

African American Students, Retention, and Team-Based Learning: A Review of the Literature and Recommendations for Retention at Predominately White Institutions

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Abstract

This article reviews the literature on retention of African American students at predominately White institutions (PWIs). A focus on current trends in Kentucky colleges and universities outlines regional retention characteristics. With the popularity of team-based learning pedagogy, the author addresses the need for research using team-based learning with African American students attending PWIs. Research suggests retention of African American students can be undermined with pedagogy that is void of cultural sensitivity. The challenges of using team-based learning with African American students attending PWIs are outlined including feelings of isolation of African American students in White team-based learning groups, omission of African American students from relevant group work, discomfort of students with students of

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differing race/ethnicity, and the effect on group educational experience as a result of student discomfort. Last, recommendations are made for the use of team-based learning with African American students attending PWIs.

Keywords

African American students, predominately White institutions, retention, team-based learning

Universities across the country are challenged with retention of students. Student attrition research shows that about half of all college students in this country will not complete a college degree in 6 years (Tinto, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). African American students pose a unique challenge of retention and graduation from colleges and universities. As a regional example, in 2007-2008 academic school year, Kentucky public institutions (including Kentucky State University—Kentucky's one historically Black colleges and universities [HBCU]) awarded 909 bachelors, 291 masters/specialist, and 22 doctoral degrees to African American students compared with 13,243 bachelors, 4,257 Masters/Specialist, and 259 doctoral degrees to White students (Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education [KCPE], 2012a). Within the context of Kentucky race demographics, African Americans comprise about 12% of the general population, but are awarded only 6% of the bachelors and masters/specialist degrees and 8% of doctoral degrees conferred by Kentucky Universities (KCPE, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In the fall 2007 semester, Kentucky Public Institutions enrolled over 16,000 African Americans. Although enrollment versus graduation reflect students receiving associate degrees, post-graduate and other certifications, and comprising only 13% of the U.S. population, African Americans are underrepresented in 4-year college graduation. While Kentucky public institutions retain anywhere from 50% to 81% of their African American first-time freshmen, the retention rates in subsequent years decrease (KCPE, 2012). Nationwide, 42% of African American college students who begin college earn their degree in contrast to 62% of White students ("Black Student College Rates Remain Low", 2013).

Recruitment and retention of African American college students at Kentucky predominately White institutions (PWIs) must be discussed within the historical and socio-cultural context of Kentucky. Prior to 1949, all African American Kentucky college students were educated at Kentucky State University, Kentucky's only HBCU established in 1886 as a teaching college for African Americans. University of Kentucky admitted African

Americans to its graduate programs in 1949, after a lawsuit by Lyman T. Johnson. In 1950, the Day Law was amended to allow individual universities to decide whether to admit African Americans if no comparable course was offered at Kentucky State University. In that same year, Berea College, Bellarmine University, University of Louisville, Ursuline College, and Nazareth College admitted African Americans. After the Supreme Court decision, *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*, in 1954, which abolished segregation in public schools, University of Kentucky opened undergraduate admissions to African Americans (The Living Story, 2012). Although Kentucky universities have had challenges overcoming this history, all now offer many initiatives that encourage, support, and retain African American students.

College education continues to significantly impact an individual's lifetime earning potential. Although Kentucky college graduates fall below the U.S. average in yearly median income (US\$26,862 and US\$31,132, respectively), 1 year post college graduation, they earn over US\$10,000 a year more than those in Kentucky who have not earned a college degree. An individual earning a college degree can expect to earn about 61% over a 40-year period than a high school graduate. College graduates with postbachelor degrees earn US\$1 million more lifetime earnings than high school graduates (KCPE, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Recruitment and retention of African Americans in Kentucky universities is imperative to African Americans, White Americans, and the state as a whole in terms of increased human and economic capital.

The move of African Americans into PWIs has both positive and challenging consequences. Positive consequences include integration of races in what is now a global community. Challenges include remnants of prejudice, discrimination, and anxiety associating with people different from self. These pressures and stresses sometimes manifest themselves in ways affecting the academic experience and educational outcomes of racially underrepresented students (Morales, 2008; Schwartz, 2012).

This discussion is forwarded as a backdrop to pedagogies that enhance the college experience of African American students in PWIs.

