumental in formulating the questions used in the individual S.A.A.B. graduates interviews. The following section Phase II features the themes that emerged from the individual interviews in rank order. To no surprise to the researcher, the same themes emerged, yet the rank order differed for those who had already graduated.

Phase II – S.A.A.B. graduates

The S.A.A.B. Graduates (SG) interviews provided insight into the experience of those students who had participated in S.A.A.B. for at least two years and graduated from college. The SG covered several aspects of the impact of S.A.A.B. on its participants and S.A.A.B.'s impact on the participants remaining in college. The SG participants also were asked about their thoughts on what affected their persistence in college. Initially, the subjects of retention and persistence will be addressed, and then the emerging themes will be addressed.

S.A.A.B. as a retention model

The general categorization of S.A.A.B. by the SG was that of a student organization. The SG referred to S.A.A.B. as one of the student organizations in which they participated. When asked about the role of S.A.A.B. on their persistence in college, the SG varied in their responses. Several of the participants acknowledged S.A.A.B. as a factor in remaining at their institutions. However, S.A.A.B. was not the most determining factor in remaining in college. The SG overwhelmingly identified S.A.A.B. as enhancing their collegiate experience.

SG comments:

“I feel that I would have left school if it had not been for my connection in S.A.A.B.”

“I think that my mind was made up before I joined S.A.A.B. Now it did have a big impact on what sort of experience I had while I was there and the quality of life I had for sure.”

Factors that affect persistence

The factors that affected persistence for the SG were fairly consistent and can be categorized in four areas. The SG identified the desire to be somebody, the drive to achieve, parents, and college relationships as the major factors in college persistence. The SG suggested that connecting to organizations such as S.A.A.B encouraged students to remain in school. Within the four categories, there were several other factors that the SG identified such as financial background, parent's level of education, academic preparedness, and campus involvement that affected their persistence.

SG comments:

“It's a case-by-case scenario, but in large I'd have to say what brought them to college... what background they came to college with.”

“It's a question of finding something to focus on, finding something to be passionate about.”

“I wanted to be somebody. And I thought that by being in college and graduating it would help – even though, if you didn't go to college, didn't graduate from college, you weren't a nobody.”

Most important factors of mentoring

There was a consensus that role modeling was the most important aspect of mentoring. Many of the SG appreciated the mentor holding them accountable when needed. The SG also identified accessibility, being a support mechanism, and providing direction as being very important aspects of mentoring. The SG also stressed the importance of a connection existing within the relationship and a life long commitment to the relationship as being important.

SG comments:

“I think that finding a good connection and being provided good advice are important.”

“I think on one level it is just basic accountability and you staying with that person and not giving up on them.”

Major Themes

The SG were asked to rank order the seven themes that emerged from their interview, or provide alternative categories if they disagreed with the themes.

Brotherhood

The SG identified brotherhood as the most valuable aspect associated with the S.A.A.B. experience. Developing relationships with the members of the organization was expressed as a priority for the graduates. The SG felt that there were few opportunities for African American males to bond on campus, despite the strong desire to do so. There also existed a sentiment that S.A.A.B. taught African American men how to connect, which appeared to be a challenge for some of the participants.

SG comments

”Brotherhood and camaraderie were most important to me.”

“Learning how to connect with black men was extremely helpful.”

“S.A.A.B. allowed brothers to cross boundaries, you know, whether it was fraternities, etc. ... and formulate relationships.”

“S.A.A.B. allowed me to embrace close relationships with men outside of my father.”

Leadership opportunities

The SG highly valued the leadership opportunities and experiences received through S.A.A.B. The SG expressed that the leadership opportunities really prepared them for situation that they encountered beyond graduation. The opportunities to lead meetings, and organize programs, and collaborate with members proved to be valuable tools obtained by participants.

SG comments:

“I thought that my involvement gave me an opportunity to lead.”

“Leadership would be a big one for me.”

“Those things (leadership experiences) help to shape and mold your experiences and your expertise and once your, down the road in the future, your future endeavors.”

Encouragement/uplifting experience

The SG had only positive comments to share about their experience with S.A.A.B. It appears that the students were motivated by their experience with the organization. The SG recalled the encouragement that they received from the members and advisors. Several of the SG referred to the organization as the most positive organization that they had experienced.

SG comments:

“I think that the members of the organization saw S.A.A.B. definitely as something that was very, very positive—not only in their lives but in the lives of other students.”

