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April, 2017

# A Breath Of Fresh Air: Students' Perceptions Of Interactions With African American Faculty

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# A Breath of Fresh Air: Students' Perceptions of Interactions With African American Faculty

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*In this phenomenological study we relied on classroom observations and 22 in-depth interviews with students as they interacted with African American faculty. Findings reveal the meaning students made from these classroom interactions and the ways African American faculty, significantly and positively, influenced the student experience. More specifically, students described the faculty as open, passionate, and caring, thereby making students feel comfortable, valued, and respected. This study supports previous research on the benefits of student–faculty interactions by providing additional evidence regarding the importance and value African American faculty bring to the academy.*

Despite increases in the numbers of students of color across institutions of higher education, faculty of color remain woefully under-represented within higher education as they compose just 18% of the full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2009–2010). Of this 18%, African American faculty represent fewer than a quarter of these faculty members. As a group, faculty of color are more likely than their White colleagues to conduct research on issues of race, to utilize active teaching methods, to incorporate class readings on issues of race and ethnicity (Milem, 1999), to engage students in diversity-related activities, and to interact with students outside the classroom (Umbach, 2006). If institutions of higher education successfully diversify their faculty,

in part, to more closely represent changing national and college student demographics, students should have more opportunity to interact with African American faculty within the classroom (McGowan, 2000).

Over four decades of research shows the benefits students receive from their interactions with faculty. While a few authors (e.g., Lundberg, 2012) have considered the ways student race influences these interactions, they have virtually ignored the race of the faculty. In this study, therefore, we shed light on these interactions by bringing student voices to the forefront as they reflect on and make meaning from their interactions with African American faculty. The purpose of our study is to add texture and richness to the literature by listening to the voices of students as they describe their experiences with African American faculty. Improving and expanding our understanding of student interactions with African American faculty also provides insight into ways African American faculty create opportunities for students to engage diversity, thereby demonstrating an important reason to continue to diversify the professoriate. We therefore address the following question: How do students describe their interactions with and perceptions of African American faculty?

## BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Two bodies of literature serve as the contextual framework for our study. First, we explore

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the outcomes associated with student–faculty interactions in general. Although scholars have not examined the influence of faculty race, this literature shapes the conversation as we explore student interactions with African American faculty. The second body of literature examined is that of students’ interactions specifically with faculty of color. A relatively small amount of this literature reflects the voices of students; more so we learn from faculty of color how students behave and interact within the context of the classroom environment.

### Student–Faculty Interactions

Authors of empirical studies conducted over the past four decades have found student–faculty interactions positively influence students’ degree aspiration (Arrendondo, 1995; Astin, 1993), perceptions of the campus environment (Kuh & Hu, 2001), academic achievement, intellectual and personal development, and retention (Pascarella, 1980). In their review of two National Survey of Student Engagement data sets, Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005), however, found that students do not generally reach out to faculty for support, suggesting students may not typically develop close and trusting relationships with their faculty members. Rather, students tend to seek out faculty when they have a specific course-related problem (Cotton & Wilson, 2006). Forty-nine students who participated in focus groups further revealed that faculty personality characteristics influenced their willingness to approach faculty. Students expressed feeling more comfortable approaching and interacting with faculty who demonstrated a sense of humor or disclosed something personal (Cotton & Wilson, 2006). Interestingly, Umbach and Wawrzynski’s (2005) conclusions support these findings that show faculty attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors play a role in creating an atmosphere that fosters student learning.

In fact, both studies suggested higher levels of student engagement and learning occur when faculty members interact with students, use active and collaborative learning techniques in the classroom, and engage students in educational experiences (Cotton & Wilson, 2006; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Narratives further reveal students want “an open, supportive, comfortable, respectful, safe or non-threatening, and enjoyable interpersonal climate” with their faculty (Anderson & Carta-Falsa, 2012, p. 134). Although the literature clearly demonstrates faculty can create an educational environment that dramatically affects student learning and engagement (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005), many faculty underestimate or overlook the impact they have on the students’ overall experience (Micari & Pazos, 2012). Careful analysis of the literature on student–faculty interactions also reveals much of the research prior to the 1990s fails to examine the influence of race in student and faculty interaction.

