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Institutional seriousness concerning Black male student engagement: Necessary conditions and collaborative partnerships

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Chapter 8

Institutional Seriousness Concerning Black Male Student Engagement

Necessary Conditions and Collaborative Partnerships

Shaun R. Harper

A recent experience compels me to question the seriousness with which educators and administrators are willing to accept personal responsibility for Black male student success. I was invited to give a presentation for the annual staff development day at a college. Because data revealed several racialized and gendered disparities in student outcomes, the president and other administrators decided to frame the event around minority males. In advance of my visit, the organizers described to me some of the problems plaguing these students and asked that I unapologetically direct considerable attention to Black male undergraduates, the population for whom engagement and outcomes were especially troublesome. I recall being initially impressed that institutional leaders relied on data to inform the thematic focus of the half-day set of activities in which all faculty and staff were required to participate—unfortunately, my enthusiasm dwindled once the professional development day began.

Ironically, the event was held in the gymnasium on this particular campus. Perhaps this was the most appropriate venue in which to talk about Black male students, being that they composed the overwhelming majority on the basketball team there. From the center of the gym floor, I presented to what appeared to be a 95 percent White audience (as an aside, most of the persons of color were dressed in blue service uniforms). Given that I have taught and written extensively on engagement, I easily recognize disengagement when I see it. Despite my enthusiastic presentation style, the majority appeared, at

best, marginally interested in the topic about which I had been invited to speak. Never have I seen a crowd respond so chillingly to a Black guy on a basketball court—perhaps their response would have been different had I been dribbling a ball instead of giving practical recommendations for improving outcomes among Black men and other male students of color. In some ways, I felt booing might have been better than the obvious disengagement their faces and body language communicated; verbal disapproval would have at least signified the faculty and staff were seriously paying attention.

After the presentation, a Black professor approached me with praise and gratitude for raising issues that were widely known and longstanding, but had gone unaddressed at the college. I left the gym feeling reasonably confident that few who attended would actually do something purposeful to improve the conditions for and outcomes among Black males. There were other indicators throughout the day that suggested collaborative efforts were unlikely to ensue in ways that would help this college close achievement gaps. Despite its devoting three hours to the topic, requiring all faculty and staff to attend, compensating me for sharing my expertise, and espousing a commitment to diversity on its website and in other materials, at the end of my visit I concluded (perhaps erroneously) that this institution was not serious in an actionable way about engaging, retaining, and improving outcomes for minority males.

In this chapter, I review recent research and highlight findings from national survey data that justify the need for institutional seriousness concerning Black male student engagement. Although some literature I review seemingly attributes problems to the expenditure of student time and effort, I firmly believe that much of what I describe is a byproduct of institutional negligence in fostering conditions and environments that compel Black males to take advantage of resources and engagement opportunities. These issues are placed in a multidimensional theoretical framework, which informs the necessary conditions and collaborative partnership ideas I present at the end of the chapter.

A Compelling Case for Engaging Black Males

Consistent with other parts of this book, what I call for in this chapter is a shifting of the onus from students to faculty, staff, and administrators. Because there are other chapters related to engaging women, men, and racial/ethnic minority students, some might ask, “Why the special emphasis on Black male undergraduates?” Below are four points to justify this population-specific call for institutional effort.

The Shamefulness of Student Attrition

The commission appointed by U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings to examine the future of American higher education emphasized the need to drastically improve the rates at which students graduate from colleges and universities. In their 2006 report, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, commission members argued the following:

Among high school graduates who do make it on to postsecondary education, a troubling number waste time and taxpayer dollars . . . some never complete their degrees at all, at least in part because most colleges and universities don't accept responsibility for making sure that those they admit actually succeed. (p. vii)

Although retention is lousy for students in general (as noted in Chapter 1, only 56 percent graduate within six years), it continues to be most problematic among Black male undergraduates.

Fewer than one-third (32.4 percent) of Black men who start college graduate within six years (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2005), which is the worst college completion rate among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups (Harper, 2006a). As indicated throughout this book, engagement and persistence through baccalaureate degree attainment are inextricably bound. Thus, any effort to improve the rate with which Black male students graduate must include an aggressive focus on eradicating the disengagement trends I later describe in this chapter. Put another way, graduation rates will remain ridiculously low as long as Black men are continually disengaged.

Engagement Now = Socioeconomic Progression Later

Placing greater emphasis on engaging and retaining Black male undergraduates now would ultimately increase the proportion of Black men with bachelor's degrees in the U.S. population. This is essential for narrowing socioeconomic gaps between them and their White counterparts. Over 20 years ago, Perry and Locke found "Black men have lower median incomes, higher unemployment, and employment in less prestigious occupations than do White men" (1985, p. 107). The most recent *Report on the American Workforce* indicates that 49 percent of White men served in professional and leadership roles, compared with 37.3 percent of Black men (U.S. Department of Labor, 2001). Conversely, 62.7 percent of Black men worked labor-intensive and service jobs, compared to 51 percent of White male employees.