“S.A.A.B. members were perceived as the positive brothers on campus.”

“S.A.A.B. was a breath of fresh air.”

“S.A.A.B. gave me something to be passionate about.”

High standards

The SG recalled the organization setting high standards for the membership. The SG expressed a desire for setting and maintaining high expectations from participants. The organization maintained a dress code of shirt and tie for the meetings. S.A.A.B. also set expectation for all members to be present and on time for all meetings. Sentiments were expressed that members represented S.A.A.B. at all times and that the members should be cognizant of their behavior on and off campus.

SG comments:

“Very high standards that it (S.A.A.B.) sets for its members because that is something that is required of us, to be a cut above everyone else.”

“I think that the challenge was to make everyone buy into the philosophy and not make exceptions for those rules and say that this is the S.A.A.B. standard and really push to keep that standard alive.”

Mentoring

Mentoring played a significant role in the experience of the SG. The structure of S.A.A.B. provided a tiered system of mentoring. The advisors mentored the officers and returning students and the returning students mentored the new students. The students appreciated having an “adult” looking out for their best interest. The SG also enjoyed the experience of mentoring in local elementary and middle schools.

SG comments:

“I was really mentored by our advisors and that completely changed me, even today.”

“It helps if you can go to that person and because you have developed a relationship through S.A.A.B. and provide advice.”

“Our efforts of mentoring in the middle school gave me a sense of giving back to the community.”

Advisors

The SG viewed the role of the advisors as important. The advisors were instrumental in providing support and direction for the organization. The SG developed close relationships with the advisors. The SG members each maintained contact and a relationship with their advisors currently.

SG comments:

“I think that the advisors served as our guide.”

“They (advisors) are the cornerstone of the organization and I think that’s what sets SAAB apart from many of the other organizations.”

“The advisors provided guidance when necessary.”

S.A.A.B. meetings

The SG viewed the meetings as meaningful. The meetings were an opportunity for all of the members to get together. The meetings provided a vehicle for the members to address any business-related issues. The meetings were also perceived as a time of fellowship. The meetings also served as a therapeutic outlet for many of the members.

SG comments:

“The meeting was an outlet for individuals to express concerns, frustrations, anger, or whatever.”

“I got a charge from the meetings.”

“The meetings were very meaningful.”

“Some meetings were very emotional and we dealt with tough issues.”

Phase I and II provided insights into the experience of the students who have participated in S.A.A.B. Phase I addressed the experience of current students and Phase II addressed the experience of those S.A.A.B. members who have graduated from college. Phase III gives the advisors perspective on the experience of the S.A.A.B. participants.

Phase III – Advisor interviews

In efforts to obtain an understanding of the S.A.A.B. Advisors (SA) perspective on the effects of S.A.A.B. on its participants, several questions were asked of the S.A.A.B. advisors as mentioned in the methodology. The comments of the SA reinforced the perceptions of the FG and the SG.

S.A.A.B. as a retention model

The SA considered S.A.A.B. to be a retention model. The SA were committed to the organization because they viewed it as a tool to keep African American males enrolled in college. The advisors felt that the organization was successful as a retention model because many of the students who participated in the organization remained in school. The SA tracked the students to keep up with their progress even if they were no longer attending meetings on a regular basis. The SA expressed a great need for retention programs for African American male college students.

SA comments:

“I really feel like S.A.A.B. has had an impact on the retention of its participants.”

“So we follow them right on through. And we have a file on each one of our members. And we just, we just coax them and keep our hands on them right on through the four-year period...until graduation.”

Factors that affect persistence

The SA thought that there were many factors that affected African American male students' persistence. They believed that there were some factors that probably had more of an impact than others were on the students' persistence. The SA suggested that pre-college factors such as the parent's level of education, family support, and academic preparation from high school were very important. The SA also believed that factors such as the student's involvement within the university community in programs such as S.A.A.B, having a mentor, the students study habits, and the students financial situation were very important once the student was enrolled in college.

SA comments:

“Wow! I think there are a lot of things and I think that a lot of it is some of the pre-college aspects.

“I think that having someone to reach out to them affects their persistence.”

Most important factors of mentoring

The SA were asked to identify the most important factors of mentoring in their experience in working with African American males. The SA identified establishing trust from the students, being able to relate to the students, involvement in their lives, and being an example to the students as being the most important factors in the mentoring relationship.

SA comments:

“Trust is one for sure. I think especially with African American males, I think there’s a need to relate to a certain extent to their experience, for them to feel like I’ve gone through some experiences they’re going through.”

