

HCC in the News: African American/Black Student Populations: Cutting-Edge Models for Best Practice

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Hillsborough Community College (HCC), a two-year public institution with five campuses in Hillsborough County, Tampa, is one of 28 community colleges in Florida. Currently, HCC ranks fifth in the nation in size as measured by full-time student enrollment (FTE) and seventh in the number of associate degrees awarded in all disciplines. It ranks 12th in the number of degrees awarded to minority students and 22nd in the number of associate degrees awarded to Black students. Uniquely, HCC's five campuses represent the demographic and cultural character of the community in which it's located. For example, Ybor City campus is predominantly an urban campus; Dale Mabry campus reflects the suburban campus and has been formally recognized as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). The remaining three campuses are a combination of rural and suburban campuses that comprise the least number of Black students.

Hillsborough Community College: Four Pillars of Academic Achievement

In response to the theories surrounding Black student achievement and low enrollment of Black male college students, we developed the "Four Pillars of Academic Achievement" based on best practices and theories from an extensive literature review on college retention and completion. The four pillars are as follows: (1) *Create a Culture of Academic Achievement*; (2) *Understand Ethnic/Cultural Differences*; (3) *Expose Students to New Environments and Opportunities*; and (4) *Provide Adequate Resources and Mentoring Experiences*. Hereafter is an overview of each of these fundamental pillars that we have deemed critical to the retention success of our Black student groups (especially males), and have been proven to work.

Black students are historically and systematically confronted with low expectations to achieve in college.

Pillar I: Create a Culture of Academic Achievement

Creating a culture of academic achievement for Black students must be intentional, structured, and possess cultural competency. Culture is defined as beliefs, customs, attitudes, and behaviors that are characterized by a group or organization. Thus, the type of academic or scholarly expectations, projects, and outcomes must be connected to the cultural needs of Black students. Institutions provide a wide array of special programs to help bring students together, especially students who share interests or backgrounds. These include, among other special programs, ethnic/racial affinity groups, special housing programs, and freshman interest groups. These special programs provide services and academic support that further individualize and personalize education. Typically, they provide students with guidance on course-taking and, in some institutions, special program staff serve each participant as the "advisor of record" (Muraskin & Lee, 2004). Following are key aspects of creating a culture of academic achievement:

- Affirm Student Potential.** The literature is replete in acknowledging that Black students are historically and systematically confronted with low expectations to achieve in college. They experience many facets of racial microaggression from professionals, such as the professors and academic advisors who interact with them during their academic journeys. As a result, they are not challenged to excel academically, with low expectations and stereotypical assumptions about their academic ability to succeed, and they internalize the stereotypical belief that they are weak academically.
- Intentional Academic Planning.** Intentional academic planning is critical in providing intrusive advising, orientation courses, and continual academic monitoring and follow-up. The majority of community colleges have small classes, which afford the students and professor the opportunity for recognition and class discussion. Special programs focused on Black students provide academic support and give them a greater sense of belonging on campus. These types of programs should enlist dedicated full-time faculty who are easily accessible to students and who play an active role in shaping students' academic progress.
- Acknowledge Barriers.** Unlike other ethnic/racial populations, Black students are challenged with a myriad of barriers before they enter college, and they are often faced with new challenges after enrollment. Barriers while in college include institutional racism, financial constraints, and limited academic preparation. They need help with learning to balance pre-college life and family, with normalizing help-seeking behaviors, and with help and encouragement from sufficient academic and personal support systems.
- Employ Intrusive Support Programs.** Another critical aspect to creating a culture of academic achievement is to acknowledge that the community college is a student "commuter culture" when compared to campus life at traditional colleges and universities. The lack of continued engagement with college life for Black students can create some challenges, which can be countered through intentional and structured college support.
- Individualized Academic Follow-up.** Black students rarely receive personal attention and privileges based on their academic pursuits. Tracking the academic progress of each student with individualized follow-up and advising is a critical best practices approach for student success. Examples of positive messages from faculty and staff are: "I expect an 'A' from you next time," "I believe you can continue on to a professional school after graduating from college," "When you complete your AA degree from this community college, you need to transfer to a four-year college," and "Do not give up; I believe you can be successful with some tutorial support." Designating a professional (advisor, coordinator, faculty, and administrator) staff member, who is willing to establish a relationship with the student, will create a comfortable educational setting, in which a student can share academic problems and questions and receive guidance.