Furthermore, Mickelson and Smith (1992) as well as Shapiro (2004) found that White men earn on average significantly more than do Black males with comparable educational credentials. In 2000, the median annual salary for White males with bachelor's degrees was \$51,099, compared with \$40,360 for Black male bachelor's degree recipients (NCES, 2003). These findings validate Gordon, Gordon, and Nembhard's assertions that "Black male professionals continue to be excluded from positions of authority, are often deemed incapable of management or technical work, and continue to earn less than their White male counterparts" (1994, p. 518). Thus, it is important to expose Black male undergraduates to engagement opportunities that will strengthen their likelihood of attaining bachelor's degrees and compete successfully for financially rewarding jobs after college.

Thousands of students participate in internships each year that enable them to acquire the skills necessary for effectiveness in the workplace after college (Harper, 2006b; Kuh,

1993, 1995). Given this, internships are part of the Enriching Educational Experiences benchmark in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2007). The relationship between internship acquisition, engagement, and post-college economic outcomes for Black men is clear: Those who are actively engaged are more likely to compete successfully for internships that will later render them competitive for better jobs with higher salaries and leadership responsibilities. The title of Thomas Shapiro's (2004) book, *The Hidden Cost of Being African American: How Wealth Perpetuates Inequality*, perhaps best captures the point I am attempting to make here. That is, active engagement in college offers wealth to students by way of outcomes for future advancement—Black males are continually shortchanged in this regard.

Empty-Handed Applicants Need Not Apply

Similar to the insufficient readiness for career competition I just described, those who were disengaged as undergraduates are less likely to be deemed attractive for admission to highly selective graduate and professional schools. This is especially true at institutions that do a holistic evaluation of applicants and place some value on prior engagement in campus activities. Having evaluated more than 3,500 applications in past roles as a graduate admissions officer for the MBA program at Indiana University and Executive Director of the Doctor of Education Program at the University of Southern California, I know firsthand the difference that engagement makes. Those with solid grade point averages, good test scores, and undergraduate leadership experiences consistently rose to the top of applicant pools. On a related note, despite its being a weak indicator of performance in graduate school, most universities still rely on the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) to conveniently sift through applications and limit access to post-baccalaureate degree programs (Nettles & Millett, 2006). A recent report from the producers of the exam indicated that only 2 percent of all GRE takers in 2005–2006 were Black males (Educational Testing Service, 2007). This could signify that Black men are not engaged in experiences that compel them to even think about preparing themselves for educational opportunities beyond the baccalaureate. As a case in point: In 2005, only 28.6 percent of Black students enrolled in master's degree programs were male, and Black males constituted only 3.1 percent of all master's students in the United States (NCES, 2007).

Better Off Ball'n? Not Really

“Perhaps nowhere in higher education is the disenfranchisement of Black male students more insidious than in college athletics at major universities” (Harper, 2006a, p. 6). This assertion is substantiated by the following data points offered in a report I authored for the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in Washington, D.C.

- In 2004, Black males represented 30.5% of student-athletes in Division I men's sports, the National Collegiate Athletic Association's highest level of competition. They comprised 54.6% of football teams and 60.8% of men's basketball teams.

- Across four cohorts of college student-athletes, 47% of Black men graduated within six years, compared to 60% of White males and 62% of student-athletes overall. The averages across four cohorts of basketball players were 39% and 52% for Black men and White men, respectively. Forty-seven percent of Black male football players graduated within six years, compared to 63% of their White teammates. (Harper 2006a, p. vii)

These data have led me to two conclusions that admittedly come across as editorial, but in my view are indisputable.

First, if colleges and universities expended even half as much effort engaging and retaining Black male students as they do recruiting them to play football and basketball, the problems described in this chapter would not be nearly as enormous. In the Joint Center Report I note that in 2002 Black men composed only 4.3 percent of all students enrolled at institutions of higher education, the exact same percentage as in 1976. Stagnation in Black male college participation rates over a 26-year period is both surprising and absurd, given that institutions seem to have no trouble at all finding suitable students to play on revenue-generating athletic teams. The same is true with engagement. That is, if educators and administrators undertook the task of fostering the conditions that enable engagement for Black males with the same deliberation and intensity as coaches and athletics departments approach recruitment activities, it would very likely end up being the case that this would suddenly become the most engaged population among all that are written about in this book.

