

“INTRA-RACIAL DYNAMICS OF BLACK FACULTY AND BLACK STUDENTS: BARRIERS TO SUCCESS IN THE ACADEMY IN PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS”

Susan D. Toliver, PhD

Department of Sociology, Iona College, New Rochelle, NY

Penelope J. Moore, DSW

Department of Social Work, New Rochelle, NY

Natalie Redcross, PhD

Department of Mass Communication, New Rochelle, NY

Abstract

Intra-racial Black faculty and Black students' communication at predominantly White institutions poses an additional challenge and source of stress for Black faculty. The view of their role vis-à-vis Black students is at odds with students' perceptions of Black faculty identity and the Black faculty role impeding Black faculty's effectiveness as mentors. Black faculty need to address this disconnect in order to increase the academic success of Black students, to decrease Black faculty's sense of isolation, and to support the interests of their institutions in their attempts to increase Black student retention and multicultural transformation of the academy.

Keywords: Black Faculty, Intra-racial, mentor

Introduction

The persistence of prejudice and racism in 21st century U.S. society and in the academy for both Black faculty and Black students suggests that Black students fare better in those predominantly White institutions (PWIs) that include some Black faculty presence. These faculties serve as mentors and role models in unique and special ways. At the same time, in the context of the academy, Black faculty struggle to find “place” within their respective institutions of higher learning, and often turn to Black students for community. Black faculties are often a small numerical minority on the campuses of predominantly White institutions who experience their own issues of isolation and lack of connection. Both Black faculty and students often times must navigate the waters of academia without the human resources in the form of mentors and role models, with a sense of estrangement on their respective campuses. In many respects, the two find themselves in the same predicament.

While Black faculty perceive of themselves as potential role models and supporters, Black students do not always share this perspective of them. This provides a challenge for Black faculty as they seek solutions for reaching students. Breaking down the intra-racial communication barriers adds to the stress already experienced by Black faculty engendered by an ethic of “giving back” as they look to Black students as a population to whom they can lend support, as well as a place where they can look for community and a sense of camaraderie in navigating the waters of an academy which is often very isolating and off-putting. These barriers equal an additional stress and another challenge to their sense of agency and place for Black faculty. The establishment of positive relationships and good communication serve as sources of engagement and fulfillment for faculty, and fosters the academic and personal growth of students. On the basis of focus group data and in-depth

personal interviews with Black faculty, this paper identifies and explores some of the problems, issues, and constraints inherent in this conundrum of barriers to success for Black faculty and consequently Black students.

Background

Previous research demonstrates that race linked stressors in PWIs are causally linked to diminished academic success of Black students. (Cuyjet, 1997; Solorzano, 2000; Swim, et al 2003; Palmer, et al,2009). Institutions, as a strategy for addressing this, sometimes attempt to achieve/hire a critical mass of Black faculty to serve as mentors and role models as well as to offer a different perspective on racial and social issues that enrich the educational experience. Increasing the presence of Black faculty on these campuses is a strategy that has been identified to address this concern. (Hickson, 2002; Moore & Toliver, 2010). Students frequently demand an increase in minority faculty as they rally to increase institutional diversity on their campuses. Student driven diversity initiatives frequently rank diversity in faculty hiring as a top priority. (Weems, 2003; Hall & Torres, 2011; Moore, Alexander & Lemelle, 2010).

However, despite their desire to increase Black faculty presence, the reality of student perceptions of Black faculty and their role vis-à-vis Black students may be very different from how Black faculty views their role. Students frequently view the Black faculty as agents of the academy who are merely of a darker hue than their White faculty colleagues. Alternatively, they are often viewed as confederates who will give them a “pass”, demanding little in exchange for “A” grades. Students may not always have an accurate perception of Black faculty and view of their role, which may include a willingness and desire to mentor and coach them, and to find a sense of community with them.

Mentoring and role modeling are critical to the success of students and faculty alike. The mentoring relationship has been defined and described as a quintessential relationship for individual academic and professional success involving two individuals of differing levels of status and experience that is interactive and usually in some way reciprocal. The senior or more experienced individual provides guidance, assistance, and encouragement to the more junior individual in the relationship. For the mentee, the relationship provides skills, character, competency, and motivation for success and achievement. The relationship may be operationalized on a variety of different levels in a variety of different ways and contexts. The role of mentor may be a formal or informal one that is most importantly characterized by the nature and qualities of the relationship more so than by quantifiable tasks or specific behaviors (See Carter, 1988; Huling-Austin, 1992; Frierson, et al. 1994; Mook, 2002).

