Addressing the Unique Challenges Minority Students Face at Pre-dominantly White Universities: Best Practices for Faculty and University Administrators

Dr. Rita Walters

MABSWE Conference

September, 20, 2019

Ferris State University

REALITY

- "Black students attending traditionally white universities contend with a highly charged racial climate, poor and tenuous relationships with white faculty, and racial affronts by both faculty and fellow students." (Reaves, 2013)

- "Adapting to a predominantly white university is threatening for a majority of black students. Four years of hostility, isolation, insensitivity, and sorrow are almost certain" (Henderson, 1988).

- http://hunewsservice.com/video/black-at-a-primarily-white-institution/

Background

- Starting in Spring, 2014, were approached by African American students who expressed concerns regarding negative classroom interactions
  - course content reflected Blacks in a negative light – poor, uneducated, criminals
  - when asking for additional help felt dismissed or seen as lazy (unteachable)
  - no supportive or safe way to address microaggressions or perpetuated stereotypes
  - negative experiences resulted in poor academic performance, poor class attendance, course withdrawals, university withdrawals, negative opinion of university

Phase I: Research Study

- Conducted focus groups with self-identified Black students to gain an understanding of the factors that contribute to academic success and failure

- A total of 53 students participated in (39 females and 14 males).

- Questions focused on three target areas:

  - Curriculum content

  - Relationship with faculty

  - Campus culture

  - College preparedness and support

Pilot Focus Group Findings

- **Curriculum** - course materials and lectures are culturally insensitive

  - *"Why do they assume all Black people live in Detroit. Every example they give about the inner city is about Black people, like white people don't live in Detroit or Chicago."*

- **Relationship with Faculty –** Do not trust white faculty, believe they are setting them up for failure

  - *"I refuse to go to them for help. They already expect for you to struggle, not be smart. They think we're all first generation or here to play football or basketball."*

- **Campus Culture –** Racism and discrimination are a regular occurrence on campus. Students feel alienated.

  - *"They treat us like visitors, like we don't have as much of a right to be here as they do."*

- **College Preparedness and support –** self-reliance and support from upper-class peers and Black faculty

  - *"We want to succeed but can't afford to depend on them to help us because they want to see us fail or see us as needing them."*

Being Black in a Predominantly White University

- Being Black means to have all white teachers and to be surrounded in class by all white or nearly all white students.

- Being Black means to go to a white counselor whom I don't trust, and who doesn't know how to handle my presence or problem.

- Being Black is trying to convince a campus policeman that he should not arrest me out of prejudice.

- Being Black is watching whites look upon my natural hair, mustache/beard, my African garments and other symbols of black pride as being deviant.

- Being Black is a resource person for curious white folks who after being answered, are not willing to accept my expertise.

* Harper, F. D. (1969) Black Student Revolt on the White Campus. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 10(5), 291-295

Phase II: Faculty-Student Mentoring Project

- Established a racial-matching faculty-student mentoring program with 20 Black students who have earned D, F, or W during 2014-2015 academic year.
- Participants met with mentor weekly either via face-to-face, phone calls or live internet chat.
- Monthly group sessions were held with the intent to create a safe space for sharing of experiences and to build a peer community of support.

Demographic Profile

- Majority of participants were Juniors (11), Seniors totaled 7, and 2 were Sophomores

- Participants met the definition of traditional students by age with the exception of one student who was 49

- Participants were Michigan residents mainly from Mid-Michigan and Metro Detroit with exception of one student who was an Ohio resident

- Only 4 participants met the definition of first generation college student

- An overwhelming majority of students (15) were employed – 2 full-time

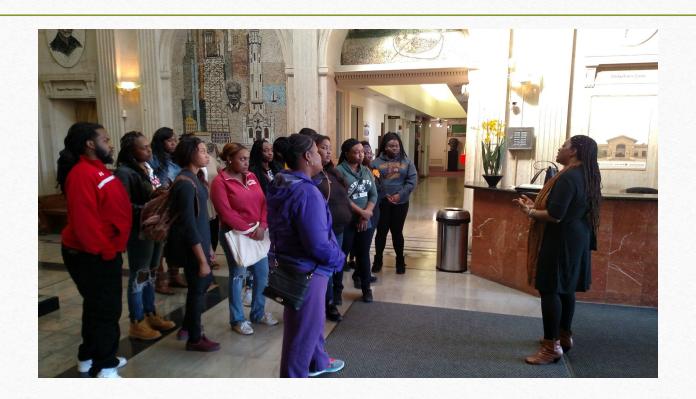- Only 6 participants qualified for Tuition Incentive Program funding

