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Dr. Michael J. Smith



Four Steps to a Paradigm Shift:

Employing Critical Perspectives to Improve Outreach to Low-SES African-American and Latino Students and Their Parents



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Access to American higher education is increasingly becoming a privilege for upper-class youth while low-socioeconomic status (SES) youth are increasingly marginalized and unable to compete in the college choice game. In order to increase parent involvement in college choice for low-SES African-American and Latino parents, a paradigm shift must take place. Specifically, these parents must be acknowledged for how they are already involved, and encouraged to convert their non-college aspirations for their children into college dreams. This paper argues that, for this to happen, admission and outreach offices would have to approach outreach and recruitment to this demographic as service for the public good, thereby encouraging cooperation between colleges and universities rather than competition. Finally, it would be essential that regional collectives established for the public good be established to make such efforts cost effective and more evenly spread throughout all Carnegie Classification levels (of nonprofit, degree granting, higher education).

Contemplating a Paradigm Shift: Rethinking Outreach to Low-SES African-American and Latino Students

When low-SES parents are involved in their child's education, scholars suggest that they are more likely to be successful preparing for, gaining access into, and graduating from four-year colleges and universities (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). However, research shows that low-SES parents, especially those who are African American, are not as engaged as high-SES parents, resulting in their children missing out on the enriched academic performance and enhanced college preparation that comes with parental involvement (Moles, 2000). This paper uses parent involvement and college choice literature to build a case for non-competitive, collective approaches for recruiting low-SES African-American and Latino students that consciously and intentionally include parental involvement whenever possible.

It is important to begin by considering what has been said about the lack of parental involvement: Why don't low-SES black and Latino parents participate in their children's education? There are no simple explanations but those that are offered reveal more about the perspective, frame of reference or theoretical lens used by the commentator than the parents in question. For example, an American assimilationist uses the lens of "normative" Anglo-American culture as a basis for comparison, while a critical theorist employs non-traditional frameworks that take into account the impact of unequal power relationships, the positionality of marginalized ethnic/racial groups compared to dominant groups and the influence of socioeconomic status. Both points of view, assimilationist and critical, will be explored, since they inform the purposes and direction of outreach programs created to assist low-SES parents in college choice.

Assimilationist Framework

With respect to American culture, assimilationist perspectives embrace the "grand narrative," which states that to be truly American a group must conform to mainstream morals, ethics, values, attitudes, and philosophies about the goals and purposes of life. In this narrative, ethnic minority groups reach mainstream status once they become less like those in their homelands and more American (which here means middle class, Anglo American); mainstream status is earned after the groups have fully assimilated. This is important to mention when discussing parent involvement in college choice—much of the research upon which low-SES student outreach programs of the 1970s and 1980s were built suggested that students should be the primary focus of efforts since parents were too disinterested or unsupportive to help; parents were problematized then summarily written off (Chavkin & Williams, 1985; Davies, 1989; Winters, 1993). They were written off because research found low-SES black and Latino parents were engaged in "abnormal" practices compared to mainstream, Anglo-American parents; practices engaged in to their child's detriment (Washington & Oyemade, 1987; Steiner, 1981; Bowler, 1974, Kenniston, K. & The Carnegie Council on Children, 1977). Essentially, scholars asserted

low-SES African-American and Latino parents (especially those who were single-female parents) were absent from the postsecondary education planning process because they did not value college education (which was considered abnormal), or devalued its influence on future life trajectories compared to other options. In fact, public policy in the 1970s and 1980s used this assimilationist framework to design programs that would "normalize" these parents and force them into mainstream parental practice (Chavkin, 1989; Christenson, Rounds & Franklin, 1992; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Hornby, 2000; Proisise, 1990). Programs based on labeling parental practice as abnormal committed the error of "defining difference as a deficit," (Staples, 1993) simultaneously marginalizing the very parents they were designed to help. While outreach programs that emerged from this era provided valuable new opportunities for low-SES black and Latino students, they left a legacy of focusing primarily on the student and only including parents intermittently throughout the process.

Critical Frameworks

Critical theorists reject frames of reference that employ cultural deficit models replacing them with paradigms that try to understand marginality, are culturally specific, and less value laden than assimilationist frameworks. They present an important counter-narrative that recognizes low-SES African-American and Latino parents' marginal status in the power relationship with dominant culture and mainstream K-12 institutions. By providing this counter-narrative through empirical, qualitative research, these parents are redefined as "normal" when evaluated by ethnically and culturally relevant contexts; a change in assumption that is the appropriate place from which to create new programs. For example, these studies begin with the assumption that low-SES African-American and Latino parents believe in and support their child's education and have postsecondary educational goals for their children that often include college attendance (Perez, 2000; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, 1992, 1994). Earlier research shows that low-SES African-American parents value education as an avenue to a better life for their children, but quite often view the high school diploma as more practical and realistic (Smith, 2007). In balance, the analysis of this qualitative data has suggested that the differences we see in parent involvement for college choice are not the result of inferior culture or misguided views on education. Rather, critical perspectives tell us that the true differences are created by possession or absence of information about college and substantial experience with college.

