Black Culture Centers: Still Central to Student Learning

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Are support and resource centers that serve students from single cultures still relevant after thirty years and in light of widespread interest in multiculturalism? Lori Patton argues that, at least in the case of black culture centers, these spaces continue to matter a great deal to students.

By Lori D. Patton

Campus A

Eighty-two percent of the students and most of the faculty are white. The campus is located in a small town. The black students at this school regularly face challenging experiences. They are commonly the only or one of few blacks in their courses. In the classroom, they often feel uncomfortable because they have been stereotyped and treated in one of four ways: as the spokesperson for all black people; as the academically underprepared beneficiary of affirmative action; as the angry, defensive minority; or as the invisible student. Black students have little or no interaction with their white peers, nor do they have meaningful relationships with the faculty within or beyond the classroom. Stereotypes have led to a widespread sense of marginalization and isolation in the university’s academic environment. The social environment is equally stressful. Few campuswide programs are devoted to the interests of black students. Major campus events, including homecoming, are racially divided. At sporting events, which draw huge crowds, black students are rarely seen in the stands. Not many attend, because they do not feel a sense of school spirit and pride. Black students are reluctant to visit campus offices. They only go to the bursar, financial aid, or advising offices when absolutely necessary. The service they receive is often unfriendly, and they believe they do not receive pertinent information unless they specifically request it. The campus newspaper, considered the voice of the students, has printed...
racist articles and cartoons that are offensive to black students and only publishes negative stories about them. When a black student or student organization achieves something newsworthy, information about the accomplishment spreads by word of mouth, not through the newspaper. In addition to being invisible, the black students are not heard. Because there is no main gathering place for them, the black students usually convene in an area of the dining hall to eat together. Their white counterparts view them as separatist and often wonder why they always sit together. No matter where they go or what they do, there seems to be no safe space on campus. The institution reeks of whiteness. The aggregate impact of these factors is that many black students withdraw or transfer.

### Campus B

**A**

NOTHER INSTITUTION some two hundred miles away is similar in demographics to Campus A. It is a predominantly white school, with few black students, faculty, or staff. The challenges that black students experience here are not different from those at the other institution. They often feel isolated and marginalized. Their academic encounters in the classroom leave them feeling that their contributions have been devalued or trivialized. Moreover, they rarely participate in study groups with their white counterparts, largely due to the fact that they are not invited. Socially, their options are just as limited. The residence environment is sometimes hostile, particularly when offensive racial epithets are written on the property. Despite obstacles in this environment, the black students at this institution respond in a very different way. They have a physical location where they feel a sense of belonging, a space grounded in their particular experiences. Moreover, they have found people who will listen to them, recognize their cultural perspective, and nurture their development. At the black culture center (BCC), they receive support, validation, assistance, and resources to help them remain in school and graduate. When they leave, they will come back and visit the BCC during homecoming or the black alumni weekend. They will remember what they learned at the BCC and how those lessons have helped shape who they have become. Because of their involvement with the BCC on campus, these students have a different outlook on their college experience.

At present, a number of programs and services like the BCC at Campus B exist to serve black students and to support other historically underserved groups. Black culture centers have been on college campuses for more than thirty years. A result of student protest during the black student movement of the late 1960s, BCCs share a mission of preserving and celebrating black culture, history, and life through programmatic and service efforts beneficial to the entire campus community. Even thirty-five years later, the question of their actual academic benefit to students has remained largely unanswered. Until recently, no studies had been conducted that linked positive student learning outcomes to the existence of BCCs. This article examines the historical and contemporary context of BCCs and offers findings from a recent study I conducted on the role of the centers in the lives of black students attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs). My research revealed that these centers make a powerful difference in student learning because they foster an environment that promotes leadership development, a sense of community, cultural identity, and a sense of mattering, all components necessary for engagement in the learning process. From black students, I learned that other campus entities that work to foster similar positive learning environments have far less success with black students than BCCs. The study makes a strong argument for retaining these centers on American college and university campuses.

