Othermothering as a Framework for Understanding African American Students’ Definitions of Student-Centered Faculty

Research indicates that faculty/student relationships affect student satisfaction with college (Astin, 1984, 1999), academic achievement (Astin, 1993; Terenzini & Wright, 1987), and retention (DeFour & Hirsch, 1990; Stoecker, Pascarella, & Wolfle, 1988; Tinto, 1993). However, evidence indicates that African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) may not glean the benefits associated with relationships with faculty. Nettles (1991) concluded that Black students attending PWIs had less contact with faculty outside the classroom and were less academically integrated into campus life than were White students. Additionally, Fleming (1984), in her seminal work examining the experiences of Black students at PWIs and at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and Arnold (1993), in a study investigating the college experiences of high school valedictorians, both found that African American students at PWIs experienced difficulty developing positive relationships with White faculty. Their results were supported by other research indicating that students of color were more apt to seek academic help from family, friends, or academic counselors who were minorities than from White faculty (Braddock, 1981; Burrell & Trombley, 1983; Guiffrida, 2003, 2004, 2005; Sanchez, Marder, Berry, & Ross, 1992; Suen, 1983).

Even research that has indicated high levels of out-of-class interaction among African American students and faculty at PWIs raises questions.

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Douglas Guiffrida is Assistant Professor in the Department of Counseling and Human Development, Margaret Warner Graduate School of Education and Human Development, University of Rochester.

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about the quality of these interactions. For example, Eimers and Pike (1996) found that although African American students at PWIs reported higher levels of contact with faculty than White students reported, they indicated less satisfaction with the institutions. Similarly, Mayo, Murguia, and Padilla (1995), in a comprehensive study of over 1200 students, found that Black students demonstrated the strongest positive correlation between frequency of out-of-class contact with professors and grade point average (GPA); however, they also noted that while student satisfaction with faculty contact had a significant impact on GPAs for Whites, Hispanics, and Native Americans, it did not for Black students. Thus, although high-achieving African American students had more out-of-class interactions with faculty, they did not find these interactions as rewarding as other students did. These results support the findings from Nettles, Thoeny, and Gosman (1986), who found that frequency of contact between African American students and faculty was less important than the quality of these interactions. The results also suggest that African American students may have unique expectations regarding their relationships with faculty at PWIs.

In the limited research that has investigated the quality of relationships between faculty and African American students, two primary factors have emerged as influencing these relationships. The first is that Black students may experience difficulty connecting with White faculty because they do not perceive them as realistic role models. Tinto (1993) concluded that while mentor programs are generally effective in increasing college retention for all students, the availability of “like-person role models” was especially important to the success of students of color (p. 186). Research suggests that it is important for Black students to be exposed to and to connect with Blacks who have been successful in higher education (Burrell, 1980; Sedlacek, 1987; Willie & McCord, 1972), as these connections have been linked to increasing their self-efficacy (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996; Hackett & Byars, 1996).

Second, research indicates that students often perceive faculty at PWIs as culturally insensitive (Fleming, 1984). Using qualitative methodology, Feagin, Vera, and Imani (1996) concluded that African American students attending a PWI perceived White faculty as unapproachable because of their stereotypical comments, insensitivity to African American culture, and generalizations of students’ opinions as representing those of all African Americans. Similarly, Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) also found that Black students were bothered when faculty asked them to represent their entire race by giving “the Black perspective” on issues and when they stereotyped them as less capable than White students. Faculty have also been perceived by students of color as culturally insensitive when they fail to acknowledge or incorporate
culturally diverse perspectives into their curricula (Feagin et al., 1996; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Sedlacek & Brooks, 1973) because it conveys to students that their histories and traditions are not valued (Marchesani & Adams, 1992).