### The Influence of Race on Student–faculty Interactions

As the proportion of students of color increased on our college campuses, researchers have studied the influence of student race on educational outcomes associated with student–faculty interactions. This body of literature indicates student–faculty interaction is a strong predictor of learning for all students, regardless of race or ethnicity (Einarson & Clarkberg, 2010; Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). In their cross-sectional sample of 836 Latino students who responded to the College Student Experiences Questionnaire, Anaya and Cole (2001) determined that a higher frequency of student interactions with faculty (i.e., talked with professor), especially with faculty perceived as accessible and supportive, enhances Latino student academic achievement. Conversely, survey responses

from more than 4,000 students at 30 colleges and universities in the Southern and Eastern United States showed that African American students believe the quality of the student–faculty interaction, rather than the frequency of contact, is more important (Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 1986). Clearly, the literature suggests satisfying relationships and frequent interactions with faculty are strong predictors of learning for all racial groups (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). According to D. Cole (2008), interactions with faculty who are supportive and encouraging significantly predict positive learning outcomes for African American and Latino students. Furthermore, a quantitative analysis of 290 students who completed the Student–Professor Interaction Scale (Cokley et al., 2006) revealed the academic performance of African American students is positively impacted by the students’ perceptions of faculty considered to be caring and approachable. Similarly, Native American students reported that a personal relationship with caring and welcoming faculty members who engage them in the classroom is essential for their development of self-confidence (A. Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003). Unfortunately however, the literature on students of color and their interactions with faculty also reveals that students of color often feel alienated, isolated, and discriminated by White faculty (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Cokley et al., 2006; Eimers & Pike, 1997; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; A. Jackson et al., 2003).

In a focus group study conducted by Ancis et al. (2000), African American students reported greater racial hostility, greater pressure to conform to stereotypes, less equitable treatment, and more racism from faculty than any other student group. Through qualitative studies, researchers also found that African American students often perceive White faculty to be culturally insensitive (Fleming, 1991), uninformed, and inexperienced in

relation to African Americans (Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999). Similarly, Asian American and Latino students reported experiences of stereotyping and prejudice in the form of limited respect and unfair treatment by faculty (Ancis et al., 2000). They also reported feeling pressure to conform to stereotypes. Native American students reported experiencing being ignored or singled out by professors to serve as “the representative” of the Native American race or culture, leading to feelings of social isolation and social pressure (A. Jackson et al., 2003).

Many students of color want to interact with faculty members who understand their cultural uniqueness, who are open and approachable (Cokley et al., 2006), and who can empathize with the pressures students of color face on a predominantly White campus (Watson et al., 2002). Ultimately, students of color are looking for faculty whom they perceive to be *student-centered*, which is defined as exhibiting a high degree of concern for students’ academic integration, demonstrating support, advocating for students, and genuinely caring about students’ well-being (S. Cole & Barber, 2003; Guiffrida, 2005; Hernandez, 2000; A. Jackson et al., 2003; Nettles et al., 1986). The above findings, both qualitative and quantitative, represent an understudied body of literature examining the influence of student race on student–faculty interaction; however, scholars have often left unaddressed the influence of the faculty members’ race, neglecting its significance and subsequently the significance of diversifying the professoriate.

## Student Interactions With Faculty of Color

What we do know is that African American and other faculty of color are more likely than their White colleagues to mentor, support, interact (Umbach, 2006), and spend time with students (Rosa, 2005). They are also

more likely to use active teaching methods (Milem, 1999; Umbach, 2006) and place importance on the affective, moral, and civic development of students (Antonio, 2002). African American, Native American, and Latino faculty self-report using engaging in-class techniques and initiating out-of-class activities, such as conducting research with students (Rosa, 2005). Newly appointed and not yet tenured African American, Native American, and Latino faculty also indicate they are more likely than their White colleagues to spend time with students (Rosa, 2005).

While African American faculty often bring specific pedagogy to the classroom that creates a supportive learning environment, scholars have also indicated White students and students of color perceive African American faculty very differently (Guiffrida, 2005; Hendrix, 2007). African American students describe African American faculty as caring (Guiffrida, 2005). Conversely, faculty of color indicate that White students are more likely than students of color to criticize their teaching styles (Myers, 2002; Pittman, 2010; Vargas, 2002). Guiffrida (2005), for example, interviewed 19 African American students who reported that African American faculty are student-centered and are realistic role models. These students indicated African American faculty went “above and beyond” their academic responsibilities by assisting students with academic, career, and personal issues. These students also indicated African American faculty provided extra tutoring and talked to students’ families about academic and personal issues. Overall, African American students reported that their interactions with African American faculty helped them navigate predominantly White institutions as well as reinforced the idea that their professors cared about more than just their academic success. Supporting these results, Chism and Satcher (1998), through

a survey of African American students at two historically Black colleges, found that students perceived the African American faculty at their institution as approachable, involved on campus, and concerned about the overall well-being of students.