My second point is related to racialized outcomes disparities among male student-athletes. Although athletics departments offer specialized resources and support services, their effects obviously differ by race. Much about aggressively targeting Black men to make up more than half of certain sports teams, but having their White teammates graduate at significantly higher rates, is wrong. Although Black male student-athletes graduate at higher rates than do their same-race male peers who are not on intercollegiate sports teams (47 percent vs. 32.4 percent), racial disparities for both groups make clear the need to engage them more purposefully. Moreover, as Brandon Martin notes in Chapter 15 of this book, only 1.8 percent of college football players are drafted in the National Football League (NFL), and 1.2 percent of men's basketball players are drafted in the National Basketball Association (NBA). Thus, it is essential to ensure that student-athletes are exposed to value-added engagement experiences that will equip them with the credentials needed to compete for jobs and admission to graduate schools, as the overwhelming majority will not go on to play professional sports. Just because they graduate at 14.6 percentage points higher does not necessarily mean Black male student-athletes will have accrued the outcomes requisite for success after college.

Most Useful: Engagement and Race/Gender-Specific Outcomes

As noted in Chapter 1 and in the Afterword to this book, a plethora of gains, outcomes, and benefits are associated with educationally purposeful engagement for all students, regardless of race or gender. But I have documented elsewhere the ways in

which active engagement specifically enables Black men to resolve masculine identity conflicts (Harper, 2004); acquire social capital and access to resources, politically well positioned persons (e.g., college presidents and provosts), and exclusive information networks (Harper, 2008); negotiate support for achievement among their same-race peers (Harper 2006c); craft productive responses to racist stereotypes encountered inside and outside the classroom (Harper, 2005); develop political acumen for survival in professional settings and environments in which they are racially underrepresented (Harper, 2006b); overcome previous educational deficiencies and socioeconomic disadvantage (Harper, 2007); and develop strong Black identities that incite productive activism on predominantly White campuses (Harper & Quayle, 2007). Indeed, the general engagement-related outcomes for all students and specific gains for Black males are too rich and plentiful to handle haphazardly. However, despite all that is known about the associated outcomes, several data sources shed light on the alarming rates at which Black men remain disengaged.

Black Male Disengagement Trends

In 2001, a special edition of the publication formerly known as *Black Issues in Higher Education* (now *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*) called attention to troublesome educational outcomes among Black male undergraduates. In one article, reporter Ronald Roach (2001) noted that college and university administrators often say male students are increasingly withdrawing from campus leadership positions as enrollment gaps widen between Black men and women. It should be noted that engagement-related gender disparities among Black collegians is not a new phenomenon, but the trend has reversed. Researchers in the 1970s and 1980s (Allen, 1986; Fleming, 1984; Gurin & Epps, 1975) found that Black men were considerably more engaged than were Black women. Reportedly, Black men gained more, were more actively engaged in the classroom, interacted more frequently with faculty, and developed more positive identities and educational and career aspirations during that era.

More recent evidence confirms the engagement pendulum has swung in the other direction, as Black women now report significantly higher levels of engagement. In their study of gender differences in engagement, Harper, Carini, Bridges, and Hayek found, “women no longer lag behind men in their academic and social engagement experiences. Overall, the engagement picture for women appears to be considerably less grim . . . women have overcome the engagement odds and social passivity of years past” (2004, pp. 277, 279). This claim is substantiated by other empirical research studies published in recent years. Gender shifts in engagement have occurred across a range of institutional types, including two-year and community colleges. In comparison with their same-race male peers, Black female respondents to the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (2005) were more likely to:

- *Discuss ideas from readings or classes* with others outside of class “often” or “very often” (57% women vs. 45% men).
- *Use the Internet* to work on an assignment “often” or “very often” (60% women vs. 52% men).
- Report that their college encouraged them *to spend significant time studying* (80% of women vs. 73% of men reported “quite a bit” or “very much”).
- *Have plans to continue their studies* (31% of men vs. 24% of women had no plan or were uncertain about their intent to continue college). (pp. 7–8)

Cuyjet’s (1997) analysis of data from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire also captured many alarming gender disparities, but at four-year institutions. His study was based on data from 6,765 Black student respondents to the national survey who attended a wide range of colleges and universities across the country. Cuyjet found that Black men devoted less time to studying, took notes in class less often, spent significantly less time writing and revising papers, and participated less often in class-related collaborative experiences than did Black female respondents to the survey. Furthermore, Black women in comparison with their same-race male peers were more engaged in campus activities, looked more frequently in their campus newspapers for notices about upcoming events and engagement opportunities, attended more meetings and programs, served on more campus committees, and held more leadership positions at their institutions. Playing recreational sports and exercising in campus fitness facilities were the only areas on the survey where Black men reported higher levels of engagement.