Prior research that has identified the significance of African American role models and the need for cultural sensitivity among faculty has been valuable in understanding barriers to successful relationships between White faculty and African American students. However, although hiring more African American faculty and facilitating cultural sensitivity among White faculty are imperatives for improving the African American student experience at PWIs, evidence suggests that these qualities may only provide the foundation for what some African American students expect from faculty. Fries-Britt and Turner (2002) noted that students at an HBCU perceived supportive Black faculty as willing to go “beyond the call of duty” to help them succeed (p. 321), and Fries-Britt (1995), in a qualitative study of African American students attending a PWI, concluded that students valued relationships with White faculties who were “sincere and interested” (p. 12). Although the researchers did not explicitly define the ways in which faculty went beyond the call of duty or how faculty manifested sincerity and interest, these results suggest that there is more to successful faculty/African American student relationships than simply providing Black role models and avoiding egregious stereotyping. Furthermore, these results indicate the potential for White faculty who understand the needs of Black students at PWIs to establish strong, supportive relationships with them.

While prior research has firmly documented obstacles to White faculty/Black student relationships at PWIs, much less is known regarding the ingredients to successful relationships among faculty and African American students. The purpose of this study was to understand, from the students’ perspectives, the faculty characteristics that facilitate meaningful relationships with African American students. These results will be connected to a long-held tradition of education within the African American community called “othermothering,” as one framework for conceptualizing the needs of some African American students who attend PWIs. The results are intended to enhance the ability of White faculty, as well as faculty of color, to understand and support their African American students.

**Methods**

Recently, it has been argued that quantitative measures alone have failed to capture the complexities involved in understanding the experiences of minority college students (Hurtado, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). To broaden our understanding of the
relationship among African American students and faculty at PWIs, qualitative methods based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were used. The phenomenological nature of the grounded theory approach allowed important constructs regarding students’ needs and expectations of faculty to emerge from the students’ perspectives. Rather than attempting to verify hypotheses or make generalizations regarding all African American students’ relationships with faculty, this study was designed to uncover patterns in students’ perceptions of these relationships in order to open new paths for future thought and research (Talburt, 2004; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1991).

Sample

Purposeful sampling was used to increase the likelihood of interviewing students who have had positive experiences with faculty. I began by soliciting participants from a PWI that embraced diversity as a core value of the institution. The research institution that was selected is located in the northeastern United States and has an undergraduate enrollment slightly below 11,000 students, less than 7.5% of whom are African American. To further increase the possibility of learning about characteristics of supportive faculty, I solicited the participation of students who perceived themselves as high-achieving African students because research indicates that low-achieving students are less likely to have positive experiences with faculty (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Students self-selected for participation in the study by responding to flyers posted on campus requesting the participation of “high-achieving” African American students. Students were also identified for participation in the study through snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), in which participants were asked to recommend other students for the study whom they believed to be high achieving. Students were not paid for their participation; however, soda and pizza were provided at each focus group meeting. In addition, participants were informed that the results of the study would be shared with university administrators.

Nineteen students volunteered to participate (2 freshmen, 5 sophomores, 6 juniors, and 6 seniors). Eleven of the participants (58% of the sample) were female and 8 participants (42% of the sample) were male. The gender distribution was fairly representative of the African American student body at the university (62% female and 38% male). Students’ GPAs, gained from their self-reports and confirmed through university student records, ranged from a 2.8 to 3.9 with an average GPA of 3.2. With the permission of the students, I also obtained information regarding their families’ incomes from the office of financial aid to
provide a more detailed description of the sample. The office provided me with each student's level of financial need, which accounted for economic variables such as family size and number of students attending college. There were 11 students who were listed as being in high financial need, 6 who were categorized as medium need, and 2 who were listed as low/no need.

Data Collection and Analysis

I gave special consideration to implementing data collection and analysis procedures that allowed me, a White researcher, to collect and analyze data in ways that were culturally sensitive and that encouraged students to openly share their perspectives. Initially, I feared that African American students might be hesitant to participate or to provide open and honest perspectives because I planned to present the results to university administrators. However, several students mentioned that my plans for disseminating the results actually provided an incentive for them to participate. These students wanted their voices to be heard by the university’s administrators, as they believed that their perspectives might inspire changes or improvements for other African American students. Therefore, presenting the results to university administrators appeared to have increased their willingness to share their perspectives with me.