Mentors and role models are especially important for Black and other students of color because of the diverse impediments and challenges that they face on their path to academic success, especially in PWIs. These factors include the pervasive challenges of living in a racist society, the “chilly climate” of academia regarding diversity and under-represented diverse groups, and the greater likelihood of financial challenges, to name a few. Having supportive relationships with faculty is among the strongest indicators of academic success for Black and other students of color (Cuyjet, 1997; Lundberg, 2004).

The availability of faculty mentors for Black students is of critical importance. These students are less likely to find strong supportive relationships with White faculty. Black students without access to Black faculty as professors and mentors are less likely to achieve. Research findings dating back decades support this contention (See Mackey, 1972; Fleming, 1984; David 1994; and Palmer & Gasman 2008). For Black students, lack of supportive relationships with White faculty is often a problem, feeling they are not treated respectfully and often viewed as less intelligent (See Kraft, 1991; Allen, 1992; and Chesler,1996).

On the other side of this coin, the mentoring relationship suggests some sort of reciprocity. This raises the question of what the faculty member gets from this type of relationship and engagement with the student. For all mentors, in any professional context academic or otherwise, there is the value derived from assisting others who need assistance with skills development, guidance, direction, the pleasure of inspiring those who are aspiring up the professional ranks, reaping the admiration of junior colleagues, gaining satisfaction from watching their “mentee” grow professionally, seeing their “mentee” succeed as a result of their tutelage, and feeling a sense of pride in and ownership of their success. While it may be argued that these elements amount to the fulfillment of the mentor’s personal needs, what Black faculty derive from their mentoring relationships with Black students satisfies a need of a different order.

In addition to the afore-stated benefits to the mentor, the Black faculty member needs the Black student. The Black student can be critical to the Black faculty member’s sense of belonging on the college campus. This sense of belonging helps to foster the faculty member’s sense of agency in his/her professional role, and connects her/him to their racial/ethnic cultural community. The faculty member in a real sense experiences the academy similarly to the ways in which the student does, as an unwelcoming, even hostile environment. For each the other provides a sense of place, connection. For the faculty member, it may also provide or at least add to in a major way a sense of purpose in their overall work life. However, there is often a dislocation between the perception of the Black faculty role on the part of students and that of the faculty member. The faculty member may conceive of his or herself as “friend”, while the student may perceive of the Black faculty member as just another agent of the institution who happens to be of a darker hue.

Being a Black faculty member at a PWI (predominantly White institution) is fraught with challenges. As sociologist Deidre Redmond in a recent edition of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* put it, “...being a Black academic is an uphill battle.” She describes being, “frustrated about being devalued by my colleagues and disrespected by my students.” (Redmond, 2014: A23) Black faculty members have to establish their credentials as faculty and present themselves as “professionals” in an environment which often does not cast or value them in this high status role. They have to fight to defend their professionalism and competency. So, it becomes more difficult to provide a supportive learning climate, and at the same time, establish one’s authority and legitimacy. It is a delicate balance to achieve, putting added pressure on the Black faculty member. Furthermore, if one is Black, female and young, the situation is exacerbated and your competence and expertise is often challenged even by other faculty members within one’s own department. This is the professional context into which the new Black faculty member enters.

Contextual Challenges

The junior Black faculty member is in the difficult position of trying to navigate a new professional role, develop skills in the art of teaching, and the interactive combination of the two in the face of racism. This creates a unique dilemma for junior Black faculty members who struggle to reconcile being a responsible faculty member to all students while being supportive and a mentor to Black students. Thus, honing their skill set is a more complex affair, and, they are more likely to do it without mentors, unlike their White counterparts.

