

INSIGHTS

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Barriers to Retention and Degree Completion of African American males in Illinois

Introduction

Elimination of equity gaps and increasing academic outcomes are growing priorities in higher education. A substantial amount of the onus to address equity gaps and outcomes is being placed on community colleges as they have been a point of access into postsecondary education for traditionally underserved and underrepresented populations for many years. President Barack Obama has expressed his interest in closing equity gaps and increasing academic outcomes by setting a lofty goal for community colleges to produce five million additional graduates by the year 2020 (Obama & Biden, 2010). The Lumina Foundation has a goal to increase the number of individuals with high quality college degrees and credentials to 60% by the year 2025 (Mersotsis, 2008). The state of Illinois has also joined in the quest to increase academic outcomes by 60% by the year 2025 via Complete College America. It is evident that there are commitments to eliminating gaps in equity and increasing academic outcomes and using community colleges as a means to do so.

Purpose

This brief focuses on equity gaps and outcomes for African American males in community colleges in an effort to inform practitioners implementing Pathways to Results (PTR) on ways to eliminate barriers and ultimately assist these students through college to degree completion. National statistics show about 70% of high school students enroll in some sort of postsecondary education or training within two years of completing high school, with only about half of those students actually completing a credential (Bragg & Durham, 2012). Those percentages decrease substantially when looking at African American males, with approximately 35–50% enrolling in college and only half of those completing (Strayhorn, 2011). According to Advance Illinois (2012), African Americans accounted for only 9% of all Illinois community college graduates, whereas White students accounted for 24%. Although this information is not disaggregated by gender, African American men were awarded half the amount of degrees in 2008, 2009, and 2010 as their female counterparts in the state of Illinois (Illinois Board of Higher Education, 2012). In that same report, 63% of first-year African American students were taking developmental courses, whereas 43% of White students were taking developmental courses (Advance Illinois, 2012). Because racial and gender gaps continue to widen between African American males and other groups, it is necessary that attention is given to this underrepresented population of students.

Challenges and Barriers Faced by African American Males

Because African American males are more likely to pursue higher education via community colleges than other types of postsecondary institutions (Harper & Griffin, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012; Wood & Turner, 2011), it is important to understand the challenges and barriers that affect their access and ability to persist through to degree completion. African American males encounter myriad barriers to access, many of which are related to social capital, family responsibility, and the internalization of negative stereotypes (Harper & Griffin, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012; Wood & Turner, 2011). Given the life challenges many of these students face before entering college, it is important that these students not be characterized from

a deficit perspective. By identifying their assets and finding ways to leverage resources to cultivate the skills and knowledge they bring to the postsecondary setting, educators can close equity gaps and assist these students to complete their college degrees. In better understanding the barriers that African American males face, practitioners can begin to develop interventions that are relevant and meaningful to supporting the success of this population of students.

Social Capital

There is a significant relationship between socioeconomic status and college aspirations (Harper & Griffin, 2011; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, Perna, 2008; Strayhorn, 2009). Although it is not exactly clear to these authors how socioeconomic status (SES) impacts aspirations and enrollments, evidence shows a correlation between admission behaviors and access trends (Harper & Griffin, 2011; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008; Strayhorn, 2009). Using a criterion often used to define SES, parent's income and education, African Americans lag behind their White counterparts. African Americans experience disparities in homeownership and wealth accumulation, owning fewer homes with lower median values. They are outnumbered by Whites almost 3 to 1 in non-inherited wealth (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009). Additionally, neighborhoods occupied by African Americans are often located in districts with lower per-student expenditures (Harper & Griffin, 2011). Students with higher SES backgrounds have access to more social capital and are provided valuable information and assistance that facilitates their college preparation and competitive advantage. This social capital provides students with college-going advantages, including access to tutors, counselors, college visits, and advanced college preparatory courses (Harper & Griffin, 2011; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008; Strayhorn, 2009). Students from higher socioeconomic families are more likely to be able to pay for college whereas students from lower socioeconomic families are more likely to share the cost with parents or assume the entire cost of college, especially in the current economic climate when tuition is rising so rapidly (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008).

Family Responsibility

Family responsibility has been shown to have an impact on Black males' ability to persist at community colleges (Strayhorn, 2012). Those responsibilities can consist of children and other dependents, parents and siblings, even ancestors and non-biological family members (Strayhorn, 2011; Wood 2012). Wood (2012) found that the odds of Black males dropping out of community colleges due to family responsibilities were 394% greater than their White counterparts and 453% greater when controlling for variables, such as age, full-time status, college grade point average (GPA), etc. Those odds are consistent with Strayhorn's (2012) finding that Black males value family, and that conflicting responsibilities between family and school contribute to their stopping out to tend to family responsibilities. Although Black males are more likely to identify family responsibility as a reason for dropping out, they are less likely to do so if they persist past their first year (Wood, 2012). Knowing this, it is imperative that resources are made available early in the college experience to assist Black males with their family responsibilities.

Internalization of Negative Stereotypes

Along with the aforementioned barriers, African American males are often labeled with negative connotations, such as “at-risk”, disadvantaged, endangered, and in crisis (Harper & Griffin, 2011; Strayhorn, 2009). They often lack access to, are not informed of, or are discouraged from taking advanced level courses in high school, especially in math and science (Harper & Griffin, 2011; Rowan-Kenyon, et al., 2008; Strayhorn, 2009), which contributes to the characterization of Black males as being under or unprepared to handle college level coursework. Frequent negative encounters can cause African American men to internalize such stereotypes that result in regression and apathy toward the educational system (Steele, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012). This internalization manifests in “self-defeating” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 359) and “self-threatening behavior” (Steele, 1997, p. 614), which negatively impacts their ability to persist.

What Can Practitioners Do?

Practitioners should be intentional in addressing issues of equity. They should implement initiatives and deploy resources in ways that can positively impact student outcomes. There are several ways practitioners can assist African American males in overcoming barriers.

1. Create an early detection or warning system (Wood, 2012) by collaborating with institutional personnel (e.g., faculty, administrators, counselors) to identify signs of departure and ensure that resources are available to help these students to overcome barriers and persist.
2. Consider bridge programs, pre-entrance counseling, and mandatory orientations (Strayhorn, 2009; Wood, 2012) to aid in setting student expectations for college. These programs and activities often begin by assessing where students are before they enter college, orienting them to the academic process (e.g., registration, financial aid, time management, etc.), and acclimating them to the culture of the institution, department, or specific program.
3. Provide additional resources such as childcare, evening and weekend tutoring and advising (Strayhorn, 2011). Doing so can help student affairs personnel assist in eliminating barriers for those students whose family commitments and schedules conflict with accessing these services during regular business hours.
4. Offer training to faculty who may not have experience in working with racial and ethnic minorities (Wood & Turner, 2011). Faculty can help to reduce the effects of stereotype threat by proactively engaging and encouraging African American males early on and consistently throughout their postsecondary education experiences.
5. Develop formal or informal mentoring programs (Wood, 2012). The mentoring of African American males not only assists in reducing stereotype threat, but also contributes to the development of self-efficacy through building meaningful relationships between African American males, faculty and other students.

Without pointed efforts to reduce equity gaps in education, African American males will continue to lag behind. However, practitioners can begin to close equity gaps by being intentional in their efforts, working collaboratively with different institutional personnel, and remaining consistent in their efforts to recruit, retain and ultimately assist these students through college to degree completion.

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