The extant research on White students’ perceptions of African American faculty is primarily limited to descriptive accounts from the perspectives of faculty, rather than the students themselves. Alberts, Hazen, and Theobald (2010), through a survey of 397 early-career faculty, found that pretenure faculty of color in geography reported higher rates of classroom incivilities from students than their White colleagues. Results of their study further indicated women faculty experienced a significantly higher rate of incivility than did men. A trend emerges from the shared voice of African American women faculty as students of all races and ethnicities test their limits and attempt to position themselves within the classroom environment (Hendrix, 2007). Two studies, one quantitative (Collier & Powell, 1990) and one qualitative (R. L. Jackson & Crawley, 2003), demonstrated that as a group, White students can be especially discourteous when engaged in classroom instruction or course curriculum that may challenge their preconceived notions and values. White students are more likely to harshly judge and resist African American faculty teaching styles, question the faculty member’s expertise, and devalue course content, especially when race is discussed (Benjamin, 1997; Myers, 2002; Vargas, 2002). McGowan’s (2000) qualitative study also discovered White students are more likely than their peers of color to report concerns or critiques to professors or their superiors. Hendrix (2007) argues some White students may carefully observe the behavior of faculty of color to ensure special favors are not granted to students of color. Although the voices of women faculty of color indicate

that the majority of incivility arises through interactions with White students (Benjamin, 1997; Myers, 2002), students of color can also be disruptive, hostile, and disrespectful of authority (Hendrix, 2007). Moreover, students of color may attempt to establish a “kinship” based on their perception of shared experiences with prejudice in hopes of gaining an “in” with faculty of color (Hendrix, 2007).

The experiences shared by faculty of color regarding their interaction with students, while not the specific purpose of our study, remain valuable in that they provide a context for exploring student interactions with African American faculty. As African American faculty and their colleagues of color teach, guide, mentor, and advise students from all races and ethnicities, students develop intellectually and socially through these interactions. The lack of research, however, specifically exploring the voices of students regarding their interactions with faculty of color and how these interactions impact student experiences and overall development limits our understanding of why these interactions are so critical.

## METHOD

Because we wanted to understand the meaning (i.e., cognition, affect, intentions, nuances) students find in their experiences, we used phenomenology as our qualitative research approach. Using methods that are interactive and humanistic in nature, such as observations and interviews, we focused on the phenomenon of the student–faculty interaction (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). More specifically, our study was designed to examine the individual and shared meanings students make of their lived experiences; therefore, phenomenology allowed us to focus on the “descriptions of what [students] experience and how it is that they experience what they experience” (Patton, 2002, p. 107).

## Site Selection and Access to Student Participants

The success of this study relied on interviewing students who had the lived experience of interacting with full-time African American faculty within the context of the classroom environment. For the purposes of this study, we sought students who were taking an undergraduate course with an African American faculty member. To locate these students, we asked African American faculty at a public 4-year institution in the Northeast for permission to recruit students from their classes.

The site for this study enrolled more than 6,000 undergraduates. At the time of our study, students of color composed approximately 20% of the student population. While 90% of the university’s 300 full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty members were White, only 2%, of the faculty were African American, a low representation that was similar to that at other institutions in the region. To ensure the confidentiality of participants, we use pseudonyms to refer to our selected institution and all individuals.

We requested from all African American faculty an opportunity to recruit students from their classrooms. Three African American faculty granted us permission. Two of these faculty, Danielle Melton and Amy Norton, were female assistant professors who taught courses in the field of human services. The third faculty member, Alex Thompson, was a tenure-track male instructor housed in a professional major. Each of these faculty members had one to three semesters of teaching experience. During data collection, a student referred to her experience with a fourth African American faculty member; her experience is also reflected in our findings.

Prior to observing their classrooms, each of the three interested faculty members completed a questionnaire on their teaching practices and



research interests; thus, we knew each of the faculty employed active teaching methods and had an interest in conducting research on topics related to race or involvement in teaching diversity-related coursework, although they did not teach a formal diversity course. We also knew that each faculty member interacted with students within and outside of the formal classroom environment. These teaching and research strategies were critical, as the extant literature suggests they are more likely to be used by faculty of color than by White faculty members (Hurtado, 2001; Umbach, 2006). We also wanted to ensure the classes from which we recruited students were not considered outliers on a continuum of diversity inclusivity (Laird, 2008). In other words, as the classroom served as the context from which to understand the student–faculty interaction, we did not include courses in this study determined to be on opposite extremes of presenting and discussing diversity-related topics (e.g., a physics course or a sociology course on Black women).