### Historical and Contemporary Context

THE INCREASED PRESENCE of African American students at PWIs represents some gains in the struggle for educational equality and opportunity. Violence, resistance, and a desire for change have characterized the efforts that African American students have made to pursue a college education on the campus of their choice. Since the civil rights movement and its successor, the black student movement, black students have gained in numbers at PWIs. According to Jacqueline Fleming, a contributor to Black Students in Higher Education: Conditions and Experiences in the 1970s, “The Civil Rights Movement, as well as student unrest in the 1960s, generated greater efforts to enroll Blacks in White institutions” (p. 43).

PWIs were hardly prepared to deal with this increasing black student population. Insufficient resources and a lack of support prompted students to seek avenues that would enhance their experiences and counterbalance the discrimination, isolation, and racism that permeated the climate they found at PWIs. The search for these avenues led to campus unrest and protest as black students and other supporters pressured campus officials to implement changes by hiring more black faculty, recruiting more black students, establishing black studies programs, creating minority affairs
While the need for a place for black students to socialize is critical, the BCC is just as important as an educational environment.

The presence of black cultural centers has been met with opposition on several fronts, and misconceptions about them have persisted. Opponents are inclined to downplay or dismiss the contributions and relevance of BCCs. While proponents emphasize the benefits of BCCs, they may not have carefully examined how present challenges threaten the existence of these centers.

Misconceptions and Challenges

OVER THE YEARS, the presence of black cultural centers has been met with opposition on several fronts, and misconceptions about them have persisted. Opponents are inclined to downplay or dismiss the contributions and relevance of BCCs. While proponents emphasize the benefits of BCCs, they may not have carefully examined how present challenges threaten the existence of these centers. Such an examination can assist advocates of BCCs in understanding the misconceptions and in moving toward the creation of new strategies to support BCCs.

BCCs Foster Separatism and Self-Segregation. Black culture centers are often viewed as promoting separatism. This criticism was common among college and university administrators during the black student movement. Harry Edwards discusses the prevailing ideas among officials in his book, Black Students: “Many educational administrators, faculty members, and concerned citizens . . . [were] frightened, confused, and intimidated by the widespread demands of black students for separate facilities and, in general, for the institutionalization of a life style separate from that enjoyed by White students on the predominantly White campus. No less confounding to many [were] demands of Black students on Negro campuses for Black Studies programs and Black culture facilities” (p. 64).

The opinion that these facilities separate black students and prevent them from integrating into the larger campus environment persists. Those in opposition contend that the separatism these facilities seem to promote prevents their staffs from creating coalitions with other campus entities committed to the overall well-being of students on campus. Moreover, this thinking goes, BCCs encourage black students to depend only on one another instead of using campus resources that exist to benefit the entire student body. Also, given that BCCs emerged from the civil rights movement, which was designed to end segregation, many do not understand why a separate facility would be created to ostensibly cater to separatist ideals. Some view the establishment and continued existence of BCCs as a step backward, not forward.

In addition, some suggest that blacks have benefited greatly from legislation enacted as a result of the civil rights movement and the black student movement and have, to a large degree, reached parity with their white counterparts. Maintaining these centers would seem, then, to no longer be necessary. Moreover, the existence of these facilities appears contradictory. They give the impression that black students are needy and require more resources than other students, yet black students wish to be viewed and treated as equal to others.

Another sentiment is that BCCs provide environments that hinder black students’ ability to move beyond their comfort zone and connect with others. Given that all students must live in an increasingly global and diverse society, this overprotection seems counterproductive. Why is it that white students must reach out and learn about diversity, while black students can stay sheltered and not be forced or encouraged to experience other cultures? In sum, the leading perspective in oppo-

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through seniors. Each had experienced much of the social and academic isolation and discomfort described at the beginning of this article, and together, the students offered deep insight into the positive role played by their campus’s black culture center. The study’s participants indicated that they derived a number of benefits from the BCC, including increased opportunities for involvement and preparation for student leadership, a richer understanding of their community, enhanced development of their black identity, increased pride in their shared history, and an enrichment of strategies for thriving in college.