A second way in which I increased the likelihood of gaining honest, open perspectives from the participants was by conducting the first round of interviews using small focus groups. Bangura (1994) found that college students of color were more comfortable sharing their perspectives in focus groups than in individual interviews and that the dialogue that occurred in focus groups better reflected students’ real world dialogue than individual interviews. Other advantages of focus group interviews include (a) allowing members more time to listen and reflect upon their own experiences, (b) the possibility that what one member says could spur memories of other members, and (c) the opportunity for the researcher to listen to contrasting viewpoints when members disagree on a particular topic (Loftland & Loftland, 1995).

The initial focus group interviews, which consisted of between two and four students each, began as “guided conversations” to allow participants to shape what was studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 95). I began by asking an initial open-ended question: Could you describe assets to your college experiences? My follow-up questions asked them to elaborate on their experiences or to give examples to illustrate the ways in which this support was manifested. Later in the interviews, I also
asked participants to describe things that hindered their college experiences. Although I did not ask students directly about their relationships with faculty, students in every focus group interview raised the theme of faculty support when asked to describe assets and liabilities to their college experiences.

While there are many advantages to using focus groups, this interview format also makes it difficult to prevent one focus group member from dominating, and thus shaping, the entire conversation (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Additionally, some participants may be uncomfortable sharing personal information in a group format. To address these limitations, I conducted hour-long individual follow-up interviews with 18 of the 19 focus group members (1 student had a schedule conflict that prevented him from meeting again). Individual follow-up interviews also played an important role in the cyclical process of data collection and analysis that is inherent in the constant comparative method. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), it is necessary to follow up with participants to focus or expand upon particular topics or themes that emerged in earlier interviews.

I began the follow-up interviews by asking each participant the same open-ended question: Is there anything you would like to add to what we discussed in the focus group regarding assets and liabilities to your success at college? This introductory question allowed participants to express opinions or experiences that they may not have been comfortable sharing in the group. In the event a student introduced a new topic or theme that they did not discuss in the focus group, I asked them to describe why they did not share this issue earlier. If they began the session by reiterating themes they had discussed in the focus group interviews, I asked follow-up questions designed to encourage them to expand upon or elaborate on these themes, such as asking participants to provide detailed examples that illustrated their perspectives or asking them to elaborate more on thoughts and feelings related to their experiences. Follow-up interviews also allowed me to ask participants to expand upon their prior statements that had become relevant to my working hypotheses (e.g., “You said that student-centered faculty went above and beyond to help you. Can you give me some examples of this?”) and to search for negative case data (“Were there any White faculty who provided you with this same type of support?”). Finally, follow-up interviews were also used to begin member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), or getting the perspectives of participants regarding my working hypotheses.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the research process, I kept an extensive audit trail that included detailed documentation of field notes, memos, and observer comments (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). In addition,
widespread use of negative case data (Glaser & Straus, 1967), or disconfirming evidence, was applied to reduce researcher selection and interpretation bias. I also utilized Becker and Geer’s (1960) recommendations for determining relative strength and intensity of manifestations in my data analysis, which included counting the number of times a category or theme emerged, how often it occurred relative to the negative cases, and how widely the data were distributed throughout contextual and temporal ranges. This comprehensive method of analyzing qualitative data allowed a more accurate analysis of the frequency and distribution of data manifestations than merely counting the number of times a theme or category emerged. I was supported throughout the data analysis process by QUALOG (Shelly & Sibert, 1992), a computer software program designed to assist researchers in organizing qualitative data. I also participated in weekly peer debriefing meetings (Mishler, 2000) with other qualitative researchers who monitored each other’s work to point out potential biases or illogical conclusions.