Black male student leaders in Harper’s (2006b) study indicated that while Black women were reaping the benefits of leadership and engagement, the overwhelming majority of their male counterparts were spending their time doing nothing, pursuing romantic endeavors with female students, playing basketball and working out in the campus fitness center, video gaming, and working jobs to earn money for familial responsibilities and material possessions (clothes, shoes, cars, etc.). Participants overwhelmingly indicated their Black male peers invested minimal out-of-class time to academic endeavors. These claims are supported by findings in Harper et al.’s (2004) study. In their analysis of data collected from 1,167 Black undergraduates at 12 historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) that participated in the National Survey of Student Engagement, the researchers found significant differences between men and women on the Level of Academic Challenge benchmark of the survey. As mentioned in Chapter 1, activities in this area include studying, reading, rehearsing, preparing for class, writing long papers, applying theories and course concepts to practical situations, and working hard to meet professors’ expectations. Black male HBCU students were less engaged than were their female counterparts in this domain.

Also regarding out-of-class engagement trends at HBCUs, the general consensus among the Black male student leaders in Kimbrough and Harper’s (2006) qualitative study is that Black men are grossly disengaged. Data were collected from Student Government Association presidents, fraternity chapter leaders, and resident assistants (RAs)

at nine different HBCUs. Among the numerous engagement-related gender disparities cited, Kimbrough and Harper note that only 7 of 49 student government members at two different HBCUs were men. In sum, the student leaders confirmed that purposeful engagement, especially outside the classroom, is extremely unpopular among Black men at HBCUs (as is the case throughout most of higher education). At HBCUs and predominantly White institutions (PWIs) alike, Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) report sororities and fraternities are among the most popular venues for out-of-class engagement among Black undergraduates. However, Harper and Harris (2006) contend these groups have declined in popularity among men, as chapters on many campuses have fewer than 10 members.

Participants in Kimbrough and Harper's (2006) study offered five explanations for these Black male disengagement trends: (1) Men deem sports, physical activity, and athleticism more socially acceptable and "cooler" than campus leadership and purposeful engagement; (2) male students typically encounter difficulty working together, which is often required in student organizations; (3) many Black men come to college having already been socialized to devalue purposeful engagement; (4) there is a shortage of Black male role models and mentors on campus who actively and strategically promote purposeful engagement; and (5) many Black men are unable to meet the minimum 2.5 grade point average requirement for membership in one of the five historically Black fraternities. Harper (2006b) contends that gender disparities in Black student enrollments have contributed to a decline in male leadership on most campuses. Since they do not see many others who are highly engaged on campus, many Black men conclude that engagement is socially inexpedient and perhaps even feminine—definitely not normative (Harper, 2004).

Although all are most likely true and some have been empirically proven, the problem with these explanatory factors is that they almost exclusively attribute disengagement to students' attitudes and behaviors, not the institutions they attend. Educators and administrators are in many ways complicit in the cyclical reproduction of these trends. Negligence in fostering the necessary conditions for engagement and the infrequency of collective efforts to study and craft strategic responses to factors that compel Black men's detachment from the educational experience have been inadequately considered. Perhaps institutions, especially predominantly White colleges and universities, just have not recognized the value in engaging, retaining, and graduating Black male students. Furthermore, deficit views of Black men usually compel institutional fascination with the undercurrents of disengagement instead of learning from highly engaged and successful students within this population.

Theoretical Framework

As mentioned earlier, I am approaching the treatment of Black male disengagement differently by shifting the responsibility from students to educators and administrators. To this end, I have decided against placing Black male engagement issues in an

explanatory framework comprising developmental, psychosocial, and student-centered theories. Instead, I have chosen a framework that helps make sense of college and university campuses as organizations for learning and environments that can be changed. Moreover, I make use of theories pertaining to the racial implications of engendering care for this population at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and possibilities associated with anti-deficit views of Black male college achievement.

Organizational Learning Theory

According to Argyris and Schön (1996), learning occurs when organizations “adapt to changing environments, draw lessons from past successes and failures, and detect and correct errors of the past, anticipate and respond to impending threats, engage in continuous innovation, and build and realize images of a desirable future” (p. xvii). Organizational learning extends beyond individuals, and is instead collective (Kezar, 2005). In the case of Black male student engagement, educators and administrators on the campus could tap available data sources and engage in dialogues that help illuminate the undercurrents of inequities, make clear what is needed to foster an environment for success, and come to understand the complexity of factors that require mediation for the actualization of institutional goals. Theories suggest that organizational stakeholders would share this knowledge and make sense of it collectively.