## Data Sources

A total of 100 students were enrolled in the five classrooms that we observed. Approximately 60 students were in courses taught by the male instructor, and the other 40 students were in the two classrooms taught by the female faculty members. Observations of students, in each of these classrooms, occurred on three separate occasions. During classes, we observed students' interactions with African American faculty members, including discussions before and after class. We also paid particular attention to students' nonverbal behaviors as they interacted with the faculty. At the conclusion of the semester, students were asked to volunteer for an interview. The 22 students (12 women and 10 men) who participated in interviews were traditional college-aged (19 to 24 years old,  $M = 21$ ). Of these 22 students, 6 identified as students of color—3 biracial,

2 Latina, and 1 African American—while the remaining 16 identified as White. Participants reflected the racial, ethnic, and gender makeup of the undergraduate student population at the institution. While the majority of participants ( $n = 18$ ) were in their junior or senior years in college, 12 of the 22 participants were for the first time taking a course with an African American professor or teacher.

We used a semistructured interview protocol, and each interview lasted from 45 to 60 minutes. Interview questions were designed to gather data leading to the description of what participants experienced and the context or setting that influenced how participants experienced their interactions with African American faculty (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). During the interviews, a couple of participants also talked about past interactions they had with African American faculty prior to our study.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred in two distinct phases: (a) we coded and analyzed observation notes and associated memos to determine patterns of student verbal and nonverbal behaviors in the classroom, and (b) interview transcripts were coded and analyzed in order to understand what students experienced and how they experienced the phenomenon of attending a course and interacting with an African American faculty member. All observation notes, transcripts, and associated memos were imported into NVivo, the qualitative research software for data management and analysis. Each phase of analysis relied on three phenomenological processes: epoche, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994).

First, we engaged in the process of epoche as we set aside or bracketed out our personal assumptions into memos that were placed in NVivo (Moustakas, 1994). This process enables the

researcher to set aside “predilections, prejudices, and predispositions” so the phenomenon can be seen again, as if for the very first time (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84). Epoche allowed us to approach the classroom observation data and student interview transcripts from a fresh and completely open perspective.

The second step within our data analysis was employing phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). This step required significant moments during classroom observations or statements within each participant’s transcript to be coded, creating a list of “nonrepetitive, non-overlapping statements” (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). This process led to the development of “meaning units” (Creswell, 2007, p. 159), which ultimately established categories that best described the themes for each student participant. From this process of phenomenological reduction, emerging themes created a description of what the students experienced.

Finally, the third process, imaginative variation, is a critical aspect of developing a composite description that accurately reflects how students experienced the phenomenon. Imaginative variation allows the researcher to contemplate conflicting and contradictory perspectives and worldviews in order to develop an accurate depiction of how the phenomenon was collectively experienced (Moustakas, 1994); in other words, we discussed what we witnessed during classroom observations as well as how students reflected on their experience in the classroom. As we reflected on the setting and context in which the phenomenon occurred (Creswell, 2007), engaging in imaginative variation allowed us to address the question: “How did the experience of the phenomenon come to be what it is?” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98); in other words, we were able to understand the essence of the student experience when interacting with African American faculty in the classroom environment.

## LIMITATIONS

While this study does not specifically address the underrepresentation of African Americans in the academy, it does speak to the significance of African American faculty on campus. It is interesting to note that the limitations of our study are in themselves an implication of this underrepresentation. While generalizability was not the purpose of our study, it is important to state that we examined the student experience within this particular context during a specific moment in time. Because all three faculty were from the same institution, we were prevented from examining whether our findings would be different at another institution.

In addition, all of the faculty members were relatively new at the institution, with no more than three semesters of university teaching experience. As such, this study is limited to students interacting with relatively new faculty members who all indicated an interest in addressing issues of race in the curriculum and using active and engaging pedagogy in the classroom.

## FINDINGS

As previously stated, the purpose of observations was to examine student behavior as they interacted with faculty in the classroom. Analyzing these behaviors revealed challenging, disruptive, and disrespectful responses to faculty. During the observations students came late or left early, rarely looking at or apologizing to the faculty member. Many students used their cell phones, sent text messages, and whispered to their peers while class was in session. Several students displayed overtly aggressive or challenging behavior such as arguing with the professor, rolling their eyes, texting when specifically asked not to do so, and mouthing profanities in class. These contextual findings served as



a foundation from which to explore what students experienced in these courses and how they made meaning from their interactions.