Major Themes

Leadership opportunities. The SA expressed the importance of the leadership development of the participants. The officer positions were thought to provide excellent opportunities for the students to develop their leadership skills. Events such as teachable moments were also thought to help students improve their public speaking skills, which also improved leadership abilities.

SA comments:

“The students who participate in S.A.A.B. are prepared to take other leadership positions on campus whether in student government, fraternities, or other organizations.”

“The students are provided with opportunities to blossom as leaders.”

Brotherhood

The SA encouraged the members to establish meaningful personal and professional relationships. The SA thought that the relationships that existed amongst the members were crucial to the success of the organization. The SA advised the returning students to reach out to the new students.

SA comments:

“The relationships formed by the members play a significant role in the success of S.A.A.B.”

“Brotherhood is one of the tenets of S.A.A.B.”

Advisors

The SA considered the role of the advisor as being essential to the success of the organization. The SA agreed that their roles in S.A.A.B. was much more involved than in other organizations that they advised. The time commitment to the students was expressed as being quite intense. The advisors met with the officers, individual members, attended meetings, and attended the organizations programs and events.

SA comments:

“I’ve advised other student organizations — fraternal and not. And one of the things that I’ve seen in S.A.A.B. is that its advisors probably have more of an impact on the organization because of the level of involvement that we have in the organization.”

Mentoring

The SA thought that mentoring played an important role in the organization. Mentoring was deemed to be important in engaging the members into the organization. The SA felt that the earlier the mentoring relationships were established with the new students on campus, the more likely they would be able to reach the student. The SA also thought that it was important to reach out to those students who would more likely benefit from a mentoring relationship. The role of mentoring was also dualistic because the SA encouraged those returning students who they worked with to reach out and mentor others when possible.

SA comments:

“And we get an opportunity to set up a mentoring type relationship with them. I think more or less the ones that buy into the organization a little bit more are the ones that we really get to mentor and where there’s some trust established.”

“We really train them to go out and mentor in the community and work with at-risk young people.”

S.A.A.B. meetings

The SA identified the meetings as a very important aspect of the organization. The meetings were said to bring together the members and provide the members with the opportunity to “check-in” with each other. If a member missed a meeting, it was important to the SA to seek out the member to make sure that everything was going well. The SA felt that their attendance at the meetings reinforced their commitment to the organization.

SA comments:

“The S.A.A.B. meetings are a very important aspect of my week.”

“The meetings allow me to check out the brothers to see how they are doing.”

High standards

The SA thought it important to establish high standards for the organization and to hold the members accountable to the standards of the organization. The SA felt that many negative stereotypes exist that depict African American males as not being responsible and S.A.A.B. attempts to negate the stereotypes. The SA identified the high standard as the divider between those who choose to participate in S.A.A.B. and those who reject S.A.A.B.

SA comments:

“I think it (S.A.A.B.) pushes some of them to excel. I think there’s a little bit of pressure there to do things well. This is a little pressure for some of them to do things well because they want their peers to respect them in that light.”

“ S.A.A.B. sets the standards and we expect the members to meet them.”

Encouragement/uplifting experience

The SA used the term “positive” several times in talking about S.A.A.B. The SA consistently identified S.A.A.B. as reaching out to the population of African American males on campus who would “fall between the cracks” or be ignored by the main-stream campus activities. The SA identified S.A.A.B. as helping and encouraging its members to reach their potential.

SA comments:

“I think that if we could help them just get to the point where they see their greatness and they see that they have promise and potential, that they’ll take the time and go the rest of the way.”

“We have a lot of times where we need that helping hand and sometimes it’s kind of hard to find, but if there’s something or someone there that can help to better that person and kind of keep their morale high, they’ll usually hang in there.”

Phase IV Non-S.A.A.B. Members

The first three phases of the study focused on the experience of those who were involved in S.A.A.B. The first three phases were important in establishing the experience of those who affect and are affected by S.A.A.B. Phase IV of the study focuses on the experience of those who did not have the experience of a S.A.A.B.-type organization (NS) as part of their experience on a predominately white college campus.

It is difficult to generalize based on the limited number of students interviewed who did not have a S.A.A.B.-like experience, but there were similarities between those students interviewed. The students both attended the same institution and did not know each other during their time on the campus. However, the students both professed limited involvement with the campus, not having supportive African American male advisors, and very little to no mentoring.