Despite the focus on collaboration, individuals play an important role in the learning process. For example, Bensimon (2005) describes three key concepts related to individuals in organizational learning:

- (1) Learning is done by individuals who are members of an organizational entity such as a college or university, an administrative division, an academic department, or a research team;
- (2) individuals inquire into a problem collectively, on behalf of an organizational entity; and
- (3) organizational culture and structures can promote or inhibit individual learning. (p. 101)

Moreover, Kezar (2005) contends that trust between individual collaborators, the establishment of new information systems, rewards and incentives, knowledge sharing and open communication, collaborative inquiry teams, and staff development are all necessary features of organizational learning.

Argyris and Schön (1996) describe two types of learning in organizations: single-loop and double-loop. The former places emphasis on external factors for problems in organizations (e.g., “these Black males do so poorly because they are insufficiently prepared for college”). This version of learning leads to incremental change, as organization members fail to recognize their own role in the stifling of desired outcomes (Kezar, 2005). In short, problems are narrowly examined; attribution is almost always external; and organizational toxins often remain unexamined. Bensimon (2005) posits that equity requires double-loop learning, which “focuses attention on the root causes of a problem and the changes that need to be made in the attitudes, values, beliefs, and practices of individuals” (p. 104). This version of organizational learning would require, for example, an inward examination of why a Black male student sits passively and performs poorly in

courses where he is constantly stereotyped by the professor and classmates, exposed to culturally irrelevant perspectives in assigned readings, and expected to be engaged only when an opportunity arises for him to be the token spokesperson for all Black persons. Double-loop learning would also oblige teams of educators to gather qualitative insights into how Black males view the campus as a normative space for engagement—what they learn should guide future efforts to make necessary environmental adjustments.

Theoretical Perspectives on Environmental Press

Environmental press refers to the norms of a campus environment that can be described as distinctive to the institution by students, faculty, and staff, as well as visitors (Pace & Stern, 1958; Stern, 1970; Strange, 2003). Presses are characteristic of what is generally acceptable and normative within the campus environment (Pace, 1969). As such, they shape the behaviors students display and the degrees to which they buy into perceived consensus on a campus. If the majority of Black males are disengaged, then most will conclude that engagement is not the “thing to do.” Strange and Banning (2001) explained that certain environmental presses can inhibit student growth, particularly when there is significant distance between what the student needs and the prevailing press of the campus. For example, Black male students need to be engaged to acquire the political acumen required for the cultivation of meaningful relationships with administrators, but if the normative press of the campus is disengagement among this particular population, then few are likely to act in ways counter to it.

Baird (1988) noted the following: “Presses are of two types, first as they exist in reality or an objective inquiry discloses them to be (alpha press), and second as they are perceived or interpreted by the individual (beta press)” (p. 3). Baird also presents two versions of beta presses, *private* and *consensual*. The first is related to the unique view a student has about her or his experience, whereas the latter pertains to estimations of commonalities in experiences and outcomes. At the end of a three-day visit that included observations and several focus groups, a consultant could conclude that Black males are disengaged and it is primarily the institution’s fault. The real indicators of disengagement would be the alpha press. An individual Black male sophomore could attribute his disengagement to the insufficient provision of clubs and activities that appeal to his unique cultural interests (private beta press), but might also believe most of his same-race male peers are disengaged on account of the overwhelming Whiteness of social offerings on the campus (consensual beta press).

Were the current problems concerning Black male achievement strategically addressed, then the consensual beta press could become that most within this population are actively engaged—it would be seen as normal. Likewise, the alpha press that a Black male prospective student would encounter might lead him to the following conclusion: “Wow, should I choose to enroll at this university, there is going to be a serious expectation that I become as actively engaged as all the other Black dudes here.” It is my

view that presses can be changed, but only if educators willingly accept responsibility for undertaking the complex work of cultural change.

Critical Race Theory and Interest-Convergence

Based on scholarly perspectives from law, sociology, history, ethnic studies, and women's studies, critical race theory (CRT) illuminates the inequitable distribution of power and privilege as well as racism and racial disadvantages within organizations (Bell, 1987; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT also challenges misconceptions regarding color-blindness, merit, and racial equity; critiques claims of liberalism; and ignites consciousness that leads to social justice and advances for people of color (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). One of the tenets of CRT is interest-convergence, which, according to Delgado (1995), "encourage racial advances for Blacks only when they also promote white self-interests" (p. xiv). It is used in this theoretical framework to help answer a question like, "why would an institution whose faculty and staff are almost exclusively White engage in double-loop learning and take on the challenge of creating a normative culture of engagement for Black male students?"