During interviews, the voices of students emerged, as they described what they experienced as they interacted with African American faculty. Despite the degree and frequency of challenging and disruptive behaviors that students displayed in the classroom, we noted most students shared similar experiences with African American faculty as they described the personal qualities and attributes of the faculty members. These qualities, down-to-earth, open, passionate, and caring, serve as the four major themes in our findings. In their entirety, most students described the African American faculty they encountered in class as “a breath of fresh air.”

### **African American Faculty as “A Breath of Fresh Air”**

Participants indicated the African American faculty members went above and beyond their expectations to assist students with academic and personal matters. For many of the participants, their interactions with African American faculty were different from what they were typically accustomed to, especially because most students were interacting with an African American faculty member for the very first time. Jack, a White male in his senior year, explained his experience was better than expected:

I thought our relationship was one of the best I've had with a professor throughout my college experience and throughout my high school experience, . . . and I usually just don't go tossing that around like it's anything. . . . It actually meant a lot. . . . It was kind of like a breath of fresh air, you know?

According to Jack, his African American professor was “different” from his other professors at East Coast University. Jack felt

Mr. Thompson displayed a genuine and caring attitude that fostered interactions based on trust and respect.

### **“DOWN-TO-EARTH”**

As witnessed during classroom observations, it was common for faculty to welcome students to class each day, address students by their first name, and talk with them informally before and after class sessions. The majority of participants reported feeling respected and trusted by the genuine manner in which African American faculty communicated with them. Maureen, for example, was taking her third college course with an African American professor when we interviewed her. A White junior, Maureen felt comfortable with the personal and casual manner in which her faculty member spoke to her. The majority of participants felt that these African American faculty were different from most of their White professors because they related to students on a more personal level. Paul, a White senior, in his first class with an African American faculty member, described his experience this way:

There wasn't any of this “Doctor” or “Professor,” he was “Alex.” . . . He was just another person, he was willing to help and everything. . . . He wasn't stuffy. . . . He was very down-to-earth, [while] some of the professors, they get their degrees and they kind of think they're better than everybody.

Several participants indicated they at times called African American professors by their first names, although one participant recognized that calling a professor by his or her first name was not generally accepted by most faculty in the professional studies department. The personal manner in which the African American faculty engaged with students, however, created a unique and comfortable environment for most students. Maureen reflected on the manner in which Professor

Melton talked with students:

She's funny. She has a contagious laugh. [chuckles] . . . She tries to stay on a personal level with everybody. It's not just strict, like, "This is what we're doing. That's what's going on." . . . But it's easy to talk to her. I would feel comfortable . . . if I had a problem, I would feel comfortable going to her.

As Maureen indicated, student participants perceived these three faculty as approachable, and students felt faculty related to them in a relaxed and friendly way. They also felt faculty members understood what they were going through as full-time college students. Michelle, a White junior, explained,

He's young . . . and you know there were times when he'd come in the class, he's ready to go, he's got his coffee and he's like, "Yup, I was up 'til 2 o'clock last night and the car broke down," and it's like . . . one of the students is up there teaching. And you felt like he was in the same predicament as you, which he is. So, . . . it's nicer to be around somebody who's in the same boat. He was definitely a friend.

While students felt they shared something in common with their faculty members and their interactions were less formal than those with other professors, participants indicated African American faculty maintained a professional relationship with them. Kim, a White senior, recalled how easy it was to talk to her professor:

She's really close to my age. But she's approachable and she's kind of like a friend where you can talk to her, but then she's also very professional and she doesn't really share her personal life with us.

Michelle and Kim both referred to feeling that their professor was or could be "a friend." This notion of friendship permeated throughout the participants' descriptions of how they felt about African American faculty.

Overall, students found their professor's genuineness and attitude when engaging and helping students to be unswerving. Participants felt these faculty members related to them in an authentic and personal manner. Moreover, participants described the genuine and down-to-earth personalities of African American faculty in terms of the faculty's level of openness.

### "Open"

Students stated faculty shared personal stories, remained nonbiased, and valued student opinions making them feel respected and trusted. Jack, a White senior, reflected on the level of openness Mr. Thompson shared with students in the classroom:

He could just relate to all of us. . . . He opened up to us. . . . He told us stories. . . . He had mentioned about how [a family member] had been, I think, murdered and I was just like, "Wow, this is really nice he can open up to us like this and—you know—he can feel comfortable enough to . . . give us that as an example." . . . A tragic event like that happened, and then he related it to something in class. . . . I think it's like he trusts everyone that . . . we're not going to think any different of him and this and that. . . . So he's very respectful, trustworthy, outgoing—you know, . . . pretty much everything you could look for in a professor.