Retention of African American Students in Colleges and Universities

Sense of Belonging and Academic Integration

PWIs are continually challenged with retaining African American students because of barriers to matriculation including racial climate, campus climate,

culture, and lack of diverse faculty and staff. African American students spend significant time and energy attempting to establish their credibility at PWIs (Love, 2008). Often, students are unsuccessful, perceive themselves as unwanted, or receive clear messages that they are not wanted at PWIs. White students sometimes see themselves as superior, more competent, and more intelligent than their African American counterparts and will manifest this by excluding African American students from academic and social interaction (Chesler, Lewis, Crowfoot, 2005; Gusa, 2010). While graduation rates for African American students vary depending on institution, geographic location, and other factors, many HBCUs have significant graduation rates. From 1998 to 2012, 26 of 41 HBCUs had improvements in graduation rates. Graduation rates at many HBCUs are much higher than the national average graduation rate. Spellman College in Atlanta Georgia has an African American graduation rate of 77% compared with 13% at the nation's 56 high-ranking PWIs ("Black Student College Rates Remain Low," 2013). PWIs are challenged to remove barriers to successful matriculation of African American students while enhancing the education of White students through exposure to diversity.

A sense of belonging is necessary for successful matriculation (Tinto, 2012). This sense of belonging can be less challenging for White students attending PWIs where the commonality is automatic and can be more challenging for African Americans. There are many variables affecting retention of African American and other racially underrepresented students at PWIs. Sense of belonging is very much related to academic achievement and a strong predictor of retention. Hurtado et al. (2007) studied 1st-year underrepresented students matriculating at PWIs and compared them with White/Asian counterparts. They found that of racially underrepresented, non-science students, studying with White students had a positive effect on sense of belonging, but interacting with a predominately White group of friends negatively affected sense of belonging. In addition, a competitive peer environment was a positive predictor of sense of belonging in racially underrepresented non-science major students. The researchers establish the positive relationship between sense of belonging and academic adjustment within the context of retention. Rovai and Gallien (2005) studied sense of belonging in face-to-face and hybrid (combination classroom meeting and online instruction) learning environments. Their research groups included one all African American hybrid course and one online course consisting of a mix of African American and White students. Within the later group, the researchers studied sense of belonging by race. They concluded that the African American students in the hybrid course and the White students in the racially mixed online course had higher levels of sense of belonging than the African American

students in the mixed race online course. The researchers conclude formation of collaborative study groups, formation of cohorts based on geographic proximity to encourage formation of connections, and sufficient opportunities for group work should be incorporated to help African American students, which is beneficial to all students regardless of race. They found sense of belonging higher in an all African American cohort hybrid course and White group mixed with another group of African American students.

In research by Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007), retention variables including sense of belonging and academic integration were examined by gender and race. The researchers note that all factors operationalizing "sense of belonging" were social in nature (e.g., peer group interactions, interactions with faculty, peer support, and parental support). In terms of sense of belonging, African American females reported less peer support at the beginning of the academic year than African American males (the reversed result found for White students). Having more peer support was positively associated with increase of sense of belonging over time for African American students (the reverse was found for White students). The researchers used perceived faculty concerns for student development and teaching and academic and intellectual development sub scales to assess academic integration. African American females reported less academic integration at the beginning of the academic year than did African American males (the reversed result found for White students).

Mentoring and First Generation College Students

Mentoring plays an important role in reducing isolation and alienation in students. It provides systematic support. Many students of color are first-generation college students; their parents have no direct college experience to pass on about negotiating application to colleges, enrollment, choosing a major, strategies for studying in higher education, negotiating and understanding the university culture, and beginning networks in a global community (Cushman, 2007).

Although many universities have formal mentoring programs, students of color often seek out informal mentoring resources, generally with faculty of color. Students of color seek out people who look like them, who can relate to them, have similar life experiences (i.e., the Black experience in America), and those who are knowledgeable about and can give guidance to the culture and politics of the university (Bertrand Jones, Wilder, Osborne-Lampkin, 2013; Calafell, 2007; Schwartz, 2012).

Students of color often utilize faculty of color resources for venting about challenges, fears and concerns, experiences with racism and oppression, and

strategies for academic success. It is often these informal mentoring processes that build faculty/student relationships and increases retention.

Mentoring Students of Color by Faculty of Color

Students of color at PWIs experience challenges not experienced by their White peers. Many African Americans who grow up in predominately African American neighborhoods and attend predominately African American churches and other predominately African American social circles feel alienated and isolated upon matriculation at PWIs. When entering a PWI, many African American students can experience psychological distress leaving an environment of color for a White environment of the university. Because of the shared life experience, the responsibility of mentoring African American students at PWIs is primarily that of faculty of color (Ladson-Billings, 2008) and is significant in African American student retention (Haizlip, 2012; Patton, 2009).

While both male and female students of color can experience racism at PWIs, female students of color can be victims of both racism and sexism. African American females are continually demeaned by stereotypes of being angry, overly sexual, unattractive, and academically inferior. While these stereotypes permeate the larger society, college campuses do not insulate female college students of color. The 2007 incident in which the radio host, Don Imus, referred to a college basketball team of predominately African American women as “nappy headed” was blatant, but not an isolated event. These overt acts of racism and more covert micro aggressions create barriers to recruitment and successful matriculation of female students of color. This can present additional challenges to mentoring.