Limited campus involvement

The NS participants expressed very limited involvement and connection with their institution, particularly during their early years on the campus. The NS participants spoke of experiencing a hostile environment on campus because of their race. They also expressed a lack of outlets to express their experience with others. Their involvement or lack of involvement was contingent upon whatever issues they were facing on the campus during any given semester.

NS comments:

“Student organizations for me played a very little role.”

“I did not get involved in student organizations until my junior year.”

Advisors

The NS participants did not consider their advisors (African American male) to be very supportive of their student organizations on campus. The NS participants felt that the advisors did not understand the students and were not very involved in the day-to-day lives of the students. Advisors were depicted as not playing a crucial role in the lives of the students.

NS comments:

“But they (advisors) were not involved in the day-to-day lives of the students.”

Mentoring experience

The NS participants did not receive mentoring from an African American faculty or staff member during their collegiate experience. The NS participants expressed that they desired to have a mentor, yet were unable to connect with any of the faculty or staff on campus. The NS participants felt that having a mentor would have made a difference in their experiences.

NS comments:

“You know, I really didn’t have a mentor. And I mean, I really think to this day I regret it, as something that I feel like I very much needed. But there was no one on campus in the faculty or, I mean in the residence hall or whatever that really has the time or the desire to take that on.”

The Experiences Tell a Story

The purpose of this section is to provide readers with a comprehensive picture of the different experiences of those associated with S.A.A.B. and how those experiences come together to tell the story.

S.A.A.B. as a retention model

It is apparent by the experience of the S.A.A.B. participants and the advisors that they agree that S.A.A.B. has a positive impact on the retention of those students who participate in the organization. This does not mean that S.A.A.B. is the main driving force behind the students remaining in school, but the organization positively impacts the experience of those students who participate in the organization (LaVant, Anderson & Tiggs, 1997). The students seem to be motivated by their participation in the organization to remain at their institutions because of the experiences they are receiving.

Factors that affect persistence

The S.A.A.B. participants, just as researchers have, identified several factors that affect persistence (Tinto, 1993). The S.A.A.B. students as well as the S.A.A.B. advisors placed a great emphasis on the self-determination of the individual as being a major factor in the persistence of a student. Moreover, they implied that the individual must take responsibility for their own success. This makes a program like S.A.A.B. effective in working with students because S.A.A.B. promotes personal responsibility of its

members. It encourages its members to be proactive in dealing with issues that may cause a student to leave school. The participants were realistic in acknowledging that there are several factors that affect persistence, however some factors may affect a student's persistence more than others, but it is still a very individualized case.

Most important factors of mentoring

The students and the advisors identified different factors as being important in mentoring. The students deemed having someone who was available to them and having that person serve as a role model as being the most important factors of mentoring. The advisors viewed being an individual that the students could trust as being the most important factor of mentoring. The traits are all related on a certain level and inter-related in the mentoring process. The advisors seem to look at the overarching variable of trust as encompassing all of the other aspects of mentoring. It seems that if there were no trust, then other factors would not seem to matter.

In the following section, the major themes that emerged from the data will be compared and contrasted.

Brotherhood

The groups were in agreement that brotherhood was a very important aspect of S.A.A.B. The S.A.A.B. graduates deemed the brotherhood experience as the most important aspect of S.A.A.B. However, the focus group participants deemed leadership opportunities as the most important aspect of S.A.A.B. This may be the case for several reasons. The S.A.A.B. graduates have left school and the relationships that they developed in the organization, and therefore recognize the value of those relationships in their absence. The focus group participants are currently enrolled in school and probably value the leadership experiences more because they are still in close contact with the other S.A.A.B. members on a frequent basis.

Leadership opportunities

The groups also agreed that the leadership opportunities in S.A.A.B. were very important to the experience of the participants. The current students thought that the leadership opportunities presented by the organization were the most important aspect of their experience. The S.A.A.B. graduates placed the relationship made in the organization above the leadership experiences. Regardless of the ranking, it was obvious that the participants highly valued the opportunity to develop relationships and leadership experiences within S.A.A.B.

Encouragement/uplifting experience

The S.A.A.B. graduates considered the encouragement and the uplifting experience received from S.A.A.B. as the third most important aspect of the experience. The focus group participants considered this to be the seventh most important aspect of the experience. The S.A.A.B. graduates seemed to reminisce on the positive relationships and the positive experiences of S.A.A.B. more than the students who are currently participating in the organization do. The current S.A.A.B. participants seemed to focus

more on the more tangible experiences such as leadership and advising that they are currently receiving from the organization.