As Jack recalled, Mr. Thompson's willingness to expose his vulnerability and share his personal self with the class was very different from how he observed White faculty approached the classroom. Many participants experienced this difference as well. Elvita, a Latina senior, further described how Professor Norton shared quite a bit of personal information:

In the beginning she was kind of ambiguous about herself, and I really wanted to—because she's so light-skinned—I'm like, "Okay, is she Black? Is she mixed? Is

she . . . she could be Latina.” She looks . . . like you don’t know what ethnicity she’s from. . . . So slowly as the class went on she opened up and we found out she’s Black, she’s gay, she’s whatever, she’s a doctor. . . . So it was really cool the way she unfolded everything. . . . I really felt like I related to her a lot, you know?

By sharing pieces of their personal selves with students, faculty members made students feel trusted and valued in the learning environment. Jack and Elvita’s statements also illustrate that participants felt a personal connection to their professors. Elvita even commented that although Professor Norton was the “leader” of the class, by sharing herself with the students she also became a “member” of the class.

The manner in which faculty expressed themselves and remained accessible made participants feel respected and valued. Robert, a White senior, reflected on conversations with Mr. Thompson:

He doesn’t come at it from, “I’m your professor. You’re my student.” He doesn’t come at it from, “I know more than you.” He wants to know your opinion. He wants to have the conversation, . . . and he listens to what you’re saying instead of hearing the first bit of it and then formulating his own conclusions of what you think.

As Robert articulated, the majority of participants felt the open and genuine nature of faculty created a place for students to express their personal opinions. Jennifer, a White junior, described how comfortable she felt when interacting with Professor Melton.

I just think it’s how she’s really open: . . . she laughs in class and she’s fun. . . . She just seems like she’s having fun in class, which makes me want to have fun. I don’t know—there’s just something about her. I feel really comfortable just being me.

Contrary to Robert and Jennifer, however, two students indicated that they felt uncomfortable

when interacting with African American faculty. Lee, a White junior, felt that Professor Melton “talked down” to him. When asked if he felt Professor Melton was receptive to his opinion, Lee stated,

No, not really. Like I said, she’s firm in her ways. She is not going to budge. She heard me out, but there was no way . . . I was going to convince her. . . . It was just my opinion against hers.

Although Lee indicated he felt he could express an opinion, he did not feel Professor Melton would respect it or accept it. Lee continued:

It just seemed like she was on one side and I was on the other side, and we never could agree in the middle. . . . I just felt like she really wanted to see me . . . not do well [in her class]. Obviously in the end, I probably know that’s not true, but that’s just how I felt.

As indicated, Lee felt Professor Melton’s actions toward him were based on personal rather than professional reasoning. Lee’s experiences were reflected in his nonverbal behavior as well. We observed Lee attending Professor Melton’s class without notebooks or textbooks, and he appeared disinterested in class discussions. He often sat with his arms folded across his chest, with his chair pushed back from the table, and a sweatshirt hood pulled down on his face.

A second student, Sheila, a White female, shared feelings of insecurity when interacting with another African American faculty member at East Coast University, Professor Charlotte Petry. While Professor Petry’s class was not one of the classes we observed, Sheila felt Professor Petry displayed a sense of superiority that made Sheila feel insignificant:

I tried to stay away from her as much as possible. I didn’t want to interact with her. I don’t feel like she’s a nice person. I just felt like every time I talked to her she was judging me. I feel like I’m pretty confident

in most things that I do. She made me feel very—she just made me feel very stupid, which I didn't think was appropriate.

As Sheila indicated, Professor Petry made her feel uncomfortable and insecure in her own abilities. Sheila also stated that due to her interactions with this faculty member, she got the sense that Professor Petry was “not a nice person”; thus, Sheila's feelings toward Professor Petry were intensely personal and negative.

The experiences and perceptions shared by Lee and Sheila offer insight into how students respond when they feel alienated and isolated in the classroom. Overall, however, the majority of participants found the openness of the faculty allowed them to express themselves, feel comfortable, and be themselves. As participants described how faculty related to them in a genuine and open manner, they also shared the enthusiasm and passion faculty displayed in their teaching.