African American males attending PWIs can often be the victims of well-established stereotypes characterizing them as criminals, sex-driven, or athletes with no academic motivation. Mentoring by faculty and administration fosters relationships that African American men need for successful matriculation. Peer mentoring and brotherhood through fraternities have also been identified as strong indicators of successful recruitment and retention of African American males (Cuyjet, 2006; Dancy, 2010; Johnson, 2009) as well as spirituality (Dancy, 2010). Historically, the same themes appear in successful matriculation at PWIs. A study of mentoring by the University of Louisville in 1994 concluded success to be contingent on genuine commitment to mentoring by executive leadership, allocation of sufficient human and financial resources, compassionate individuals committed to mentoring, training programs for mentors, and assessment and evaluation of mentoring programs (LaVant, Anderson, & Tiggs, 1997).

Isolation, alienation, discrimination, and stereotyping have been discussed as a backdrop to the discussion of teaching pedagogy, specifically, how team-based learning affects students of color within the context of PWIs.

Team-Based Learning and Students of Color

Team-based learning is characterized by group work and peer evaluations, (Michaelsen & Sweet, 2008). To date, a search of team-based literature and success with students of color in PWIs yielded no empirical research. Preliminary anecdotal results reveal positive educational outcomes but that revision of this pedagogy to insure cultural sensitivity may benefit African American students attending PWIs. Many students of color find themselves in a racially underrepresented group learning environment, isolated by White students who are not yet comfortable or receptive to ethnic diversity, alienated from the group process in that their ideas/suggestions/ input is minimized or ignored, and are evaluated lower by peers.

Team-based learning is a solid pedagogy. Some adjustments based on cultural sensitivity can minimize experiences of isolation, alienation, difference, and acculturation stress already experienced by students of color at PWIs (Brittian, Sy, & Stokes, 2009; Dahlvig, 2010; Gregory, 2001; Reddick, 2006). These adjustments are needed to reduce negative experiences that undermine retention.

Racially underrepresented students are more likely to be first-generation college students (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Peabody, Hutchens, Lewis, & Deffendall, 2011). Students may feel extreme pressure to succeed, to be the first college graduate in the family. Anecdotal results reveal students of color are sometimes uncomfortable in team/group learning environments because of the shared responsibility of performance and responsibility for grades. Students of color have something to prove; the shared performance of the group process may result in students feeling a loss of control of their destiny, less ability to show individual ability, and less opportunity to be in control of their grade.

Some research suggests that students of color increase their academic performance and graduation through study groups (Habrowski & Maton, 2009). Study groups differ from team-based learning groups in that study groups are formed for out-of-classroom study; team-based learning groups are in-class groups designed to complete graded assignments/projects to receive a grade based on group performance. Study groups supplement student learning through study groups while preserving the individual performance and evaluation. Habrowski and Maton (2009) discuss the 1980 study conducted by University of Maryland, Baltimore County, which addressed the underachievement of African American

students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Focus groups from this study revealed the need for change in institutional culture including the need for study groups. Faculty can facilitate study groups by providing student guidance on formation and group study strategies. University administration can facilitate group study by providing comfortable, adequate space conducive to group study and discussion.

Learning Communities Versus Team-Based Learning

Some distinctions between learning communities and team-based learning are difficult to determine. Some learning communities include team-based learning as its pedagogy. Other learning community models include a faculty learning community that creates common themes across classes/disciplines but may not include the group project component. These learning communities provide the sense of belonging, cohort education, an opportunity for study groups, and cross-racial socialization while preserving the individual's academic performance.

Historically, learning communities are vital in student retention (Tinto, 1999). Learning communities have been successful in enhancing student learning in African Americans, but often, these successes come in learning communities implemented in HBCUs where a sense of community is more easily established because students of color are in the majority, consequently not battling the discrimination, alienation, isolation, and exclusion related to racially underrepresented status. In HBCU learning communities that implement a team-based learning pedagogy, research demonstrates a significantly enriched learning experience for African American students. In a study conducted by Freeman, Alston, and Winborne (2008), learning communities that involved the group assignment (team-based learning) component was implemented for STEM students at two HBCUs: Howard University and Talladega College. This pedagogy can increase success of African American students in STEM disciplines, promotes this success through interpersonal interaction and learning through collaborative effort, and nurtures competence and efficacy. The Learning Communities for STEM Academic Achievement (LCSAA) project was an initiative designed to increase the presence of learning communities at HBCUs to remedy the poor representation of African Americans in STEM (Freeman et al., 2008). The four-partner HBCUs involved in the program were as follows: Howard University, Washington, D.C.; Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi; Talladega College, Talladega, Alabama; and Xavier University, New Orleans, Louisiana. Two of the HBCUs, Howard and Talladega, improved linked or clustered courses in

the fall 2006 and 2007 semesters and were the focus of the Freeman et al. (2008) study. The theme for the linked courses was Health Disparities and African Americans. (The potential success of student motivation and success of learning communities and team-based learning is contingent upon topics of student interest.) Freeman et al. examined whether student attitudes, motivation, and learning were enhanced through utilization of learning community pedagogy. Some results of the study include the following:

- Ninety-five percent of students at Talladega recommended continuation of link courses;
- Howard University students reported they were more likely to attend graduate school and pursue Math and Science as a result of their experience with linked courses;
- Howard University students had statistically significant higher success in pre-calculus than students in non-linked courses; and
- Both universities reported higher motivation levels in STEM courses

Harrison, Moore, and Evans (2006) conducted a study on linked courses and culturally relevant themes. The learning community consisted of linked courses and African American popular culture theme of race, hip-hop, and sport. The learning community linked two course disciplines, history and kinesiology. The linkage was created by teaching as the history course, "African American Popular Culture: Race, Hip-Hop, and Sport" and the kinesiology course "Special Topics in Kinesiology: The African American in Sport." The two courses were offered on the same days, back-to-back, in the same physical location, using the team-teaching approach. Students were required to register for both courses. Course assignments included students interviewing African American athletes, examination of media depictions of athletes and rap stars, and student presentations on a rap group, athlete's endorsement program, or a record label. The researchers identify the following outcomes from the learning community:

- gained extensive knowledge and a greater depth of learning by critically examining the realm of African American popular culture and sport;
- developed an understanding of the evolution of African American popular culture from the civil rights movement to the present;
- explored the intersection and relationship between rap music, hip-hop, and sport in the African American community;
- critically examined the historical and cultural forces that have shaped African American popular culture and sport; and finally and very important,

- bridged cultural gaps of understanding as a result of the learning community (p. 8).

PWIs—Establishment of Learning Communities and Team-Based Learning Strategies

One key to successful establishment of learning communities and team-based learning with African American students is the establishment of themes relevant to the African American experience. This creates validation and affirmation for African American students and their life experiences within the context of education at PWIs. African American experience curriculum themes in learning communities can also enhance the learning of White students at PWIs. Establishing themes about the African American experience can enhance learning in White students at PWIs by presenting the opportunity to have quality interaction with and learning about African American culture, giving White students a different perspective (Harrison et al., 2006). White students then gain a more diverse education experience while African American students can more easily be incorporated into PWI learning communities and team-based learning environments.

A second key to successful team-based learning is the creation of sense of community. This is often the challenge in PWIs that struggle to implement learning communities and team-based learning with the backdrop of historical and socio-cultural barriers to cross-race community building. It may be a better strategy to address learning communities and team-based learning as a two-step process. The first step, the implementation of learning communities (i.e., student cohort groups who take the same courses together; faculty learning communities that implement themes that run across courses and disciplines; out-of-class study groups). The second step occurs after the learning communities are established, possibly the 2nd year of program study. Step 2 involves the implementation of team-based learning (i.e., actual student group projects that require students to complete group assignments for group grades). It is important that the learning communities be established first to lay the foundation for team-based learning. The learning community builds relationships among students, trust among students, and allows for trouble shooting among learning community members prior to the implementation of team-based learning (i.e., group assignments). It builds relationships and sense of community without students having to take a risk with each other on grades based on group assignments: a very high risk and commitment for students in cross-race learning environments. Group assignments require a level of collaboration, trust, competence, and confidence that develops after learning communities are in place, not simultaneously.

In Step 1, the out-of-class study group process is important. It begins students learning the collaboration process without having students interdependent for grades. Students learn to collaborate, begin to bond as a group, and build trust. Within this process, students will begin to form quasi group projects (i.e., moving from studying together to getting together to actually complete individual assignments together). In the 2nd year of the academic program, students are now more equipped and motivated to complete formal group projects because they have evolved authentic groups. Establishment of learning community groups prior to implementation of group project work allows faculty to assess groups for strengths, weaknesses, and problematic group dynamics. This then allows faculty and student groups to make adjustments/revisions, including reassignment of individuals to other groups prior to implementation of group project work.

Conclusion

PWIs are met with challenges to retain African American students. Socio-cultural and historical contexts help explain the existence of this challenge. One component of student success, teaching pedagogy, can help address this goal of retention using team-based learning approach that gives context to the African American student experience at PWIs. Team-based learning and learning community pedagogies can be infused to address the culturally sensitive need of teaching pedagogy. When combined, they can create a sense of belonging needed for African Americans at PWIs and create a diversity-enriched learning experience for all students.

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