One junior Black faculty member expresses this dilemma as follows:

“Black Student Frustration: I've found that when Black students (the few I have) muster up the courage to approach me about anything concerning Black culture, once comfortable, their concerns, complaints and issues are numerous. Relief is expressed not only about the fact that Black faculty exists, but that they've found one that they can trust and relate to. In reference to perceptions of those Black students who ‘view the Black Faculty as agents of the academy

who are merely of a darker hue than their White faculty colleagues’, and those who expect higher grades or deserving of a "pass" for sharing a common culture, it is these factors that are most concerning. Any student can feel an ‘us against them’ dynamic, being that the professor is in control and hence the student is at their mercy. As this is already the case for many students, a Black student at a PWI has more of a challenge as the frustration lies in wondering whether or not the Black professor can be trusted as a mentor at all, much less a mentor who will guide them in a way White faculty cannot. Knowing this, the frustration extends to Black faculty, who may find it difficult or impossible to extend a hand to Black students for fear of offending White students or appearing as though they're playing favorites.”

“Black Faculty Frustration: The desire to support and mentor Black students is evident; strategies as to how to do this effectively is not. An additional source of concern is the feeling of responsibility for the academic success of a faculty member's Black students. While I want all my students to succeed, I'm aware of the unique issues and struggles Black people will inevitably face in the field of Public Relations. While these issues can and should consistently be addressed during class at a PWI, faculty may be reluctant to ‘over-address’ the issues in an attempt to avoid uneasiness or confusion in the classroom. In these cases, I and other Black faculty would welcome continued discussion about Black and other culture-sensitive issues during office hours, but this often doesn't occur, nor can we request that it take place. The dynamic of Intra-racial Black faculty and Black students at PWIs certainly warrants further research and investigation.”

In order to better understand these observations, Moore and Toliver’s (2010) study explored the “Intra-racial Dynamics of the Black Professor and Black Students’ communication in traditionally White Colleges and Universities” by inviting Black faculty focus group participants to respond to questions about what it means to be perceived as Black and what are the indicators thereof, whether they initiate behaviors to influence students’ perceptions about them as Black, whether students look to them to affirm beliefs they may hold about prejudice in the academic environment, how do Black student perceptions of them and their perceptions of Black students’ aspirations impact their effectiveness in the classroom and as mentor (p. 936).

Focus group findings are summarized below:

“The role of mentor is taken very seriously by black faculty who recognize the difficulties black students’ face in predominately white institutions of higher education. In fact, they observed that challenges increased as black students have to compete at a higher level of attainment in professional programs. The ways in which black professors perceive themselves as black and learn to cope with the challenges of institutionalized racism influence their roles as mentors. In particular, they recognize the importance of positively identifying themselves as black, while establishing clear standards of performance, which each student must learn to meet. If black students evidenced difficulties in meeting academic challenges, these professors felt it was their responsibility to provide additional support.”

“The misperception that black students may hold about their professors’ sense of place and their intentions comes with the territory of being black professors in all white colleges and universities. Even so, these focus group participants have come to recognize this dynamic as yet another challenge to overcome in order to cultivate positive mentoring relationships with black students. The lessons learned from black students are that black professors have more to cope with, and that the black professor’s role is more dynamic than that of white professors. Expectations of the black professor are different and more diffuse while at the same time and in part because the needs of black students are greater. Black faculty members have to adapt

their pedagogies and professional styles in order to be most effective in the professorial role and most responsive to student needs (Moore & Toliver, 2010, pp. 942-943).

On the basis of focus groups conducted with Black faculty at select predominantly White institutions and personal interviews with Black faculty, the findings of this research show a dislocation between Black faculty versus Black students' perceptions of the Black faculty role. Black faculty feel a sense of responsibility and are committed to serving as mentors to Black students, yet struggle with how to do this effectively. They are critically aware of the various misperceptions that Black students have of the Black faculty role. Black faculty need to address intra-racial Black faculty-Black student communication as a barrier to effectiveness in the academy. This amounts to yet an additional challenge for Black faculty in predominantly White institutions, requiring them to adapt their professional style and rethink pedagogies and expectations, and, for the new or junior Black faculty it increases the burden placed upon them as they endeavor to learn and define their professional role within the academy. Understanding and rising to this challenge is critical in improving Black student retention and success and addressing the nuances of institutional racism in the academy.

Strategies to Overcome Barriers to Success

In their quest to achieve effectiveness and competency in the mentoring role, Black faculty engage in a variety of strategies and behaviors to break down the barriers to Black student success in PWIs. There are both similarities and differences among them in terms of how they achieve these ends. Factors such as campus demographics, subject taught, faculty member's age, appearance, and sex/gender also influence the nature of strategies employed.

