Invisibility Syndrome of African Americans in Educational Institutions

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I want to spend a little time talking about some of the things that have been of
primary concern to me about the experiences of African American students in educational
institutions. These are the concerns which touch upon my academic, scholarly and
professional interests, as well as personally, because they are central to the African-
American community of which I am a member. A fundamental focus of my concerns is
how do we improve the pipeline for students coming into academic institutions as well as
provide the environ 439.44 Tm   [(ut)-22(i)37(o)-20(n)410(e)3Tm   [( )] TJ   ET   Q   q   BT   /F2 12 Tf   0 3

that offer attractive competing alternatives. We therefore are concerned on a number of levels about the welfare and well being of students as they come into our educational institutions because of the pressures upon still young evolving identities. An essential concern is what happens to African American students' identity from exposure to the intellectual traditions that come from our institutions. Equally important what are the barriers that prevent meaningful exposure?

There are enough structural barriers to college admissions for African American students, but there are also psychological challenges for our students as they try to fulfill their own and parents' aspirations for

living, and particularly our understanding of how race, racism, discrimination and prejudice impact development of the individual. The university is no exception as a particular cultural context that influences identity development.

As we look at the circumstances of so many young African Americans trying to

being and achievement, something that can happen in the transformative college years. And so in my work with a variety of community programs preparing African American students for college admissions I learned an area of primary curriculum focus is strengthening resilience and providing perspective in social identity

really a part of our campus, the campus networks, and the groups that essentially define

the campus culture or even the curriculum for that matter. Like most students they must

find their way.

What's the consequence of this? You have students who are overly concerned

about how they are seen on campus.   So the question becomes what does that

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upset was not just that they dropped out of college, but that they were so disillusioned by it. Moreover this discouragement by an alienating culture of learning restructured their academic motivation. Some decided not to transfer to any other college opportunity but rather went to work. They were very disillusioned about the whole academic culture and its relevancy to their life and future. So I asked her: "What would you say, in essence, were the experiences of these students?" Her passionate position was that they were made to feel like they were never really accepted. She noted the faculty saw them as an affirmative-action initiative, and there really wasn't the same kind of investment in them as there was in white students on campus. This was beyond the average college student's sense of difference and struggles when joining a new community after high school. That lack of cultural relevancy for African Americans in our traditions tended to create for them a sense of being invisible on campus. Parenthetically, high educational aspirations of African Americans are not without the desire for social relevancy of that education.

Given this reality for African American students on predominantly white campuses there are several areas that make this whole issue of invisibility important for us to understand as concerned educators. Invisibility is generated by assumptions based in stereotypes about people. Negating what other people believe about you and related stereotypes is a very powerful factor in trying to be successful, but it is also psychologically and spiritually exhausting. It wears you down and takes its emotional toll.

How do you know when students are experiencing invisibility? For one, they will share it when genuinely engaged with concern about adjustment to campus and classroom experiences.   For example a common experience of invisibility is conveyed as the

professor doesn't recognized me as a student in class, overlooks me, or if I give my response in class and somehow, it's not quite good enough, and a white student in class gives the same response, said a little differently, and somehow, that particular response is valued better than my view of the issue. If that happens one time, that's unique, but if it happens on several occasions, and they have corroboration from other students, that's another. These corroborations I term as "sanity checks" in my book *From Brotherhood to Manhood*. Other African American students who are sitting in the cafeteria amongst themselves are a sounding board on campus life and sanity check about such things as experiences in a classroom with a professor. With corroboration, there is some verification that your experience was not an isolated, unique experience but has integrity to it.

What happens then is that the students now must grapple with these experiences and appraise their authenticity, while internalizing how it makes them feel not just as the average student but in special ways as an African American student. They gradually become sensitive to other kinds of interpersonal exchanges on campus with a growing vigilance to assess if there are patterns of treatment. This process can become preoccupying, very frustrating, anxiety provoking, highly distracting and create enduring indignation about culminated perceived slights they experience on campus. This can be very psychologically unhealthy and counter productive for the development of students if it goes unattended to and essentially limited to airing within small isolated campus groups. Whereas common interest groups also serve a very curative and developmental purpose, they can also be litmus test for a particular

