The Warner School

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The African American College Student Experience at Predominantly White Institutions

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The Problem

Retention

Bachelor's degree or higher completion rate, age 25-29, 1947-2002 (Mortenson, 2003).

- Asian- 69.7%
- White- 54.6 %
- Black- 33.8%
- Hispanic- 28.8 %

Achievement

- Bowen and Bok (1998)- Black students have significantly lower GPAs than Whites

- Correlate with future earnings, advanced degrees, satisfaction with college, and civic leadership

Evolving Perspective

- Historically attributed to poor preparation and Affirmative Action (i.e., Thernstrom & Thernstrom).

- More recent research questions that assumption (Cabrera et al., 1999; McCauley, 1988; Sue, 1983; Eimers & Pike, 1996).

- Bowen and Bok (1998)- Black class ranks lower after controlling for SAT scores, hs GPA, SES, school selectivity, & major. Blacks performed lower than predicted by SAT and hs gpa in every school except one.

Methods

- Qualitative to understand from students' perspectives

- Sample- 99 African American students from a midsize (under 11,000), private, PWI: 15 leavers, 65 low achievers, 19 high achievers

- focus groups and individual interviews (phone and in-person).

Non-academic factors influencing persistence

- Involvement in Ethnic/Cultural activities
- Family & Friends from Home
- Faculty and Academic Advisors
- Cultural/motivational Orientation

Ethnic/Cultural Student Organizations

- Facilitate social integration (Tinto, 1993)
- Professional connections, opportunities to give back, comfort, connection to Black culture (Guiffrida, 2003).
- Can also isolate students from larger campus community and detract from academics (Flemming, 1984).
- Studied conditions under which involvement becomes an asset and liability

Organizations: Assets & Liabilities

Liability for Students

- With hierarchical notions of leadership

- Definitions of success include service, systemic change, and leadership experiences over grades

Asset for Students

- Systemic notions of leadership

- Valued academic success over service and systemic change

- Most active in organizations with the same values

Families & Friends from Home

- "Break away" to become socially integrated (Tinto, 1993).

- Research has been conflicting with minority students.

- Studied conditions under which families and friends from home became assets and liabilities, from students' perspectives.

Families

Leavers & Low Achievers

Families as liabilities

- Head of household responsibilities
- Lack of emotional or financial support

High Achievers

Families as assets

- Strong emotional, academic, and financial support
- Irrespective of levels of academic attainment or income

"While families of low achievers and leavers relied on students to provide them with emotional and financial support, supportive families strived to let nothing interfere with students' academic success. Instead of expressing fear or apprehension about losing them, supportive families allowed and encouraged students to change and grow socially and intellectually. Rather than being critical of their educational environment, supportive families attempted to understand students' educational surroundings in order to provide advice and direction (p.58).

Friends from Home

- Liability- express fear or disapproval of students' adaptations to college or when unable to relate to college lives.

- Asset- relate to students' experiences (went to college or were interested) and/or expressed strong emotional support.

Faculty/Student Relationships

- Impact student satisfaction with college (Astin, 1984), academic achievement (Astin, 1993; Terenzini & Wright, 1987), and retention (Tinto, 1993).

- Research indicates Blacks at PWIs may not glean these benefits

- More contact, less satisfaction with institution (Eimers & Pike, 1996) and with faculty (Mayo, Murguia, & Padilla, 1995).

- Indicates they may be seeking something unique

Problems with White Faculty

- Students do not view White faculty as realistic role models (Burrell, 1980; Sedlacek, 1987; Tinto, 1993; Willie & McCord, 1972).

- Perceive faculty as culturally ignorant or insensitive; i.e., stereotypical comments, asking students to "give Black perspective" in class, fail to acknowledge culturally diverse views (Feagin, et al., 1996; Flemming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Sedlacek & Brooks, 1973).

Looking for More

- Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) "go beyond the call of duty" (p. 321) & Fries-Britt (1995) White faculties who were "sincere and interested" (p. 12).

- Did not specify but indicates there is more to successful relationships than providing Black role models and avoiding egregious stereotyping.

- Also indicates potential for strong Black student/White faculty relationships.

Sought to understand characteristics of "student-centered faculty"

- Tended to be African American Faculty
- extensive academic, career, and personal advising;
- advocacy & supporting (talking to parents, getting jobs, etc.)
- pushing them to excel (raising the bar).

Raising the Bar

- Some White faculty demonstrated lowered expectations by giving inappropriate praise:
  - "you speak well"
  - "you are smart"
  - "show the rest of the class how to get their hips into it"

- Student-centered faculty demonstrated positive beliefs and pushed them to succeed

- Perform at higher levels to be viewed equally- asset & liability

Faculty Discussion

- Not surprising that many students did not feel they received adequate advising (Astin, 1993).

- White students may have expressed similar concerns; however, Black students perceived this expanded, even intrusive relationship as crucial in defining faculty who were student centered.

- Many models of multicultural teaching but few have advocated for such a holistic approach.

