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2011

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Developing successful black male initiatives

Commentary

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Community College Times

Published August 5, 2011

Academic leaders and college practitioners have increasingly been focusing on the success of black male students. From pre-K-12 to postsecondary education, conversations about black males are ubiquitous. At community colleges, in particular, a rekindled interest in black male success has prompted new efforts to curb disastrously high attrition rates. At the national level, the American Association of Community Colleges recently launched its Minority Male Initiative Database to highlight “community college programs, initiatives, and strategic plans that focus on minority male mentoring, recruitment, persistence, and completion.”

As a researcher who examines the experience of black males in community colleges, I have developed a few insights that may help some of the programs and initiatives that are targeting this segment of students.

Assumptions about experiences

First, educators cannot assume that all black male students have the same experience across institutional types. Research on black males in four-year colleges is not always applicable to the two-year college context. A 2006 study from Lamont Flowers found that black males at four-year institutions are more likely to experience both academic and social integration than those at two-year institutions.

My own work in this area (which is under review for publication) has yielded similar findings. Black male students at community colleges are more likely to be older, married, independent students with dependent children and to have their delayed enrollment into postsecondary education. They are also less likely to have higher degree expectations, attended private high schools or have enrolled in college preparation courses in foreign language, mathematics, and science.

Accounting for these differences between student populations cannot be trivialized, as these differences suggest the need for strategic planning, programming, activities and policies which address the unique needs of students in each institutional type.

Recognition of heterogeneity

Educators should also recognize that black males are not a homogeneous group. They differ in terms of income levels, marital status, employment, cultural affiliations and family responsibilities. Efforts made to improve black male success must be generic enough to address issues facing the greater population of black males, while also
having the flexibility to account for the diversity of student experiences. For example, mentoring is a generic approach that can be developed to address unique differences among students, such as students’ backgrounds and interests. Students can be paired with mentors who have similar backgrounds or interests.

A college and its personnel, culture, policies and procedures, and programs have a critical role in student success. In a 2011 study that I co-authored with Caroline Turner, we discussed this circumstance, focusing on the relationships between faculty and students. We examined how faculty interactions with black males can affect their achievement in the community college. Many external barriers can be overcome by institutional environments that are affirming, encouraging and caring.

**The need for data**

All activities related to programs and initiatives must have predetermined benchmarks, with built-in mechanisms to assess effectiveness. Proving that the programs have an “impact” is essential to fostering buy-in from campus affiliates.

As a researcher and a former member of a community college minority male initiative, I know the importance of data. Information should be the driving force behind decision-making. Unfortunately, at many community colleges (and postsecondary institutions, in general), data can be tough to get. Access to sufficient data from institutional research (IR) is often difficult because of limited resources, privacy concerns and sometimes ambivalence.

Black male efforts, while important, can easily take a back seat to the numerous duties, requests and responsibilities on IR staff. Additionally, some college leaders may be ambivalent about providing such efforts with data—which often reflects low completion rates and other information—that could easily become headlines in the local newspaper. In addition, in many systems, institutional data is decentralized, which makes it difficult to collect and analyze data across a system or state.

**Buy-in from key stakeholders**

Efforts to improve the success of black males in community colleges are bolstered with buy-in from trustees, administrators, faculty, staff and the local community. Attaining the support of these stakeholders first requires that they understand the challenges these students face as well as the programs and initiatives that have been developed to address them.

A broad-based buy-in across a campus is imperative to successfully shifting institutional culture, policies and processes. In particular, such advocacy efforts should seek buy-in from key stakeholders who are respected by their colleagues and have the authority to make campus-wide decisions (particularly removing barriers).
A piece of puzzle

While student persistence continues to be a focus of black male initiatives, it is only one part of the success puzzle. Students can continue in college without actually succeeding academically. Achievement (as measured by grade point average) must also be an integral consideration when evaluating success.

Most research studies on black males in the community college follow this pattern, emphasizing what keeps them in college as opposed to what enables them to succeed academically. This is important, as individuals can stay in college, persisting for long periods of time without actually succeeding, such as having sufficient grades to have choices when transferring. This emphasis on persistence is interesting, especially given that in K-12, programming and research, the vast majority of interest is not on continuation in school, but on achievement (primarily as measured by test scores). However, by the time students reach college, educators seem less interested in achievement, and more simply in whether or not the student continues in college.

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