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Therefore, it is important for college counselors, college admission officers and outreach professionals to not only make every effort to include these parents in their recruitment activities, it is vital to help them access critical information that not only explains the college process but details its many benefits. College is infrequently considered because this group rarely possesses the critical capital (Auerbach, 2004) to understand the basics of higher education finance, or understand the long-term benefits of a college degree compared to other postsecondary options. Still others are afraid of the changes their children will go through after four years behind the ivory towers of American higher education (Smith, 2007; Perez, 2000; McDonough & Calderone, 2006).

Imparting College Knowledge

Critical capital is also referred to as "college knowledge," information that serves to connect low-SES African-American and Latino parents to the "college choice" process of creating a predisposition for college, searching amongst the bevy of institutions that might best serve their children, and eventually choosing one to attend (Hossler, Gallagher, & Coopersmith, 1989). College knowledge represents what scholars define as valuable information about what is needed

to prepare for and choose a college, how to make use of the college experience, the long term value of a college degree, along with how the experience will be financed (McDonough, 1994, 1997; Vargas, 2004). Perhaps the most important facet of college knowledge is recognition of the specific financial and transformative experiential values of a college degree relative to other postsecondary options; understandings that are second nature for high-SES parents who enjoy direct or indirect college experience (McDonough, 1997). Children from such families are expected to attend college and quite often are focused on graduate school from their freshman year due to their families understanding the value of a college degree (Freeman, 2005; Tornatzky et al., 2002). Today, especially in highly-selective institutions, many black or Latino students on campus tend to come from such families, while their low-SES co-ethnics are few and far between (save their presence in athletic programs). This growing college gap between high-and low-SES African-American and Latino students is best illustrated by considering recent developments in the highly-selective University of California system where Contreras (2005) found that after Proposition 209 was passed in California (banning race-based admission policies) African-American and Latino students who were admitted and enrolled tended to be of high-SES. While many factors contribute to these disparities, a likely reality is that low-SES African-American and Latino families have deficits in college knowledge that are disadvantageous in the college application game—a game they already play on a less than level playing field (Vargas, 2004; Smith, 2001; Smith, 2007).

Utilizing Critical Perspectives to Transmit Knowledge

What does this all mean in concrete terms for admission and outreach practitioners? It means that families have to be valued as much or even more than students. We must embrace a paradigm shift that requires buying into the assumption that low-SES parents want to support college education for their children but lack the critical capital to become partners in the predisposition-search-choice stages of what Hossler termed the "college choice process" (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1998: Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989). It is important to employ critical perspectives to help shift the focus of low-SES outreach from the child to the family with a commitment to including parents as partners. In this way, admission and outreach practitioners could use approaches similar to NCAA Division I athletic coaches/recruiters who often spend as much time wooing the parent(s) as they do the student-athlete. Athletic recruiters take the extra steps needed to identify talent and then connect with parents as early as the junior high school years. Why not try to do the same to identify talented low-SES students of color for undergraduate admission? Although it may appear to be economically unfeasible, there are ways that admission/outreach offices could imitate their athletic counterparts with equal levels of effectiveness during or before high school. Success could be achieved if higher education as an entity could approach such outreach as part of the "public good" thereby fulfilling two very important missions: developing the talent pool and achieving greater human equality (Astin, 1985; Bowen, 1977).

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In selective and highly-selective bachelor's degree-granting institutions, as defined by the Carnegie Classification of higher education institutions, an inordinate amount of attention is given to those African-American and Latino students with nationally-recognized standardized test scores and good-to-exceptional grades, while little attention is given to those who exhibit great potential in non-quantiative ways. This is the kind of redundancy and a sizable duplication of effort that makes the entire American system of higher education less effective and less accessible.

There are pre-existing models for the kind of programs that could be reproduced on a larger scale by higher education collectives. For example, these efforts could include everything from hosting low-SES primary and secondary students and their parents on visits to the campus to presentations for the students and their families in their communities. During the summer, colleges could host academic summer camps similar to those organized by TRIO, programs such as Upward Bound/Talent Search with the addition of aggressively pursuing avenues for parents to also participate and learn. During the fall recruitment and spring yield cycles, admission officers could be more visible in low-income high schools, possibly on weekends or when low-income parents are more likely to attend. More aggressive moves could be made at college fairs to minimize obstacles that often exclude these parents. For example, since parents are such an important part of the college choice process for these students, why not think of ways to collectively fund evening bus rides for parents and siblings so that families become the focus as opposed to the single student resulting in a higher quality experience for both.