### **“Passionate”**

Most participants stated the African American faculty whose classrooms we observed in this study were excited about teaching and passionate about what they were doing. Classroom observations confirmed the students' views as faculty exhibited a high level of energy in the classroom, generating enthusiastic and engaged classroom discussions. Students stated they believed faculty members were excited to be teaching, loved their jobs, and were passionate about what they were doing. This in turn influenced and motivated the participants themselves: as Paul, a White senior, described, “[Mr. Thompson] comes in and he's full of energy and he is really passionate about [the course material] and it really did rub off. It made everyone else passionate about it.” Mr. Thompson's passion displayed in class influenced how Paul felt about learning the material. Similarly, Samantha, a White junior, described Professor Melton's general attitude, which

influenced her perception of how much the faculty member enjoyed teaching: “Danielle's a happy person. . . . She's friendly, and she's always laughing or giggling about something, and she's upbeat. She clearly likes what she does.” Samantha went on to say she believed Professor Melton was a “really good professor . . . and a really good person.” The positive and “upbeat” attitude displayed by Professor Melton influenced Samantha's perception regarding the personal quality of being “a good person.” This friendly and positive nature faculty brought to class stood out for several participants. Isabella, for example, described Mr. Thompson as “different” than all of her other professors.

The excitement and energy faculty brought to the classroom created a supportive environment, and participants felt faculty were responsive and student-oriented. Participants also described how faculty displayed a high level of care and concern about their overall well-being, which the majority of them found comforting.

### **“Caring”**

Students shared that faculty deeply cared about them and they exhibited a strong desire to help students with academic and personal matters. Classroom observations illustrated this caring nature as faculty talked with students individually, called on students by their first name, and wished students well at the end of class sessions. Students also felt faculty spent a considerable amount of time and energy getting to know them and were willing to listen to their struggles.

Matthew, a White junior, experiencing his first course taught by an African American professor, shared that Mr. Thompson demonstrated a level of care that was due to more than just job responsibilities:

He's really there. He will help you. Even if you don't understand the concept and he has to go over it again, he'll try changing

it up and he'll keep going over it until you understand it. He's really—like he said, "I'm here to help you." That was his first words to us. I think that's a good-quality professor, that they're there to help us. He made it seem like, "Yes, it's my job, but I'm going to help you as best I can." . . . I think that he's more caring about his students than my other professors.

As Matthew illustrated, participants felt that the African American professors they had were committed to helping them succeed and displayed a genuinely caring attitude as they interacted with students. Kenton, a biracial junior, reflected on how Mr. Thompson was personally invested in his academic and professional success and how that investment was different from his other professors:

It would just be the level of involvement, and initiative taken by [Mr. Thompson]. Like I said, all of my professors make it clear that they're student-oriented. They're worried, they're concerned about what the students are getting out of their classes, what they can do to help further understanding, . . . but just on that personal level. . . . It's one thing to just say hi and be cordial, and another thing to like go above and beyond to know somebody's background, know their interests. And that's probably the difference, the main difference between the two [cordial and personally invested]. So the conversation is a little different.

In addition to knowing names and personal interests, the African American faculty observed in this study were devoted to establishing relationships with the students. More specifically, it was obvious to Elvita that Professor Norton was extending herself in an attempt to get to know the members in her class.

She made a relationship with us. . . . I would see her go and talk to this person on the other side of the room and that person. I'm like, "Okay, she's

really building relationships with these people." And she's knowing . . . this one has a problem with her son, that one, her father's sick. Amy really knows all of us in the class.

Thus, faculty spent the time needed to become aware of students' personal interests and motivations. In describing how he felt during a conversation with his professor, Tom, a White first-year student, said it was a "warm experience" because Mr. Thompson "wanted to help me out so I didn't go down that [wrong] path." For Tom, the time Mr. Thompson took to talk with him about his future aspirations and what he wanted to accomplish in college created a supportive environment. Mr. Thompson showed tremendous care in connecting with Tom on issues in which he was most interested. Tom also indicated he had meetings with other professors, but they were never like the meetings that he had with Mr. Thompson where they discussed Tom's personal and academic interests.

Similarly, Kim, a White female, shared an experience in which Professor Melton provided her support outside the confines of the classroom. At the end of the semester, Kim e-mailed Professor Melton for advice on how to help a family friend. Professor Melton provided Kim with resources and suggestions on how to provide assistance to this individual. In addition, although the semester was over, Professor Melton told Kim that she would keep her cell phone on over the holidays so that she could be contacted at any time. Kim's experience is an example of the connection African American faculty made with students and their willingness to assist students with issues or problems that occurred outside of their immediate classroom or assigned course work.

One student however voiced that she believed students did not show Professor Norton the respect she deserved. Elvita



indicated students took advantage of the kindness and compassion displayed by her professor:

I think some of the kids just didn't have enough respect for her. . . . I think some people took advantage. . . . Like there were girls who would be talking in class and stuff like that, over [the professor], like whispering while she was talking. . . . Don't come to class if you're going to do that.