For example, establishing one's racial identity at the very beginning of the semester or course is something faculty agreed was of utmost importance. For some faculty this is achieved by merely stating what may or may not be the obvious. For others, it involved periodic, even frequent, reminders of their identity. In initial formal introductions, many referenced their personal backgrounds in terms of class, ethnicity, place of origin, place of residence, family background, where they went to school, and other personal information. They express a sense of pride and comfort in racial identity through their dress, hairstyle, and reference to s/heroes. Many also reported utilizing Afrocentric examples in their lectures and presentations, and integrated diverse content in their courses through readings, exercises, anecdotes, and cited works. The hope is these behaviors let students know that they have someone who is of and understands their experience and values them as intelligent human beings. But, for fear that students may perceive that this may signal that Black students will "earn" an easy "A," most faculty felt that it was also important to establish clear standards for success and achievement to which all students would be held accountable. The role of the professor is reflexive and flexible, taking its cues from students, and open to adapting pedagogy, mentoring strategies, and personal style in order to increase teacher / mentor effectiveness.

Overall, Black faculty strive to strike and maintain a balance in their relationships with Black students. They try to read indications of how they are perceived, and whether or not they are perceived as Black. It is important to them that students demonstrate respect for them as Black professors. They keep a watchful eye out for and are wary of students who engage in certain types of body language and verbal expressions such as slang, in ways that might violate what they deem as appropriate student-faculty communication. While they want students to be comfortable in their interactions, it is also important that students show them the same level of respect that they would show to White faculty. Some faculty felt that even

higher levels of respect were appropriate as might be consistent with Black cultural proscriptions for interacting with adults of higher status.

Conversely, Black faculty demonstrate respect by recognizing the heterogeneity among Black students who come from a broad range of socio-economic and social class backgrounds. Students' aspirations for academic achievement may possibly vary dependent upon the types of motivational factors, which can be and often are linked to social class and / or socio-economic background. Black faculty believe it is necessary to understand what (if any) factors there are that may influence a student's definition of success and not assume to know what success means to a particular student. In so doing, Black faculty avoid the pitfall of trying to exercise influence on students for whom a passing grade of a C is considered satisfactory. Through mutual respect, Black students and Black faculty are able to forge positive relationships characterized by understanding and appropriate boundaries that empower both students and faculty who may be able and more than willing to "go the extra mile" to encourage and support Black students' success.

Another strategy is the honest communication that takes place about the nature of the academic environment, thus affirming the reality that racism exists in the academy. Many faculty feel obligated to acknowledge that Blacks and people of color historically have not been valued in the academy. Letting students know that you understand this, and they should too, helps to establish an alliance while sending a clear message that Black students must do what the institution requires in order to be successful, and, not let racism stop them from attaining their educational goal.

Discussion

Scholars of diversity have for sometime focused on the importance of and the process of mainstreaming diversity across the academy. The guidelines that flow from this existing body of research, when translated into initiatives for change have demonstrated effectiveness in moving toward a more inclusive campus climate. Such strategies hold promise for diminishing many of the challenges that impede Black student success and Black faculty efficacy in the mentoring role.

Sociological research presents a one-dimensional picture of Blacks such that intra-racial relations and diversity are obscured. Aspects of intra-racial diversity cannot be underestimated in efforts to combat mutual feelings of isolation and alienation on White college campuses. It is important for institutions of higher education to strengthen their commitment to both Black faculty in the mentor role, and Black students by cultivating a culture of acceptance and belonging (Grieger & Toliver, 2001). The topic of mainstreaming diversity across the academy has implications for further investigation/research.

Implications

- Recruit and retain a critical mass of Black faculty and students on predominantly White college campuses
- Develop an institutional strategic plan based on research findings that inform the best way to cultivate, and support the professional development of Black faculty as positive role models for diverse Black students.
- Create advisement structures to promote individual communication between students and faculty advisors/mentors for ongoing exploration of issues of race and racial diversity.
- Incorporate/infuse diversity content in curricula and promote open discussion about race as part of, but distinct from, other factors of diversity.

- Link rewards structure of institutions of higher education with the role of Black faculty mentor.
- Develop organizational transformation strategies that reflect a positive valuing of diversity, thus creating more effective intra-racial communication between students and faculty.

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