Othermothering (Foster, 1993)

- "Women who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities" (Collins, 2000)

- Practice began with education of slave children but continued into segregated schools.

- Attend not only to academic development, but social, psychosocial, and moral development.

- Establish kin-like relationships with students' families,

- Believe in and push all African American students to succeed

- Studies by Foster (1993), Case (1997), Lomotey (1990).

Cultural/Motivational Orientation

- Student commitment is central to Tinto's theory but he fails to note orientations to such commitments.

- Self-determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1991).

- Job Involvement Theory (Kanugo, 1982).

A Cultural Advancement of Tinto's Theory
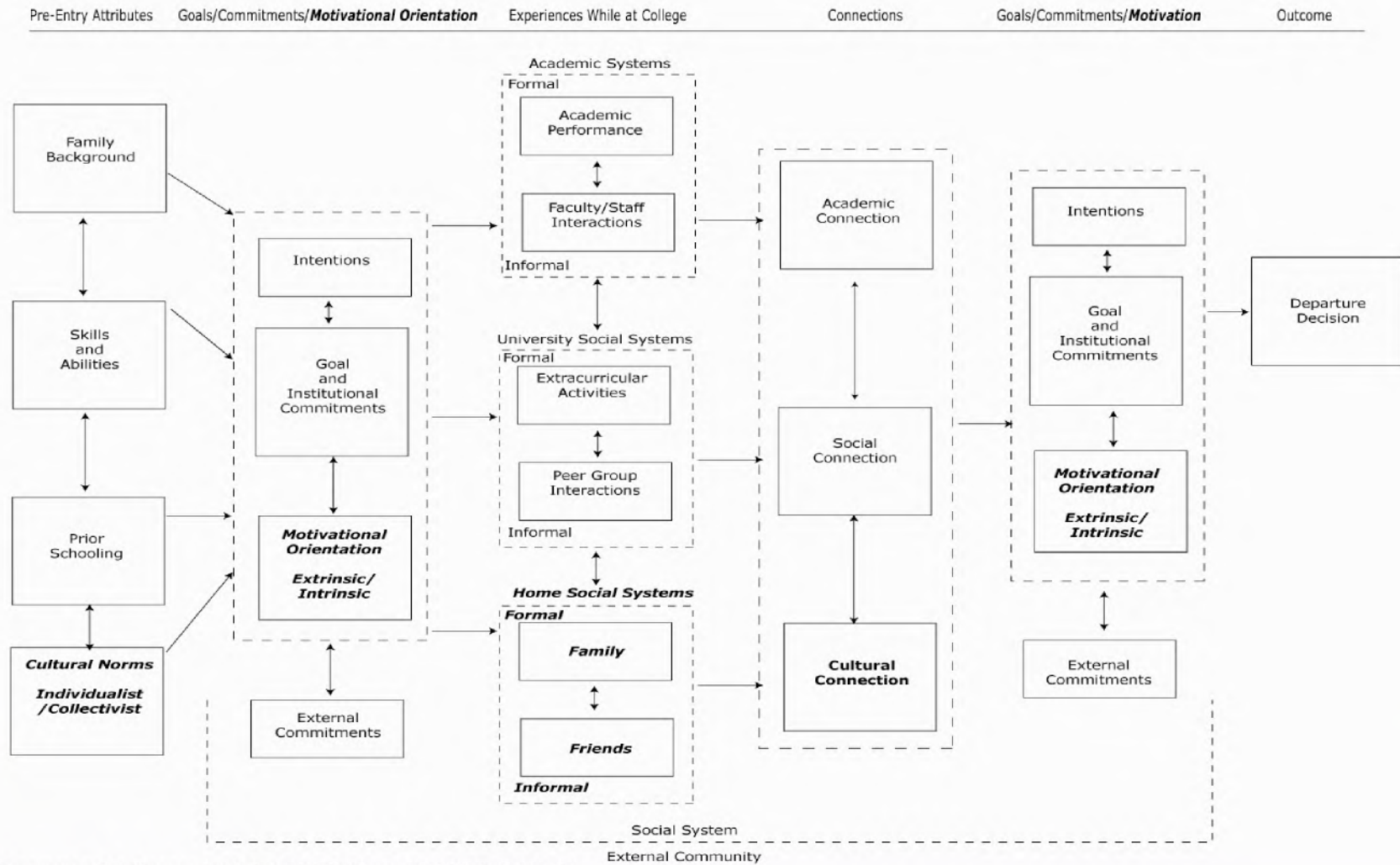
Implications

- Encourage student to become active in ethnic/cultural organizations while also cautioning against over-involvement- teach systemic leadership.
- Educate families at about students' transitions and the significance of their emotional, academic, and financial support.
- Seek to collaborate with important members of the home community.
- Be mindful of cultural insensitivity that students experience and attempt to educate campus community
- Attempt to fulfill students ideas of "student-centeredness" through expanding relationships with faculty and staff. Expand student support services, such as TRIO programs, that fulfill student needs.