

Reaching Black Men

Elizabeth Redden

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When Walter M. Kimbrough became president of Philander Smith College, a historically black, private institution in Arkansas, he was dismayed by the graduation rates. “Just looking at all the data on our campus and the low rate of graduation for black men on the campus – it was in the teens – I asked people, ‘What are we doing about this?’ ” he says.

In 2006, Philander Smith’s six-year graduation rates were 11 percent for black men, 21 percent for black women, and 16 percent overall.

Despite the concern, such numbers are not unheard of among institutions that admit many students who haven’t been well-prepared for college. “We deal with a lot of first-generation students, a lot of students who come from what I would consider to be horrible K-12 systems,” Kimbrough says. Still, he continues, “If you admit students like that, you’ve got to do extra things for them. That’s the part that I didn’t see [happening]. We’ve admitted them, so what are we doing extra, to really boost them?”

Philander Smith in 2007 launched its Black Male Initiative, a low-budget but institution-wide, presidential-level program aimed at personally reaching the black men on campus. “The goal is to touch at least half of the men on campus each semester. Which is an aggressive goal,” Kimbrough says. Last year, over the course of 15 events, about 56.5 percent of the approximately 200 black men on campus participated (the total student population last fall was 587).

“It’s really based on the research on African-American men in higher education” – with non-cognitive variables, including attachment to the institution, levels of social adjustment, and supportive relationships with mentors playing significant roles in predicting student satisfaction and success. “Those are the things that you really have to address, that men really need to have these supportive and nurturing environments. It’s not just as simple as they need more tutoring. You could provide the tutoring, and the guys won’t come,” Kimbrough says.

Philander Smith's Program

Nationally, the six-year graduation rate for black students enrolled at four-year institutions is 40.5 percent, compared to 56.1 percent overall (and 59.4 percent for white students).

Furthermore, the rates for black men trail those of black women. At four-year public universities, the graduation rate for black men is 31.4 percent, compared to 43.1 percent for black women; at private non-profit colleges, the national rates are 38.6 percent for black men, and 49.3 percent for black women.

In response to these glaring discrepancies, an increasing number of colleges have started Black Male Initiatives or other targeted programs. They run the gamut from student-run programs or clubs to initiatives managed by university systems (specifically the City University of New York and the University System of Georgia).

“People are becoming more and more aware of the need to make specific overtures toward African American men,” says Michael Cuyjet, an associate professor at the University of Louisville’s educational and counseling psychology department, and editor of the book *African American Men in College* (Jossey-Bass, 2006), which profiles a number of programs. “The core issue seems to be giving them some way to develop a sense of community on campus. The general research on student behavior indicates that students do better if they feel that they’re connected to the campus somehow, through academics, through extracurricular activities, through social networking -- somehow. And studies have also shown that African American men seem to have a difficult time doing that, for a number of reasons. Generally speaking, one is that a large number of African American men are socialized to not ask for help.

"It becomes necessary for campuses to provide programs like this, to take the initiative. We have to be active and not passive with this particular population," Cuyjet says.

Philander Smith’s Black Male Initiative is modest in scale, but it has the president’s bully pulpit behind it. Organizers hold a series of events throughout the year. Last year’s included a “Swagger Like Us” fashion contest, judged by local celebrities, a session on how to tie a tie, a beginning golf lesson and outing (“Are You the Next Tiger?”), a number of lectures, and a bowling night. The goal, again, is to get as many black men involved as possible. “When they see our Black Male Initiative logo, we want them to say, ‘Oh yeah, that’s for me,’ ” says Michael Hutchinson, executive assistant to the president and chairman of the initiative. Hutchinson adds that they send a birthday card with the Black Male Initiative’s logo to every black male student at Philander Smith, as well.

“We first of all want to create a sense of community so that they can have a family-like atmosphere and feel that they belong,” says Hutchinson.

"When institutions have these kinds of programs for any group, the so-called usual suspects attend, the guys who are already involved, who are in leadership positions, who are doing well academically" says President Kimbrough. "What we're trying to do now is have events and then personally ask guys who never come to anything to come.

"We're a small campus so we pretty much know everyone or know something about them. We clearly know the people who no one knows anything about. We know who they are."

Retention rates have climbed at Philander Smith in recent years, although a number of variables are in play aside from the Black Male Initiative -- most notably, the university tightened admissions standards (the average high school GPA is up about 20 percent from when Kimbrough arrived in late 2004, he says), and has revamped its orientation. Whatever the reasons, or combination of reasons, first- to second- year retention rates have increased, from 50 percent in 2004-5 to a high of 75 percent in 2006-7 (in 2007-8, however, they dropped to 62 percent).

Philander Smith's six-year graduation rates have also increased, and the gender gap has narrowed. The overall rate is now 28 percent, and it's 30 percent for women, and 23 percent for men. (97 percent of the students enrolled at Philander Smith are black.)

The budget for Philander Smith's Black Male Initiative is just \$20,000 per year.

“What Philander Smith has confirmed for us, or at least for me, is it’s not about the money. It’s more about the strategic investment of institutional energies. And about being intentional in working with a particular population, to close the gaps between that group and students from other groups,” says Shaun R. Harper, an assistant professor of higher education management at the University of Pennsylvania and an expert on black male college access and achievement. Harper, who spoke at Philander Smith for a Black Male Initiative event last year, recently received a grant from the Lumina Foundation for Education to work with six different colleges to, he says, “essentially do what Philander Smith is doing, to create a culture of success for black students.”

"They actually have a strategy," Harper says of Philander Smith, "that isn't a one-time program, or a sort of isolated activity that resides in one part of the institution. Their initiative is institution-wide, it involves not only student affairs administrators but also faculty and staff, alumni of the institution and most impressively the president of the institution. It really is an all-hands-on-deck kind of initiative that is very strategic."