As Elvita shared a sense of frustration in the behavior exhibited by her peers, she also indicated Professor Norton should have been more direct and forceful in classroom management. Elvita surmised Professor Norton may not have known how to deal with the disrespectful behavior presented by students in the classroom.

Conversely, Jennifer, a White student, placed blame on Professor Melton for using an e-mail to confront the students' inappropriate talking and texting in class. Jennifer believed that Professor Melton should have directly discussed her concerns with the students in the classroom. Samantha, another White female, also felt Professor Melton's use of an e-mail communication was "inappropriate," and she was disappointed that Professor Melton did not say something directly to the students. Samantha felt her professor's inability to confront the class in person was "immature," and she expected that Professor Melton "would put her foot down." Samantha also admitted that "out of spite" she did not stop texting people in class.

Although participants reported that they or their peers displayed disruptive or disrespectful behavior toward faculty, the majority of the participants felt that the African American faculty in this study went above and beyond the participants' expectations of a faculty member. Students explained that these faculty made an effort to become aware of the students' personal issues and academic concerns, demonstrating

a genuine interest in them as individuals and a passion for teaching. These personal qualities of the faculty promoted student–faculty interactions based on mutual respect, support, and encouragement.

## DISCUSSION

Findings of this study indicate African American faculty positively influenced the students in this study and their experiences at this institution in a number of ways. Students reported that their faculty who were African American displayed personal qualities (i.e., down-to-earth, open, passionate, and caring) during their interactions, allowing students to feel comfortable, respected, and valued. Students in this study also felt they developed an individualized relationship with faculty, which positively contributed to their overall experiences and engagement in the classroom as faculty were generally considered open and accessible. Our study thus supports previous research asserting the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors exhibited by faculty play a role in creating an atmosphere that fosters student learning and engagement (Cotton & Wilson, 2006; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

More specifically, this research illuminates how these students made meaning from their interactions with African American faculty, which is germane to understanding the need to diversify the faculty. As the faculty welcomed students each morning, addressed them by their name, and met with them individually to discuss their personal, academic, and professional interests, students felt they were being treated in a caring and supportive manner. Faculty also shared personal stories and remained open to the students' opinions, making students feel they mattered in the learning environment. These interactions with African American faculty differed from those with other faculty the students had in



previous classes. Because we talked to students of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, our study furthers the work of Guiffrida (2005), who reported African American students perceived African American faculty as “student-centered” and “willing to go above and beyond” to assist them with academic, career, and personal issues. More specifically, the voices of students in our study provide evidence that these students, regardless of race or ethnicity, appreciate faculty who are perceived to be student-centered.

While our findings regarding student interaction with African American faculty were generally positive, we did discover that two White students felt disrespected and uncomfortable when interacting with African American women faculty. Classroom observations and subsequent interviews also revealed students who challenged the professors and exhibited inappropriate behavior in the classroom. Indeed, we found students of all races and ethnicities who challenged the authority of African American faculty in the classroom. We did not address the dichotomy that exists between students’ feelings of isolation and their disrespectful behavior with their overwhelming sense of feeling trusted and respected by these African American faculty. For the majority of students, this was the first time they interacted with an African American teacher or professor. Future study concerning students’ racial and ethnic identity and their experience with diverse interactions may lend more insight.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The voices of the students in this study highlight the importance and value of what African American faculty brought to their educational experience. If the academy is committed to creating engaged learning communities, for

students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, as well as attracting and retaining students of color, then the hiring and promotion of faculty of color must be a priority. Indeed, the campus is more welcoming when faculty diversity reflects the student population and diverse faculty provide accessible and supportive environments. Creating such environments, however, is not the sole responsibility of African American faculty. While institutional leaders must be committed to diversifying, retaining, and promoting faculty of color, all faculty can create a classroom experience that welcomes and engages students if they employ some of the strategies used by the faculty observed in this study. All faculty can benefit from the knowledge that students are willing to become more involved when they are in a caring, safe, and supportive learning environment; therefore, while increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of faculty must be a first priority for higher education institutions, faculty and administrators of all races and ethnicities may find these results informative as they attempt to create educational environments that encourage student engagement.

It is further recommended that institutions examine tenure and promotion policies to formally reward faculty for “going above and beyond” to support students in their academic and personal success. Formally recognizing (through tenure and promotion) the unique contributions that African American professors and faculty of color bring to an institution would go a long way toward retaining a more diverse faculty, while also enhancing the overall climate and culture of the institution.

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