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A Phenomenon of Religious Relevance Developing at Predominantly White Institutions

by Donald Brown

In a recent conversation with a colleague at a neighboring institution, we reflected that in the nearly twenty-five years that we have worked at predominantly white universities, little has changed with respect to Black students dissatisfaction with campus life. Since the 1960's, a considerable amount of research has been done on the causes of attrition among Black students in higher education. A number of themes have emerged as causative factors of dissatisfaction and, in far too many cases, attrition among Black students. Three themes, however, seem to re-surface repeatedly. They are the feelings of alienation, isolation and loneliness.

Many Black students feel divorced from the mainstream of campus life in predominantly white campuses. Donald H. Smith's research attests to the alienation felt by Black students on predominantly white campuses. In his study of seven predominantly white institutions, he found that two of the premier causes of attrition among Black students were feelings of alienation and isolation. His research led him to conclude the following: "Blacks perceive their environment to be hostile. They must attempt to deal with loneliness and alienation at the same time that they are trying to adjust to a largely foreign milieu."¹

Mary Frances Berry captures the plight of Black students on predominantly white campuses by offering this insight:

Their classroom days are filled with isolation, exclusion from informal repartee among white students and being ignored by professors. They seek haven in Black fraternities, sororities, and Black student organizations, not because they want to isolate themselves, but because they feel unprotected and unwanted.²

In a comparative study of Black student satisfaction with social and cultural programming on predominantly Black vs. predominantly white campuses, Walter R. Allen found that nearly two thirds of Black students surveyed at predominantly Black institutions enjoyed the campuses' social and cultural programs while the opposite held true for those students surveyed at predominantly white institutions.³

Against the backdrop of alienation and isolation, it is refreshing to see that one of the things occurring at

predominantly white institutions across the country is that Black students are beginning to take matters into their own hands with respect to developing social and cultural programs that respond to their needs. Two examples of this have been the formation of gospel choirs and the increased attendance of Sunday morning worship services by college students. In the greater Boston area virtually every campus has a college choir. In fact, at one time or another during the academic year, each of these choirs conducts what is generally referred to as a Gospel Fest. One of the features of these Gospel Fests is that of inviting a Gospel Choir from a neighboring institution. Hence, students from Boston College's Voices of Imani get a chance to meet and to hear from students who sing with Harvard University's Kuumba singers, or Boston University's Inner Strength Gospel Choir, or Tufts University's Essence Gospel Choir.

From this writer's point of view, when the full story of Black student retention and success is told, it is again, the Black community's strongest institution, the Church that will be recognized as playing a critically important role. In my opinion, this has actually been the anchor that has steadied multitudes of Black students who have contemplated dropping out of school when feelings of alienation, isolation and loneliness have become unbearable.

Marvalene Styles Hughes highlighted the important role that religion plays in the lives of Black students attending predominantly Black and predominantly white colleges and universities.⁴ On asking Black students at both types of institutions an open-ended question aimed at determining what contributes to their success in college, an equal number of students cited their religious faith and practices as being critically important. Among sample statements from students indicating that religious beliefs contributed to their persistence, retention and success were the following:

- When everything comes tumbling down or closing in on me, I remember to have faith in God to pull me through.
- I pray a lot and encourage my family to pray for me.
- I attribute much of my resilience to God and agape Christian fellowship for encouragement.

These are not isolated statements, but reflective of the thoughts of many successful Black students.

Several Black churches in the Greater Boston Black community actively assist and support Black collegians in their journey toward earning college degrees. Among just a few churches that aid Black students by way of providing scholarships and other forms of financial assistance, hosting College Fellowship Ministries, or just providing a home away from home are the Twelfth Baptist Church, Union United Methodist Church, and New Covenant Christian Center, all three in Boston, as well as the St. Paul A.M.E., Union Baptist, and the

Massachusetts Avenue Baptist Churches in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

One congregation, the Massachusetts Avenue Baptist Church of Cambridge, provides a transportation service called the Gospel Caravan which affords college students attending area colleges and universities an opportunity to attend Sunday morning worship service. In addition, every fourth Sunday has been set aside as College Day. On College Day, the service is officiated by college students and a gospel choir from one of the area colleges or universities sings. Following morning service, the college students are treated to a home-cooked meal and words of encouragement from parishioners who, though themselves may not have had the benefit of a college education, recognize how important it is that young Black men and women acquire the skills needed in an increasingly competitive world and provide future leadership in the Black community.

I offer this recommendation. While student affairs professionals at predominantly white institutions speak about the importance of educating the whole person, their offices do very little by way of helping Black students to connect with houses of worship in the Black community. This in my judgment is a mistake as I am convinced that the support that comes as a result of leaving one's campus and attending a worship service in the community, goes a long way in helping Black students.

Student affairs professionals would be wise to encourage and to assist Black students who wish to start choirs, or other initiatives which speak to their cultural needs. Equally important, transportation should be provided to those students who wish to leave campus on Sunday morning to attend a church service. In my opinion, the support and encouragement received from elders, and other members of the church family, provides Black students with the stamina needed to persist in an environment that all too often is inhospitable, alienating, isolating and lonely.

Notes

¹Donald H. Smith, "Admissions and Retention Problems of Black Students at Seven Predominantly White Universities." A Report of the *National Advisory Committee on Black Higher Education and Black Colleges and Universities*, 1988.

²Mary Frances Berry, "Blacks in Predominantly White Institutions," *The State of Black America: The Nation Urban League Report*, (January, 1983).

³Walter R. Allen, National Study of Black College Students. A Report of the Department of Sociology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1982.

⁴Marvalene Styles Hughes, "Black Students' Participation in Higher Education," *Journal of College Student Personnel* 28 (1987), 532-545.

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