Findings

- Students are overwhelmed with demanding schedules (class, work, family responsibilities)

- Personal/intimate relationships interfere with class attendance and performance

- Students deal with overt and covert racism on an almost daily basis

- Students have repeated contact with police – suspected of "looking like or fitting the description" of someone of interest

- Students do not seek help from faculty. Very few have visited faculty during their office hours. Campus resources are underutilizied (i.e. Writing Center, Disabilities and Counseling Center)

- Students feel limited in what they can achieve academically. Faculty are not inviting them to participate in out of classroom experiences such as conferences, research studies, etc

- Students question if they will remain and earn degree – easier to quit, go home and find a decent paying job

Students' Recommendations

- Continue and expand mentoring program

- Hire more Black and Latino faculty

- Educate Black students on the legal rights (encounter with Police)

- Train white faculty on how to interact appropriately with Black students

- Create a more inclusive campus and facilitate more events for Black students (i.e. trip to Black museums)

DuSable Museum of African American History

Phase III: "Flippin' the Script"

- Workshop series aimed at creating a learning community for faculty to:

  - Gain a better understanding of the challenges Black students face within their classrooms and on campus;

  - Recognize their own biases and limitations that may contribute to the concerns expressed by Black students;

  - Identify processes for corrective action to counter microaggressions, biases and cultural insensitivity.

Workshop Structure

- Present students' narratives

- *Faculty reflect on impact (dismiss intent as irrelevant for the purpose of the exercise)

- Faculty explore alternative responses and potential outcomes

- Affirm with best practices techniques to create an inclusive learning environment/classroom

Student A: Exercise

- Tanesha is the only African American student enrolled in your 8:00 a.m. Macro Practice course, the only section offered during the semester. Tanesha has a pattern of arriving to class about 10 minutes late and has one absence so far this semester. The class meets for three hours once a week. It is week six of the semester. Students are given an assignment to form into small work groups (no more than four students). Each group will be assigned a neighborhood to conduct a community needs assignment. Students quickly move about to partner up and create their groups. Tanesha is the only student remaining without a group. There are 17 students in the class creating an odd number for the groups that, per your instructions, can not include more than four students.

Student A: Exercise

- Is this a Tanesha problem or an instructor's problem?

- How is this affecting Tanesha?

- What steps could have been taken to prevent this problem?

- How would you address this problem?

Faculty Response to Students' Voices

- Grateful for feedback but believe it was overgeneralized – should be addressed on an individual level

- Difficult to recognize biases, use of microaggressions if not being called on it at the time it happens

- Desire to learn more techniques and best practices for creating an inclusive classroom

- Want all students to succeed, failure is a reflection of them as instructors

Faculty Deliverables

- Developed "Break the Ice" class activities to create a welcoming and inclusive space for students.

- Developed and administered survey to elicit students' opinions and attitudes about Big Rapids community.

- Created a lesson plan on Microagressions in the Classroom

- Developed Best Practices for Promoting Inclusion and Fairness During Group Work in a Diverse Classroom

Best Practices

- Recognize students as experts of their lived experiences – listen to them
- Identify personal biases, preconceived notions, prejudicial views and address them
  - Implicit Bias Test
  - Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do (Steele)
- Have a Black colleague audit your class, review your teaching materials – provide honest feedback relative to cultural sensitivity and inclusion

THANK YOU

- Rita Walters, PhD, LMSW
- Associate Professor
- Department of Social Work
- Ferris State University
- 517-256-0091
- RitaWalters@ferris.edu