Amid Controversy, Continuing On

Black Male Initiative programs can be controversial, however, and a complaint levied against the City University of New York's in 2006 remains under investigation by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. Michael Meyers, executive director and president of the New York Civil Rights Coalition, filed the complaint, which alleges that the program discriminates based on race and gender in violation of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Title IX of the 1972 Educational Amendments. While his complaint was filed against CUNY's Black Male Initiative specifically, Meyers opposes such programs in general, and has watched with dismay as more have developed nationwide. “All the characteristics of these programs are the same. They're steeped in paternalism, steeped in stereotypes about black men, that because they're black and because they're male they are quote-unquote an endangered species.”

“I think it’s racist and it’s sexist. I mean, it’s clearly racist and it’s clearly sexist, but our colleges and our universities don’t care about that,” he says.

“The officials of these colleges know better, too. But unless they’re caught, unless they’re snagged, unless they get a kind of slapping on the wrist, instead of just a slap on the back... unless they’re given slaps on the wrist or slaps across the face and told, ‘You’re violating the law, both the spirit and the letter and the law,’ they’re going to keep doing this, with pride.”

Elliott Dawes is university director of CUNY’s Black Male Initiative, which is currently sponsoring or funding 25 projects, across the various campuses, intended to increase the enrollment and retention of students from underrepresented groups, especially African American, Caribbean and Latino males. The programs, while focused on these groups, are available to students of any race and gender, Dawes stresses. For instance, 25 men and 10 women participated in the first two cohorts of a program to develop future teachers.

Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE)

The initiative has been funded by a succession of four grants from the New York City Council, the latest, for the upcoming academic year, just approved at \$2.5 million.

“Our primary concern is making sure that we support projects that provide access for students from various populations, particularly the most severely underrepresented populations in higher education,” Dawes says. “Who would be against that?”

Commentary

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Journalist Elizabeth Redden brings to the surface several salient issues in her article entitled, *Reaching Black Men*. First, she illuminates that fact that access is not enough when it comes to educating African American men. Second, she points to the importance of having campus-wide initiatives to support the success of Black men. And lastly, she illuminates criticisms of race and gender-based initiatives to increase engagement.

In 2007, African Americans comprised 13.9% of the fall enrollment at 2- and 4-year postsecondary degree granting institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). With regard to gender, African American men and women represented 10.7% and 14.8% of all undergraduates enrolled in degree granting institutions, respectively. Although recent reports show that Black male enrollment is increasing, graduation rates for this group are not. According to Shaun R. Harper (2009), an expert on African American male college students, “fewer than one-third (32.4%) of Black men who start college graduate within six years, which is the worst college completion rate among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups” (p. 141). There is indeed a crisis around the education of Black men.

Of importance, Harper (2006; 2008; 2009), puts the onus of engaging Black men and solving this crisis on college and university staff, faculty, and administrators – not on Black male students. He also says, rather vehemently, “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...would not be as enormous” (Harper, 2009, p. 141). Redden’s news article gets to the heart of Harper’s identification of the problem and the solutions. She points to the importance of intentional institutional efforts to enhance the experiences and engagement of Black men.

Research on student engagement within the college and university setting tells us that students who are more engaged are more successful. In the words of higher education scholar George Kuh (2003), “The engagement premise is deceptively simple, even self-evident” (p. 25). He elaborates “students who are involved in educationally productive activities in college are developing habits of the mind and heart that enlarge their capacity for continuous learning and professional development” (p. 25). For decades researchers have been conducting research on student engagement – we know what to do to engage students. Once again, the onus is on institutions of higher education, especially when it comes to African American men.

In her article, Redden interviews Walter Kimbrough, the president of Philander Smith College, a historically Black college in Little Rock Arkansas. Kimbrough, although working within a predominantly Black environment, recognizes that young Black men have been prompted to disengage throughout their lives through the messages they receive from teachers, guidance counselors, and even parents from time to time. Of note, as a higher education researcher himself, Kimbrough is aware of the data that show that even within the Black college environment African American men are not doing well (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004;

Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2010). His research led him to proclaim, along with Harper, that “the challenges facing men at HBCUs may be more disturbing in some ways, given the belief that these institutions ostensibly provide a safe haven of sorts for African American student growth and development” (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006, p. 189). According to Lundy-Wagner and Gasman (in press), “less than 50% of the 16,251 African American males who began college at Black colleges in 1997, for example, had obtained a bachelor’s degrees by 2002” (p. 22). Based on the higher education research, Kimbrough has implemented an intentional Black male initiative that has his full support and participation and is linked to the campus overall. It’s not relegated to a department on campus with little influence or power.

The last major point in Redden’s article is the existence of criticism of initiatives such as the one at Philander Smith College and those elsewhere in the country. Some activists find gender and race-based initiatives objectionable. These individuals typically believe that if all students are treated the same, fairness will be achieved and perhaps equity as well. However, this assumption neglects to consider the history of oppression and discrimination against African Americans in the United States. Likewise, these opponents fail to understand that students do not enter higher education on a level playing field. Even when controlling for socio-economic status, African American males experience racism that can have a damaging impact on their learning and engagement.

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Discussion Questions

For those that may wish to use this article for teaching and/or professional development related purposes, here are some guiding questions that may be helpful:

1. Which campus units should be involved in student engagement in order for it to be successful?
2. After reading two or three of the engagement articles related to African American men (listed above), what questions remain unanswered that, if answered, could positively shape the situation for Black men?
3. If Black men are, in fact, socialized not to ask for help, how can this problem be solved through increased engagement?
4. As an administrator or scholar, how could you work to further engage African American men?
5. If you consider race and gender-based initiatives objectionable, what would you suggest as an alternative?