Results

Students spoke often of their relationships with faculty when they were asked to describe assets and liabilities to their college experiences. The term “student-centered” was a part of the slogan at this university, and many students used this term to describe faculty whom students perceived as strongly supportive of them. Although some examples of positive experiences with White faculty emerged, the vast majority of faculty members whom students perceived as student-centered at this PWI were African Americans. Data from this study were consistent with prior research indicating that African American students perceived African American faculty as more likely than White faculty to (a) incorporate Black culture, history, and ideas into their curricula (Freis-Britt & Turner, 2002; Sedlacek & Brooks, 1973); and (b) be perceived as realistic role models (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996; Hackett & Byars, 1996; Sedlacek, 1987; Tinto, 1993; Willie & McCord, 1972). Additionally, the data supported studies indicating African American faculty were perceived as less likely than White faculty to stereotype them by race (Arnold, 1993; Burrell, 1980; Fleming, 1984; Feagin et al. 1996).

Although the data were rich with examples of faculty insensitivity and testimonials to the need for African American role models, the purpose of this paper is not to elaborate on findings that support conclusions already established in the literature. Rather, it is to expand our understanding of Black students’ experiences by exploring more deeply the characteristics of faculty whom they perceived as “student centered.”
While these results support research indicating the importance of faculty who are culturally sensitive and viewed as realistic role models, the findings also suggest that these qualities may provide only a fraction of what students were searching for from faculty.

A more salient characteristic that emerged when students described student-centered faculty surrounded a concept some referred to as “going above and beyond.” I will describe the ways in which student-centered faculty went above and beyond their roles as professors to assist students with their academic, career, and personal issues. Consistent with the inductive nature of the inquiry, I will then connect these results to a long-held tradition of education within the African American community called “othermothering” as one framework for conceptualizing the unique needs, expectations, and experiences of some African American students who attend PWIs.

Comprehensive Career, Academic, and Personal Advising

One way in which faculty who were described as student-centered went “above and beyond” was by providing comprehensive advising regarding career guidance, academic issues, and personal problems. African American students expected their faculty advisors to provide advice in selecting courses and in planning programs of study, guidance that, overall, students described as lacking in their relationships with faculty. However, student-centered faculty took a much more holistic approach to their career advising that went beyond simply giving students advice regarding course selections. Instead, they invested time patiently listening to students to understand their professional fears, dreams, and goals. When asked to describe assets to her college experience, this student expressed how central the comprehensive career advising she received from her professors was to her success:

A good professor to me is approachable, very down to earth. I should feel I could talk to them about the future: what I aspire to do as a [her area of study]. I like to hear about their experiences. A lot of my professors have shared that with me, both good and bad experiences—that it’s OK to be indecisive and you are not expected to know what you are going to do with your life at this stage—just generally being open and honest. Don’t tell me it’s easy and you are going to love it all the time. Be honest and let me know the struggles too.

African American students emphasized the need to discuss their futures with faculty who knew them and their fields intimately. One reason this was important was that they believed the professional connections that faculty had would help them find employment in their fields or gain
acceptance into graduate schools. As this student described, student-centered faculty also encouraged students to become active in their fields by providing them professional contacts:

Prof [x] said that I seemed so interested and that I had a talent for it and could turn out to be a really good [practitioner in the field]. I got so into it and was like, Oh my God! He even gave me contacts for people in [several cities] to speak about careers. He is a really inspiring teacher, especially if you want to do [his field] as a career. He will give you contacts for anywhere you live.

In general, faculty who were perceived by students as going above and beyond in providing career advising tended to be African Americans. However, there was one example of a student who described receiving this same type of holistic career advising from White faculty. After she shared an example of how an African American faculty member had gone above and beyond her role to help her sort through her professional concerns, I asked if she had ever received that type of attention from other faculty. She responded with the following statement regarding her experiences with White faculty in her program:

I can speak the same way to a Black prof as a White prof in my program. My teacher in [one course] is White and I love her to death and actually, I want to be like her when I finish. She is just so passionate, and you can just tell she is in the right field. I have gone to her office hours as well and just talked to her about [my problems in the field], and she was like telling me it was okay and how she deals with it and stuff. So I relate to her as well as the Black prof. I have had no problem with any of them, White or Black. That is why I love my school.