How does that impact the learning process? If you've read the work of Claude Steele, a professor of psychology at Stanford University, he talks about the impact of what he calls "stereotype threat." Stereotype threat is "the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype".   Two types of reactions have been noted in stereotype threat in which:

1) "the person fears verifying the negative stereotype held about his or her group which is considered d*isruptive apprehension* and, 2) the person rejects the setting where the verification might occur which is considered *protective disidentification*

He has examined this phenomenon through various research studies using sample tests from the Graduate Record Examot   Q   q   BT   /F2 roteresearc

do well on this test because African American students do poorly, and if they don't measure up, then they're not going to be able to gain admissions. This apprehension, for some students, puts family goals at risk with such thoughts as: "I'm not going to be able to gain admission to college," or "I'm not going to be able to fulfill mine or my parents' dreams." There are many psychological associations that get evoked by what Cross calls spotlight anxiety.

The other way in which performance get depressed is by what Steele calls "projective disidentification." What does he mean by disidentification? Well, one of the ways in which students can psychologically restructure their orientation to taking a test is to psychologically disidentify with being an African American student, or performing as one. If the person is successful in restructuring his or her thinking to distance themselves from identification with African American student performances then he or she can lessen the "racial risks" in demonstrating their talents. Or it can also disrupt, meaning that they're so intent on not being identified as African American and not coming up with results on the SAT like African American students, that they create sufficient anxiety that it too disrupts performance on the test. These are powerful psychological issues that go straight to the heart of identity and how identification plays a part in academic performance.

When African American students arrive on campus they are confronted with additional challenges to their identity embedded in student life. Campus life becomes another venue for the invisibility experience to prosper. The social curriculum in many of the after school programs that I invited to the *Nelson Chair Roundtable on Networking Community Based Programs* at Boston College last spring anticipate these student life

issues and address directly the social identity agenda in going

Dr. Beverly Tatum, formerly a Dean at Mt. Holyoke and now President of Spelman College in Atlanta, wrote that when African American students come on predominantly white campuses they insulate themselves from the sense of alienation and therefore invisibility by sitting together in the cafeteria. Well, what does that do? It provides comfort, safety, and space to be themselves.

How do students make themselves visible in a fulf981 0 0 1 9 330 571.2 Tm   [(i)17(n)19( )-10(a)3( )

Beverly Tatum tried to create a different academic community that takes into consideration the way in which African American students create for themselves a survival network and integrate it into the college community. She formed the ABCs institutional model that represents: Affirm identity, Build community, and Cultivate leadership. I shall come back to leadership as an important goal of the University. What she felt was extremely important was to build on the ways in which students create their little isolated social networks. From this knowledge find a way to facilitate greater inter-group connections and engagements with other social networks on campus.

If we step back and look at the social structure of Boston College campus, I'm sure that we can identify different social networks of students. I agree with Beverly Tatum that if we are going to be involved in a pluralistic society then we have to do something in which social networks on campus, particularly those limiting diverse social contact engage each other. If they remain homogeneous and isolated, then that creates a disconnected community and student life environment that I believe is inconsistent with Boston College's social justice mission and ever-evolving institutional identity.

The other focus for the University is building community. Beverly Tatum's belief and mine is that the more that you get different groups to engage each other, the more it begins to build a very different community on campus. Now, what she's doing is essentially addressing the issue of invisibility of students on campus, African American students in particular

and be prepared for providing leadership. It is extremely important for the African-American community that we evolve new generations of leaders. That the generations of students that come to predominantly white campuses and become exposed to diverse intellectual traditions will inevitably utilize their new knowledge and competencies in ways that give back to the community while building their career.

My challenge to you attending this seminar therefore is to keep in mind that psychological invisibility is a very profound experience, and this threat of being seen and treated as a stereotype puts academic performance and future contributions at risk for African American students. Unless we engage the social networks on campus as an educational imperative, we will not fully prepare a new generation of leaders, in particular African-American leaders that must also deal with a global community. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." These issues matter.

So my questions to you for this discussion are: Question one, are African-Americans invisible in Catholic intellectual traditions? Two, how do we engage African-American students to include their intellectual contribution in a pluralistic community? And three, how, in our ways of knowing, do we cultivate future leaders for the African-American community from those students we admit to Boston College?