High standards

The S.A.A.B. graduates valued the high standards set by the organization more than the current S.A.A.B. students did. Both groups expressed that the organizations high expectations motivated them to meet the expectations of the group. The high expectations set by the group such as accountability and dress codes appeared to separate S.A.A.B. from some of the other student organizations on campuses.

Mentoring

The mentoring experience seemed to be of equal value to the S.A.A.B. graduates and the current students. However, the advisors considered mentoring to be the most important aspect of their experience with S.A.A.B. This speaks to the different perspectives and motivations of those who participate in the organization. It appears that the Advisors are able to provide the mentoring experience for the students and the students consider the mentoring as one of the many components of the S.A.A.B. experience and not the focus of the organization.

Advisors

The current S.A.A.B. participants viewed the significance of the advisors as being much more important than the S.A.A.B. graduates did. The S.A.A.B. graduates highly valued the organization, but did not feel that the role of the advisors was as important to the functioning of the organization as the current students did. The current students felt a great reliance on the advisors and that may be due to the age and or limited experiences of the current students. The S.A.A.B. graduates expressed much more confidence in their leadership and organizational abilities than the current students expressed.

S.A.A.B. meetings

Surprisingly, the S.A.A.B. meetings were rather low in the rankings of importance by both groups. This is interesting because most of the interactions and opportunities that the students have to lead and develop leadership skills are initiated in the meetings. The students reflected on the meetings very fondly and expressed that they left meetings feeling very motivated, however, there does not seem to be a connection for the students between what they gain from the organization and the role that the meetings play in the organization.

Discussion, Recommendations

Based on the experience of those who have participated in S.A.A.B., colleges and universities, particularly predominately white institutions, should invest in and support such programs. The participants clearly believe that they need such programs and that participating in S.A.A.B. positively impacted their college experience. Institutions must acknowledge the special needs of African American male college students and try

new approaches in addressing this population because most of the existing programs are failing.

The students clearly suggest that social interactions at their institutions affect their connecting and remaining at the institution (Tinto, 1993). African American males want leadership opportunities and they want to connect with their campus. The students also seek opportunities to interact with those who they can relate to on a cultural basis (Grant-Thompson & Atkins, 1997). The challenge is to get the students connected to the university as soon as possible.

Recommendation Although it cannot be assumed that all African American males need programs like S.A.A.B., conditions should be created by the university, that allow those who do need such connections to be aware of their options as early as possible in their college selection process. College officials and recruitment and admissions personnel should make potential African American male college students aware of organizations such as S.A.A.B.

Mentoring has been proven to be effective in the retention of African American male college students (Grant-Thompson & Atkins, 1997). There are several mentoring models in existence that focus on the retention of African American males on college campuses (Lavant, Anderson, & Tiggs, 1997). In order for mentoring programs to be successful, faculty and staff members must be willing to, and be in a position to devote the time needed for the students (Johnson, 1996).

Recommendation Mentoring programs such as S.A.A.B. need institutional support in order to achieve maximum effectiveness. Depending on the campus, some S.A.A.B. chapters receive financial support as a student organization. Offices that are targeted towards student retention need to provide academic and financial resources to S.A.A.B. chapters so that the chapters may focus on the development and retention of its members. This would send a very clear message to the students of their importance to the institution.

As addressed in Chapter II, African Americans have faced difficult challenges in higher education (Pounds, 1987). Due to the changing policies in college admissions not considering race as a factor, African American males are facing greater challenges in being accepted into highly competitive public institutions. Prevailing research on African American male college students provide bleak reports on the status of the group (Wright & Mc Creary, 1997). Throughout history African Americans have been forced to found their own organizations on college campuses to meet their own needs (Womack, 1994). Organizations such as S.A.A.B. have taken on the challenge of African American male college student attrition (Lavant, Anderson, & Tiggs, 1997).

Recommendation Student African American Brotherhood (S.A.A.B.) needs to develop its program and increase its presence to more college campuses. There are localized efforts on several campuses by African American male students to unify and provide support for each other. However, there appears to be value in expanding efforts

beyond the local campus and unifying African American males throughout the country to band together and provide support for each other on a broader and far more reaching level.