In addition to providing students with comprehensive career advising, student-centered faculty also afforded students with inclusive academic and personal advising. When asked to describe assets to their college experiences, several students shared experiences in which faculty members had gone above and beyond in helping them deal with their academic and personal issues. In fact, several students said that faculty required students to meet with them regularly so they could monitor their academic and personal progress at college. As evidenced in the following example, it tended to be African American faculty who mandated that students met with them on a regular basis:

The [African American faculty] that I had would make you schedule offices hours and make appointments and you would have to come by. And so it wasn’t easy when you had nothing to say and you had to sit there for half hour or 45 minutes and sit there like hi how are you? But I even appreciated those times too.
Rather than staying focused only on academic and career advising, African American faculty who were described as "going above and beyond" adopted a holistic approach to their advising, which included asking students about personal and academic issues. When asked about his experiences with supportive faculty, this student described why he believed it was logical for Black students and Black faculty to establish relationships that were more personal and that went beyond just discussing academics and careers:

I think that a Black professor and a Black student, there is always going to be that bond. Like he would always ask me how are you doing in your other classes? How are things going? We would speak a lot about websites and how's your family? How was your vacation? Where are your parents from? Stuff like that while other professors may not really take a personal interest in you. I mean there is professional and there is friendly but [White professors] don't get really personal.

Support and Advocacy

While expanding their boundaries as academic, career, and personal advisors was integral to students' definitions of faculty who were student-centered, the most salient characteristic distinguishing truly student-centered faculty was that they went above and beyond this by supporting and advocating for African American students. When asked to elaborate on relationships with faculty whom they considered their most important assets to their college experiences, students shared stories of support and advocacy that ranged from faculty providing them extra tutoring, to helping them locate money to stay in school, to talking to their families for them regarding academic and personal issues. This student shared an example of how an African American professor invited her friend's parents to campus so he could advocate for her to be allowed to study abroad:

Like there's this girl who wants to study abroad in Africa next year and her parents, well, her mother isn't really liking it too much. He is taking her best interest by talking to her mother for her. He is going to try and have her mother come up here this week and they can talk about the importance of her going to Africa.

As more examples emerged regarding the ways in which faculty went above and beyond to assist students, it became clear that this type of relationship, where faculty took an interest in and advocated for students in their academic and personal lives, was something they did not perceive in their relationships with most White professors. However, many students had come to value and, in some ways, to expect this type of
personal attention from African American faculty. These interactions not only assisted students by providing them with the information and resources they needed to navigate the PWI but also reinforced to them that their professors cared about more than just their academic success: They cared about their personal development as well. This student, when asked why he was able to connect so well with his African American professors, highlighted this important difference between his relationships with Black professors and those with his White professors:

[White faculty] might say come by, but they wouldn’t understand. Like my one friend, he wasn’t able to find a job so one [White] professor was like, oh that’s bad. She was sympathetic, but [a certain Black professor] helped him get a job and that’s what he needed. He didn’t need sympathy; he needed someone to help him find a job. She [the Black professor] called her friends and was like, could you possibly need a student to organize your desk or answer your phones or something? And she found another professor who was like sure, and he was able to get a job, which he needed. It was more like she helped the situation instead of being empathetic.

As the preceding example illustrates, White faculty were not necessarily viewed as insensitive to African American students’ issues; however, students perceived White faculty as unlikely to extend themselves to help with their situations. Black faculty members, on the other hand, were perceived by students as more willing to go above and beyond by actually supporting and advocating for students. There was one student, however, who indicated that she had received active support from one of her White professors. As she noted, this faculty member went beyond simply demonstrating sympathy for her situation by actually helping solve the problem:

I was taking a course once and I couldn’t afford the book, then I got the money and had to spend it and I went to [the professor] and explained and she wasn’t upset—she actually went and copied the material to make sure I did good in her class. She was White; I don’t think her helping me had anything to do with me being African American. She worked with me hard and helped me pass and actually caught me after the exam to tell me I got an A!