**Involvement and Leadership.** The results of my study and findings from additional research indicate that programming by black culture centers plays a primary role in acclimating first-year students to college. One of the most powerful opportunities for participation and involvement is the student ambassador groups associated with BCCs. At the University of Florida, for example, students indicate that their involvement in the BCC ambassador group has been the pathway to participation in mainstream activities such as student government, homecoming planning committees, and university-wide ambassador groups. Students indicate that without their involvement in BCCs, their participation in other campus activities would be considerably diminished. In addition, first-year student participation in programs sponsored by BCCs help them learn skills—such as public speaking, planning and promoting events, and teamwork—that can easily transfer to leadership roles and involvement beyond the center. Students involved in the Malcolm X Institute (MXI) at Wabash College also become more self-assured and develop important skills. One student who indicated his desire to be involved on campus was offered the opportunity to serve on the planning committee for an annual conference hosted by the MXI. He shared how this experience increased his confidence in speaking out: “It was key to [have] input . . . because in working with white professors and a white administration who plan the conference, the only input that was constant was my input as an African American male and so their input had a new voice . . . [and] brought me up to the level where my opinion was as valuable as a tenured faculty. My opinion counted, to make decisions and get the experience of being in a collaborative effort to meet a goal that was pleasing and was aimed at black men. It was one of the most glorifying and positive experiences of my life so far.” Based on additional research I conducted while completing my single-institution study, students at other institutions indicated that involvement in BCCs builds important skills and creates a level of confidence that enables them to become involved in the wider campus.

**Community.** Campuswide orientation and welcome week programs frequently lack information on services specifically aimed at meeting the needs of black students. Such information—for example, on ethnic hair care products, foods, or worship facilities—can be shared during a black student orientation sponsored by the BCC. During such an event, students can also learn about the history of the center, about the historical presence of blacks on the campus, and about resources they may need while on campus. Students in my study shared that during their orientation, they learned how to establish informal networks among black students. As members of these networks, they learned which instructors and courses were best, established friendships, and built a sense of community.

An ongoing challenge is encouraging students to visit the BCC. On many campuses, the location of the BCC is not central, which means that dropping by is difficult for most students. When students in my study and on other campuses did have the opportunity to visit the BCC, they learned that the center is by far the most comfortable environment on campus and that being there engenders a sense of kinship. One student at the Institute of Black Culture at the University of Florida noted, “Oh, it’s friendly. It’s like a family here. . . We treat each other like brother and sister. I didn’t
know these people, and now they’re like my family, like brothers and sisters. We’re that close now.” Students often referred to the director and staff members of the BCC as “like a mother” or a “father-like figure” who mentored them, corrected them if they were wrong, advised their organizations, and worked to build a sense of community for the students. Their efforts supported the notion of the BCC as a “home away from home,” a phrase I heard frequently from students involved in my study. The support, community, and familial atmosphere in the BCC have been critical in helping students successfully navigate the campus environment and overcome the daily difficulties they experience as black students at a predominantly white institution.

**Historical Pride and Black Identity.** For students who use BCCs, a heightened sense of their black identity has been a major benefit. BCCs are the one place where black students can be assured that they will learn about their culture. According to the students in my study, the black culture center is a proud symbol of black history. The BCC is also seen by the students as an important aspect of their institution’s history. Moreover, the BCC I studied is often used to recruit black students and is promoted as a place with which black students can immediately identify. The presence of a BCC can influence a student’s decision to enroll at a particular college or university. At the BCC in my study, the story of the center’s rich history is posted throughout the center, allowing students and visitors to easily familiarize themselves with the center’s beginnings. At the time of my study, the center’s director indicated that if the walls of the center could talk, they would tell of the hardships that early students endured to ensure that future generations of students would have a space to call their own.