African American males are more likely to enter the workforce than to go directly to college immediately after high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). This seriously affects the potential economic success of African American males in employment and income earnings (Sanders, 1995). The lower levels of educational attainment by African American males is one of the major factors that affects the economic disparity that exists between blacks and whites, even though racism cannot be discounted as a contributing factor (Sanders, 1995, Staples, 1987, Black & Darling, 1994).

Recommendation S.A.A.B. participants should use the tools and support acquired from participating in the organization and reach out to others, particularly young African American males who may need encouragement to attend college. This may be done individually or collectively by being a mentor or tutor in the community. A major challenge that must be addressed is getting more African American males to choose higher education as an option after high school. Statistically, African American males are more likely to encounter hurt, harm, and danger than any other group in this country (Major & Billson, 1992). The concept of the African American male as the “head of household” is quickly fading in this society (Hunter & Davis, 1994).

The majority of African American males in this country will grow up in a family where positive male role models living in the household is non-existent (Hacker, 1995). African American males being more likely to find themselves arrested, convicted, and incarcerated than white males further exacerbate the situation. African American males are faced with a great deal of negativity in this society.

Recommendation Organizations such as S.A.A.B. need to continue to provide a forum for those African American males who are able to beat the odds and arrive on college campuses. Those students need outlets to connect with each other and to discuss the issues that they face. S.A.A.B. should continue to challenge its members to set high standards, hold themselves accountable, and encourage and support each other through their struggles.

S.A.A.B. has a positive affect on those students who participate in the organization. Those who participate in S.A.A.B. admit that they value positive relationships with other African American males despite stereotypes. The current S.A.A.B. students and the S.A.A.B. graduates agree that leadership opportunities and brotherhood (relationships) are the most important aspects of participating in the organization. If this is the case, then university administrators must be made aware of this data and be encouraged to provide opportunities for African American males to achieve both.

Without a doubt, mentoring programs that provide African American male college student’s opportunities for leadership, brotherhood, advising, mentoring, social

interaction, high standards, and encouragement are of great value to the group. One of the challenges is getting the student connected with such organizations as quickly as possible. Institutions leave it to the students to find support and a connection to the campus on their own. This works for many students, however, the attrition rate of African American male college students suggests that this may not be the case for this group. Universities must take more responsibility for the success and failure of its' African American male students. If the group is not doing well as a whole, then concerted efforts must be focused towards their success.

Research Implications

This study has examined the effects of an African American male mentoring program used on several predominately white college campuses. Institutions that are serious about the success of the African American male students on their campus may investigate to see if their campus is in need of a S.A.A.B. chapter. For those students who participate in S.A.A.B. a follow-up study of ethnic identity and student organization selection would provide insight into the significance of S.A.A.B. being a predominately African American organization. The data collected would provide insights into the connection between racial identity and student affiliation on campus. It would also be interesting to know what type of organizations students join when and if they depart from S.A.A.B.

Those students who did not have a S.A.A.B. like experience expressed a real sense of disconnection from their college campus. Factors such as not having a mentor, not having a close relationship with an advisor and not being very involved in campus organizations seemed to detract from their experience. The students were successful in obtaining their degree; however, they expressed feelings of isolation and alienation on campus.

By describing and analyzing the experiences of students who in the past and who currently participate in S.A.A.B., students, faculty, and staff members have an example of the effects of such mentoring programs. Others interested in the retention of African American male college students can use this study to justify the creation of S.A.A.B. chapters on their campus. This study is particularly important because there is a dire need to provide strategies to address the attrition of African American male college students. The majority of the programs that have been studied and currently being focused on are institutional programs instead of student organizations. It is imperative that institutions begin to acknowledge the significance of student organizations in the retention of students.

Other concerned faculty, staff members, and students can utilize this study as a tool to examine the needs of African American males on their campuses. As more research is conducted on such programs, hopefully more such programs will be utilized on campuses. The students indicated that S.A.A.B. makes a difference in the college experience of those who participate in the organization. The results of this study reveal that the experiences provided by S.A.A.B. are instrumental in the progression and

success of its members during and beyond college. The mentoring received from the advisors is crucial in the overall success of the organization.

Additionally, the results of this study indicate that having a S.A.A.B. chapter benefits the institution because it enhances the experience of its students. The advisors also benefit from the experience because of the positive interactions with the students. Ultimately, the students benefit the most from having a S.A.A.B. chapter because they are able to gain valuable tools that empower them to succeed on campus. The ideal conclusion will be that African American males who participate in S.A.A.B. will successfully graduate from their institution.

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