Rather than just providing the student with sympathy and understanding, as some African American students have come to expect from White faculty, this professor extended her responsibilities to provide her student with the resources she needed to pass the course. Additionally, the student indicated that the extra time and encouragement provided by the professor helped motivate her to succeed in the class. While this example was not indicative of the same type of personal advocacy that was described as coming from African American faculty, it indicates the potential for White faculty who provide students with active support and personal advocacy to be viewed as student-centered.
Raising the Bar: Believing in Students and Pushing Them to Succeed

Another more controversial aspect of faculty who “went above and beyond” was related to faculty expectations of students. When describing ways in which faculty were perceived as liabilities, several students shared examples in which they felt White faculty had demeaned them by giving them inordinate praise for things like “speaking well,” “being smart” or, in the case of one student who was a dance major, getting her “hips into it” more than the other, mostly White students. Students felt such unwarranted praises were manifestations of faculty’s lowered expectations of them based on stereotypical assessments of their abilities. In other words, students thought that faculty assumed that, because they were Black, they would not speak as well or be as smart or capable as White students are and, therefore, they should be recognized for meeting minimal expectations.

Conversely, students expressed that African American faculty tended to demonstrate more positive beliefs in their academic abilities and provided students with more motivation to succeed than White faculty provided. Some students referred to the increased expectations and motivation they received from African American faculty as “raising the bar.” According to students, Black faculty conveyed the message early on to them that Black students not only had to overcome burdens of being a minority at a PWI, but also that they must perform at higher levels than White students to be viewed equally. As a result, the Black faculty at this PWI indicated high expectations of their African American students and pushed them to succeed in their classes. For several students, this notion of “raising the bar” was empowering because it emphasized professors’ beliefs in students’ abilities to succeed. This student, when asked to elaborate on the support he received from his African American professors, described how holding him to a higher standard helped motivate him towards success:

[Black faculty] are going to expect you to do well in their class. I mean they are not going to let you slide through. [Black students] should appreciate it, because, basically, they are pushing you to excel. In other classes, you come and go as you please. The only way [the professor] knows if you are there is if you sit in the same exact seat everyday. But an African American professor would be like, “You haven’t been to class in 2 days. Why haven’t you been to class? You’re supposed to have this paper.” They’ll trash your paper in a heartbeat but you’ll realize that their trashing your paper made your paper writing skills better for you in other classes. If you did your work, they really didn’t bother you but they will totally call on you. You can’t sit there and think it’s an African American professor and I don’t need to do any work [because] they will let me slide. They won’t. They will hold you to a higher degree.
As this student indicated, raising the bar was viewed by some students as yet another way in which student-centered faculty went above and beyond to assist in their students' academic success. Enforcing higher standards on students, holding them accountable by continually monitoring their academic progress in their courses, and pushing them to reach new limits in their academic work was described as instrumental to the success of some African American students in the study.

However, not all students shared this perception regarding the effects of "raising the bar" on their academic achievement. In fact, four female students described these elevated academic expectations from faculty as a liability to their academic success. For example, this student explained why she viewed "raising the bar" as just another form of stereotyping that did not allow her to be seen as an individual:

There are a lot of Black faculty in [her major] and my advisor is Black and he is like, talking to me, he is always like, “You have to work harder. My role is to get my, get ya’ll out of here; get my people out.” And that’s good, that boosts me but at the same time, I am like, why do I have to work harder? And lot of people look at that as a compliment: Like I expect a lot from you. No, that’s not a compliment! Judge me on me! If I do wrong, then I’m wrong, but what I do does not have any effect on what the rest of the Blacks in this room do just because they are Black. No! What I do is based on me and that’s not, I don’t know, that’s, that whole notion of representing everyone or being the voice for everyone, that doesn’t sit well with me.