Pillar II: Understand Ethnic/Cultural Differences

Most Black students have expressed in many ways that they are not understood. They are not understood culturally, which many times may impede the efforts of academic advisors and faculty mentors in getting to know the students. In the African-American culture, relationships matter. For example, Harper (2007) found that forced classroom participation and certain faculty teaching styles may have a negative impact on African American males. The following strategies have been proven efficacious to understanding ethnic and cultural differences among our students:

- Focus on the Intake Process.** Special programs should include opportunities for Black students to participate in individual intake or initial interviews. During the intake process, the advisor should assess the student's academic aptitude, semester course schedule, GPA, test scores, part-time or full-time work schedule, family/parent status, etc. The advisor should inquire about the student's personal status without being insensitive and judgmental, to determine if additional guidance and resources are needed. In addition, it is necessary to conduct an academic assessment of each student (transcript, grades, strengths/weaknesses, test scores, etc.) and establish realistic academic and career goals.
- Host Motivational Forums and Seminars.** As previously discussed, many Black students are accustomed to experiencing racial microaggressive responses from persons of authority, and have experienced these responses also from student peers throughout their matriculation in K-12 grades and college. As a result, microaggressive behavior creates an educational environment in which Black students feel targeted, distrust authority, and are impeded in their help-seeking behavior. Help-seeking behavior is crucial to the academic and personal success of many Black students enrolled in community colleges. Especially for Black males, help-seeking translates to internalized stereotypical beliefs that they are weak academically. This perceived belief inhibits them from seeking tutorial support, advising, counseling, financial support, and so forth. Thus, motivational forums and seminars to inform Black students on how to navigate college are critical components to their overall college success.
- Understand Unique Differences.** Black college students are very diverse within their ethnic/racial groups, and they also enroll at the community college with a broad level of diversity. For example, within the Black community, there are a number of subpopulations, which include Caribbean, African, and African-American backgrounds. It is important to let them know that their unique differences are recognized. Institutions should maximize the services available to students to help bring them together, especially students who share similar interests or backgrounds.
- Establish a College-Wide Diversity Council.** HCC has a college-wide Diversity Council comprising students, faculty, and staff representing all five campuses. The Council coordinates and supports traditional ethnic/cultural celebrations and provides a series of seminars offered throughout the academic year entitled "Courageous Conversations." This series promotes college-wide participation and addresses issues that affect race and diversity throughout the entire college community.

Pillar III: Expose Students to New Environments and Opportunities

A significant number of Black students are enrolled in college, especially in community colleges, from low-income and/or first-generation backgrounds. These economic realities prevent them from engaging and experiencing the type of exposure that would be beneficial for their success in college. The extent to which the individual becomes academically and socially linked into the academic and social structures of an institution determines the individual's departure decision. In other words, the leaving behavior of a student is largely dependent on how he/she integrates into the formal and informal academic and social systems of a college.

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Despite the current mix of public and private subsidies, students from low-income families do not enter college at the same rate as more affluent students. Academic, cultural, or financial factors limit low-income students' educational opportunities. In fact, the graduation trend is vastly affected by this factor. Pell Grant recipients are probably more likely than higher-income graduates to have financial problems that can cause them to leave school and are more likely to experience nonfinancial risk factors, such as single parenting status, delayed college enrollment after high school, inadequate academic preparation, extensive family obligations, and lack of experience with the college environment (Pearson, Inc. 2004).

Pillar IV: Provide Adequate Resources, Including Mentoring Experiences

Appropriate resources should be connected to the needs of the student. Understanding the "whole student" (e.g. personal, financial, and cultural needs) is critical to the overall success of students in college. College resources include tutoring, mentoring, scholarships, stipends, financial aid, and access to technology. When Black students are convinced that the college is invested in them, they will work harder to achieve their academic goals. In this regard, community colleges should structure the following into their academic and student support services:

- Implement Financial Advising and Mentoring Programs.** The most critical resources related to the successful college retention and completion of Black students is connected to financial status—money. It has been documented in the *Journal of College Retention* and the *Journal of Student Financial* that Black students drop out of college because they cannot afford to pay tuition and other expenses associated with college. Black students, especially Black males, rely on working during college: examples include paid summer internships; paid leadership roles at college, such as SGA and housing; and applying for numerous fellowships and scholarships in an effort to stay enrolled in college (Harper & Griffin, 2011). Facing these financial challenges prevents Black students from completing college within a four- to five-year period. In fact, data suggests that more than 50% of Black students are enrolled in college for at least 6 years or more (Harper & Griffin, 2011). Adequate resources, such as scholarships, technology support, tutorial services, personalized advising, college tours, and cultural activities have a significant effect on the overall academic and personal success of Black students.

2. **Faculty and Peer Mentoring Programs.** Faculty and peer mentoring are both very powerful tools for retaining Black students. For example, Harper (2006) found that peers play a significant role in collegiate success for African American males and that peer mentors help these students to become successfully acclimated to the college environment. In addition, Palmer and Gasman (2008) found that encouragement from faculty and administrators plays an important role in the academic success of Black males. Findings suggest that those Black men who reported having frequent and varied supportive relationships with faculty, staff, and peers were more likely than other Black males to be highly satisfied with their college experience (Strayhorn, 2008).
3. **Establish Cohort Learning Communities.** The cohort program model has had many unintended positive outcomes with peer mentoring at the community college level. This model represents varied age levels and the vast experiences of many student participants, especially when compared to traditional age cohort models at four-year colleges and universities. Many Black students do not have positive role models in their communities and homes to provide shared insight and wisdom, to guide them to make better decisions and choices that will affect their overall college success.

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