Interest-convergence helps explain the motivating factors that might compel majority advocacy on minority issues—essentially, there has to be something in it for Whites and they must see value in their efforts. Critical race theorists argue that White persons rarely act on behalf of minority groups "out of the goodness of their hearts." Delgado and Stefancic (2001) contend that consequently efforts to eradicate racism have produced minimal results owing to the insufficient convergence of interests. That is, Black Americans have hoped for racial justice, equity, and fairness, but those interests have not converged effectively with the goals of the powerful persons from whom those things have been sought. Black students could want more Black faculty, but in most instances it is not until protests ensue, media attention is garnered, and the institution is embarrassed by the public exposure of its structural problems with race that administrators move in any serious way to hire cohorts of minority faculty.

"We cannot ignore and should learn from and try to recognize situations when there is a convergence of interests" (Bell, 2000, p. 9). Making clear how retaining Black men will ultimately increase the overall retention rates for a predominantly White college is one way to do this. Another is pointing out the outcomes that will accrue for White student leaders via their interactions with Black men (e.g., developing cross-cultural communication skills that will be employable in future settings, which will make the institution look like it graduates progressive people who are not ignorant racists). And a third is arguing that changing the environmental press of the campus could garner for the institution a better reputation that will ultimately stimulate increased financial contributions from Black alumni. Donnor (2005) offers an example of when interests do not converge effectively between Black male student-athletes and universities with major sports programs:

Critical race theory offers a means to better recognize and more fully understand the forces that have constructed a system in which African American athletes are cheered on the field by wealthy alumni and powerful fans while at the same time denied opportunities to earn the degree that could lead to wealth and power of their own (p. 63).

A college president is quite powerful and could steer most agendas she or he deems worthwhile. But agenda movement often comes at a cost; hence White presidents and other senior administrators must see the value of expending their political capital in support of equity and engagement for Black male students. Surely there will be resistance from faculty and others if the ways in which the White majority will benefit are not made clear.

Anti-Deficit Achievement Theory

I have described elsewhere the anti-deficit achievement theory that emerged from my National Black Male College Achievement Study, the largest-known empirical research project on Black male undergraduates (see Harper, 2007). Essentially, it is an informative view of how Black males navigate social settings, such as schools and colleges, despite all we know to be stacked against them. It counters the *orientation* (focus on stereotypical characteristics associated with the culture of disadvantage and poverty), *discourse* (lack of preparation, motivation, study skills, blaming students and/or their backgrounds), and *strategies* (compensatory educational programs, remedial courses, special programs, all focused on fixing the student) associated with the “deficit cognitive frame” that Bensimon (2005, p. 103) describes.

Instead of always striving to “fix them,” I argue that institutions can learn much from Black male achievers about what worked well, which could guide institutional efforts to engage more Black men. Although considerable attention has already been devoted to examining the problems with Black men in education and society (Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Ferguson, 2000; Gordon et al., 1994; Harper, 2006a; Polite & Davis, 1999; White & Cones, 1999), it remains important to continually expend institutional energies on investigating the undercurrents of outcome disparities and social disadvantage. Never have I argued to altogether abandon this approach. However, it is my belief that at this point much is known about the problems, but too little about those who achieve despite them.

My approach is a theoretical perspective on institutional change that relies on learning from Black males who have chosen to make the most of college, inside and outside the classroom—active learners and doers who have high GPAs, impressive records of leadership and engagement in enriching educational experiences, large networks of institutional agents and supporters, and more social capital at the end of college than at the beginning. I argue that institutions can learn more about the conditions required for success by collecting qualitative insights from successful students. Instead of asking why so few Black men take advantage of counseling, career development, and academic

support resources on a college campus (which remains an important question worthy of pursuing), perhaps more could be learned from those who actually utilize programs and services. Discovering the impetus for their engagement could be most instructive to those who endeavor to attract more of their same-race disengaged peers. This lens rejects deficit-minded treatments of Black male students, while simultaneously recognizing the continued need to better understand the factors that stifle achievement.

Indicators of Institutional Seriousness

Before presenting a set of strategies, I first describe some conditions I believe are necessary before an institution can claim to be serious about improving Black male student engagement. First, campus leaders must make this a high institutional priority. Recognizing there are countless issues that merit the attention of senior administrators, the decision to focus on this particular population should be data-driven. At many colleges and universities, analyses of engagement and retention data could easily justify the need to devote immediate attention to this particular population. These findings should stimulate a cross-campus campaign that is aggressive and conveyed with urgency. Institutional leaders also must have goals for the gains, outcomes, and levels of engagement they hope to see among Black male undergraduates; resources must be invested toward these efforts in order to confirm that creating a culture of engagement is indeed a priority. These goals should be documented, widely disseminated, and frequently discussed across the campus. An assistant professor in the English department, for example, should not accidentally discover the university has goals for addressing many of the same engagement issues that plague Black males in her courses—it would be better if she and others across the campus received communiqués articulating the institution’s objectives for improving engagement and outcomes for this specific student population.