Students involved in my study also indicated that they discovered the BCC while in search of information on black issues that is readily available at the BCC but not at the institution’s main library. At Northern Illinois University, the African American studies minor is housed in the Center for Black Studies. Students frequently remark that enrolling in courses about black issues is among the most enlightening experiences they will have in college. In regard to black studies classes, one student said, “Definitely . . . an eye-opener, some of the things that I was a little ignorant to . . . coming to college, they’ve made me realize some things about myself and my culture.” Offerings at this and other BCCs foster learning about black culture and ultimately about students themselves.

**Self-Preservation and Mattering.** Students involved in my study indicated that out of all of the places on campus, the BCC is where they can go and feel a sense of comfort and relief. For black students in a predominantly white environment, the BCC indicates that it “is okay to be black.” At the BCC, the issues black students face are not seen as strange. For these students, someone was always there to listen and to help them feel as if they mattered. One student said, “. . . I can speak freely here. I could on campus, but it’s going to be repercussions in one way or another. So, you know, here I can speak my mind. At times, I need to vent. I can do that.” The listeners at the center in my study were the administrative assistant, who had been there for thirty years, and the director, who played a variety of roles, such as adviser to student organizations, course instructor, and program planner.

One student shared, “It’s a lot easier, you know, dealing with problems here . . . being able to come to them like a family . . . and being comfortable around them . . .” At one center for black studies, another student said, “Like I say, I come over here, there’s always somebody to talk to and somebody who’s there as support. . . . They always seem willing to help and be there for the students. . . . They really care about the welfare of the students, and that’s something I really like about it here.” This sense of mattering and validation is a result of the welcoming atmosphere that prevails at these centers. This feeling often emerges from small gestures or positive comments from staff members. Simply asking, “What’s wrong?” when a student seemed sad or upset has made a significant difference. One student noted that the administrative assistant would watch his car for him on Thursday afternoons. On-campus parking is problematic, and the administrative assistant wanted to help him avoid receiving a parking ticket while he was away handling academic issues. Another student summed it up when she shared, “. . . It’s just nice to be around people that have had experiences that are the same as you’ve had.” These and other students indicated that the supportive environment of the BCC is critical in learning how to manage the myriad challenges they face.

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WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

BCCs CONTINUE TO BE ESSENTIAL because they provide a safe and supportive environment that facilitates student learning. In BCCs, students learn about the importance of being involved on campus and about the skills of leadership. They share history, develop a strong sense of identity, and learn to build strong communities. Students learn what it means to matter. While their positive impact on student learning seems clear, they remain under fire. In the February 14, 2002, edition of *Black Issues in Higher Education*, David Hefner characterized BCCs as "standing on shaky ground." BCCs struggle with issues of limited resources and against the belief that multicultural centers are preferable to culture-specific centers. The motivation for tackling these and other concerns may arise from the lessons that can be learned from the BCC experience. What are these lessons?

First, BCCs serve as a springboard for teaching students how to become involved on campus. Through participation in the center’s programming and event planning, students have a starting point for learning valuable leadership skills. This experience would seem to suggest that there is still a need to have culture-specific centers or services that focus attention on marginalized populations. These facilities appear to create a bridge that connects these students to the larger campus community. Second, while multicultural centers serve important purposes, they cannot provide the same focused environment that traditionally marginalized students may need. Reasonable funding should be allocated to these focused centers to ensure the existence of updated facilities, resources, equipment, and the hiring of knowledgeable, friendly, and supportive staff members. Third, my research suggests that BCCs and other culture centers are necessary for providing students a safe place where they can learn to resist and overcome oppression and subtle aggressions they may experience on a regular basis. Equipped with these skills, students involved in BCCs and other cultural centers can then join the larger campus population in ways that expand their learning and their opportunities to teach other students.

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