Four Steps To A Paradigm Shift: What Does It All Mean?

For college counselors, admission officers and university outreach personnel there are four key steps that should be taken before beginning work on parent/family-centered outreach. First, in order to effectively recruit low-SES African-American students, their parents have to be involved in the process in ways that acknowledge the variety of barriers (structural, race, class, financial) that may prevent them from full involvement/participation. Second, when interventions are designed they need to embrace research findings that support the fact that these parents want to support their children's educational attainment as a way to improve their quality of life regardless of the end goal (college or other postsecondary options). Third, the process should endeavor to convert this interest into participation in the college choice process; a conversion facilitated by providing "college knowledge" especially in the arena of financial aid and understanding college costs. Finally, the higher education community must embrace this population of parents and their children performing outreach for the common good.

Non-Competitive, Cooperative Outreach For "The Common Good"

After 11 years as a coordinator of diversity recruitment for two excellent, but very different institutions, one common thread the researcher observed was the often intense conflicts over National Merit caliber or "high quality" African-American and Latino students. The competition between selective and highly-selective colleges for academically-advanced African-American and Latino students has become a zero-sum game that focuses substantial resources on a relatively small number of students. In selective and highly-selective bachelor's degree-granting institutions, as defined by the Carnegie Classification of higher education institutions (McCormick & Zhao, 2005), an inordinate amount of attention is given to those African-American and Latino students with nationally-recognized standardized test scores and good-to-exceptional grades, while little attention is given to those who exhibit great potential in non-quantitative ways. This is a kind of redundancy and a sizable duplication of effort that makes the entire American system of higher education less effective and less accessible. Issues such as the territorial way much of the outreach is conducted also cause concern: meaning the extreme institutional self-interest where colleges and universities expect immediate and quantifiable justification of their financial investment in the form of applications to their institution. Finally, in most cases low-SES black and Latino parents are not catered to the way parents of wealthy prep

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school students or university alumni are; quite often they are treated with disrespect. There seems to be a preference for those few students who represent "complete packages" versus widening the college pipeline, and a failure to recognize how important parents are to the college choice process for low-SES African-American and Latino students.

While there are no detailed solutions to address this dilemma, college choice literature and observation at the college level suggest alternative ways of doing low-SES outreach. Such efforts could be organized and conducted by regional collectives of both public and private, nonprofit, degree-granting institutions in ways that would place cooperation over competition. Dropping competitive agendas driven by institutional self-interest would result in widening the pipeline of talented, low-income African-American and Latino students by starting early and always including parents. At the same time, non-competitive approaches could be cost effective, cutting down on duplication of services and widening the span of outreach within a geographical area not separated by type of control (public vs. private), selectivity (moderate to high), or institutional mission (research, teaching, religious etc.). Although it would take a good deal of negotiation, reorganization and a necessary paradigm shift in conceptualizing the appropriate way to conduct outreach, the preferable and most cost-effective way of accomplishing early and effective outreach that respects and involves low-SES African-American and Latino parents and students could emerge from regional collectives. Financial and human resources could be pooled and all four-year institutions within a geographic area could benefit from increased participation in college from a wider range of low-SES African-American and Latino students with the important residual benefit of enhancing social justice and creating goodwill towards higher education throughout the broader community. Dropping institution-centered approaches and embracing a family-centered focus for low-SES African-American and Latino students would require sacrifice and sizable reorganization and reprioritization of how resources would be allocated. However, an agreement to create such cooperatives would not only enhance diversity but would go a long way towards creating a more equitable and just society during an era marked by the frighteningly escalating gap between the rich and poor, especially in the African-American and Latino communities.

If the higher education community could contribute to the common good in this way, the public relations benefits would reach beyond simply increasing college access to the poor. An emphasis on college outreach to improve access for the least likely demographic to attend college helps American economic competitiveness and would make important steps toward healing a ruptured civil society. As Bowen (1977) suggested many years ago, a more fair and inclusive higher education system will help our civil society become more "civil," our nation could boast of a more robust democracy and we could all have genuine hope in the future of higher education for the less advantaged. This is about creating a process that would exemplify genuine and respectful partnerships with these parents on a consistent basis and done with a level of care that would be easy for the casual observer to detect.

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