Institutional leaders must also have high expectations for Black male students and those who are positioned to engage them, both inside and outside the classroom. Clarity in the articulation of these expectations is critical. Strategic planning by administrators and other stakeholders is also essential. Strategy must permeate the campus at large as well as specific aspects of the institution (the student affairs division, the mathematics department, classes that emphasize writing, etc.). Given that Black males are retained least often on most college and university campuses (Harper, 2006a), it seems appropriate to suggest that presidents hire an outside strategist to advise senior administrators on how to best reverse this trend. Accountability is another necessary condition. Faculty, staff, and administrators should be held accountable for advancing the institution’s agenda for Black male student success. For example, if improving Black male student-athlete retention rates and increasing student-athlete engagement in activities outside the athletics department have been identified as institutional goals, the athletic director must be willing to hold coaches and others within the department accountable for implementing new approaches, documenting efforts, and demonstrating effectiveness in this regard. Also, the person to whom the athletic director reports (usually the presi-

dent) must hold her or him accountable for contributing to the institution's goals by making engagement a proven priority in the athletics department.

Lastly, collaboration among various institutional stakeholders—from food service workers to the director of residence life to the dean of engineering and students themselves—is also a requisite indicator of seriousness. Stakeholders from across the campus must be brought together to help actualize the institution's goals and develop ways to reinforce expectations for Black male achievement and engagement. Simply convening faculty and staff once in a gymnasium to listen to a speaker and expecting them to be compelled to partner is the exact opposite of what I am recommending here. Instead, specific approaches to fostering collaborative partnerships must be written into the aforementioned strategic plans. In sum, high priority, goals, high expectations, strategy, accountability, and collaboration are all necessary indicators of institutional seriousness. To be clear, I am asserting that institutional stagnation will ensue and disengagement will remain normative among Black male undergraduates in the absence of these important conditions. Notice that everything I have written in this section requires leadership, specifically presidential action. Having now worked at four postsecondary institutions, I have not yet seen something become a serious campus-wide priority without the president being involved.

Engagement Strategies

As indicated in the previous section, evidence of collaborative effort across the campus is one way to determine if an institution is serious about improving Black male student engagement. In this section I present possible ways that faculty, staff, and administrators can partner to reverse problematic trends and outcomes. This is not to diminish the worth of individual action and one-on-one work with students. But no lone academic advisor, faculty member, or Black administrator in multicultural affairs (or anywhere else) can single-handedly create a campus-wide culture of engagement. Caring and committed individuals are important, but it is usually the case that a small cohort of such persons is treated as the default source of advocacy for minority students (and this group is often primarily composed of staff of color). Student engagement must be everyone's responsibility at the institution, especially if the status of Black males is ever to be improved. To this end, below are five ideas for collaborative partnerships.

- ◇ The Equity Scorecard process developed by Professor Estela Mara Bensimon and a team of researchers in the Center for Urban Education (CUE) at the University of Southern California is perhaps the best available model of collaboration and organizational learning (see Bauman, 2005; Bauman, Bustillos, Bensimon, Brown, & Bartee, 2005; Bensimon, 2004; Harris & Ben-

simon, 2007; Peña, Bensimon, & Colyar, 2006). It is one I highly recommend for institutions that are serious about closing racialized and gendered gaps that disadvantage Black male students. This process brings together faculty, staff, administrators, and institutional researchers who work in teams to examine unique data sources that could provide some insights into inequities that would otherwise remain hidden. Ideally, there should be alignment between a group's representation in the student body and its members' engagement in various experiences or acquisition of certain outcomes. For example, an analysis of students listed on the dean's list might reveal that Black males make up 4.3 percent of the student population on campus but 0.3 percent of achievers on the dean's list. The team not only makes this discovery, but also partners to investigate the origins of and explanatory factors for this gap. In the process, team members are engaged in thinking about how their own practices contribute to the inequities they have uncovered, and they learn much about the organization in which these disparities are continually reproduced. This enables them to approach planning and institutional transformation efforts with greater enthusiasm, purpose, and focus. What I have offered here is a simplified summary of the process; thus, readers are encouraged to retrieve the published work I cited above. Any institution looking to take on the enormous task of engaging Black males should consider consulting CUE to help facilitate the Equity Scorecard process. The ways in which it can guide institutional action and facilitate organizational learning have not been overstated here.

- ◇ A second collaborative strategy is the formation of *engagement teams* for Black male students. These teams can comprise academic advisors, faculty, and professionals in athletics, student activities, residence life, ethnic culture centers, and first-year student program offices. Members of this team can work to create with students individual engagement plans that guide the expenditure of their time outside of class and provide a set of strategies for managing engagement in different types of classroom environments (being engaged in an Introduction to African American History class may be more challenging for some than a physics course). The team can work together to establish protocols and common approaches to engagement planning; meet at least twice per semester or quarter with each of the Black men whose engagement plans they supervise; and meet with each other periodically to assess effectiveness, share approaches that have worked for them individually, and learn from each other strategies for reaching resistant students whose engagement plans have not quite taken shape.
- ◇ A committee on improving the academic status of Black males is a third collaborative partnership idea. Deans and department chairs, administrators

from student affairs and multicultural affairs, basketball and football coaches, faculty, and students can work together to envision, implement, and assess a systematic set of initiatives to improve grades, transfer trends (at community colleges), and retention and graduation rates specifically among Black male undergraduates. An equally important function of this committee should be ensuring that Black males are introduced to the rich harvest of learning opportunities that are available on and external to the campus (e.g., study abroad programs, internships, and summer research programs with faculty). The team should rely on data from the Equity Scorecard team, as well as qualitative interviews with Black men who have persisted, performed well, and benefited from participation in enriching educational experiences. The committee should coordinate an initiative that is data-driven and imaginative. Its work will not prosper if committee members hold low expectations for their work or deficit views of Black men on campus.

- ◇ Staff from the counseling office, Black male graduate students, faculty, and student affairs educators, to name a few, can partner to offer advisory support to Black male student organizations. Harper and Quaye (2007) as well as several contributors to Cuyjet's (2006) edited volume amplify the important role such groups play on predominantly White and historically Black campuses alike. Accordingly, they provide an outlet for Black men to gather and be themselves; learn from the diversity within the group and challenge stereotypes they have about each other; discuss ideas and problems that pertain directly to them without fear of judgment from White onlookers and Black women; and share resources and navigational insights that could help improve their individual and collective existence on campus. Although these groups are enormously powerful, they would benefit greatly from a strong web of supporters who collaboratively offer advisement. These advisors should work with student leaders in these groups to create an agenda that addresses many of the strengths and weaknesses Black men bring to the college setting; having a counselor (preferably a Black male) on the team would be especially helpful.
- ◇ Given some of the problems noted earlier with Black male readiness for graduate school and careers after college, a *futures team* composed of athletic administrators, staff from the career development center, faculty, and Black male alumni could be created. The futures team could collaborate to offer events and resources that are targeted directly at Black males. For instance, a panel made up of former student-athletes who thought they were going to play professional sports, but were denied such opportunities after college and found themselves insufficiently prepared to compete for desirable jobs, could be instructive to current students who may have constructed similarly narrow pathways. Furthermore, there could be tremendous synergy between this

futures team and the aforementioned engagement teams, as they could work together to ensure that individual students' engagement plans include experiences that will render them competitive for post-college roles they desire for themselves. Moreover, student leaders and advisors for Black male student organizations can also rely on the futures team to bring in guest speakers for programs and introduce the group's members to influential Black male professionals who can leverage connections on their behalf.

These partnership ideas are not meant to be prescriptive—meaning, it was not my aim to offer five ideas that will solve every engagement problem plaguing Black males on all college and university campuses. Instead, it is the essence, seriousness, and coordinated nature of these ideas that I am hoping will inspire readers. Again, all efforts should be data-driven and context-specific—the problems with and possibilities for Black male student engagement at the University of Pennsylvania are surely different from those at the Community College of Philadelphia. Thus, thoughtful and well informed implementation by collaborators is essential.

Conclusion

I hope I have made plain in this chapter that the formation of active collaborative teams that involve stakeholders from across the campus who start with assessment and then act in aggressive and strategic ways is the ultimate demonstration of institutional seriousness concerning Black male student success. But an institution must be ready to take on this challenge—presidents and other senior leaders must convey with enthusiasm the high priority, goals, and expectations the institution has for reversing troublesome engagement trends; they must be actively involved in the formation of strategy; and they must hold themselves and everyone else employed by the institution accountable. To make this work, the ways in which White faculty, staff, and students at PWIs will ultimately benefit must be made clear.

The problems and possibilities of Black male student engagement are too critical to leave at bringing in a speaker for a three-hour professional development workshop. Such an approach is neither enduring nor likely to compel audience members to immediately act in the collaborative ways described in this chapter. Serious issues (e.g., Black men dropping out of college more than any other group) require serious partnerships and planning. Institutional leaders must be involved, and efforts cannot be isolated to a certain segment of the campus (e.g., student affairs or multicultural affairs). Resources should not be wasted flying in speakers for professional development workshops if the institution does not mean what it says about equity and diversity in its mission statement, on its website, and in public speeches made by its president. Prior to talking about these issues in a gymnasium filled with disengaged faculty and staff, I had tremendous hope for the college I visited. That experience notwithstanding, I remain optimistic that readers of this chapter will be inspired to treat Black male achievement with greater seriousness.

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