Although they appreciated the extra attention, support, and belief in their potential, some students also became incredibly frustrated by being held to a higher standard. This female student described how difficult being held to a double standard by her Black professor became for her and a few other Black students in her class:

They expect so much of you all the time when you are working in class and I was like, I am no different than Sally over there, you know, leave me alone. We had one Black professor, he is my advisor, and he was the worst. Like the one Black person, who we thought would be nice to us, and he was just a bastard! He was like, you know, I am expecting a whole lot from you guys [the Black students] and you better not let me down. Like, he would make us work three times harder in classes so, he would make me do all kinds of crazy stuff and the White kids would be like, “oh wow, that’s horrible. That’s messed up.” And then they would go and do their just real simple things and I would be in the corner just crying because I can’t do it and it is so unfair! And all of us [Black students] except one felt that way about him. He was just so mean to all of us.

Some students believed that African American faculty members were trying to improve the image of Blacks on campus by imposing higher standards on Black students. Others believed that affirmative action
initiatives, designed to increase minority access to higher education, were actually to blame for the idea that Blacks have to work harder just to prove they belong. While students recognized the influences that contributed to the notion of “raising the bar,” and appreciated, for the most part, when faculty demonstrated positive beliefs in their academic abilities, they did not all agree with the practice of imposing higher standards on them than on other students. Although there were students, including one female student, who felt empowered by the extra attention and encouragement they received from faculty who implemented a “raise the bar” approach to motivate them, four of the eight female students raised this issue when they were asked to describe liabilities to their college experiences. These four students believed that imposing higher standards on them because of their race not only unfairly made the course more difficult for them but also reinforced the stigma that they should be treated differently than their White peers. The student in the last example felt that higher standards imposed on her by an African American professor were so unreasonable that she transferred to another department where she believed she would be treated more fairly.

Discussion

It is not surprising that at this research institution, many students did not feel they received adequate academic and career advising from their faculty advisors. As Astin (1993) has pointed out, this is unfortunately quite common at research institutions where faculty tenure and promotion criteria are more closely aligned with research and publications than with teaching and advising. Therefore, it is likely that White students and other students of color may have voiced the same types of complaints regarding faculty who were unavailable or who did not provide them with encouragement to excel in their classes.

However, African American students perceived this type of expanded, even intrusive academic, career, and personal advising to be especially important in defining faculty who were student-centered. These results indicate that it was this willingness to go above and beyond that distinguished good professors from those who were truly student-centered in the eyes of many African American students. More importantly, these results allow us to understand the multifaceted ways in which student-centered faculty go above and beyond to support African American students. According to students in this study, student-centered faculty provided for students a web of support that went well beyond being culturally sensitive, understanding, or sympathetic to their needs. Their definitions of student-centeredness included faculty who served as their
mentors by providing professional contacts, advice, and leading by example; as their academic coaches by providing tutoring, encouragement, and pushing them to reach their full academic potential; as their advocates by pleading their cases and defending them to others on campus and at home; and finally as their counselors by listening to their academic and personal problems, supporting them, and giving them sound advice.

While there are several models of effective multicultural teaching (see Brown, 1998; Marchesani & Adams, 1992), few have advocated for faculty to take such a comprehensive role in their relationships with students. In fact, there may be faculty who view these services to students as crossing professional boundaries. Yet by examining African American feminist literature, it becomes apparent that these expanded relationships between Black students and Black teachers are quite common in the African American community; Foster (1993) has referred to this type of relationship as *othermothering*. In linking the concept of othermothering to the formal education of African American students, Collins (2000) states, “Unlike the traditional mentoring so widely reported in the educational literature, this relationship goes far beyond that of providing students with either technical skills or a network of academic and professional contacts” (p. 191).

Othermothers, defined as “women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities” (Collins, 2000, p. 178), have been apparent in African American communities since the first slaves were brought to the United States (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). Mothering others’ children in slave communities was a necessity, as children were often orphaned by the sale or death of their mothers. However, the practice of othermothering was also extended to assisting women who were too poor to care for their children or who did not have the preparation or desire to provide the full range of mothering activities (Collins, 2000). Because formal schooling was forbidden to slaves, and because men were often separated from their children, the practice of othermothering soon extended beyond caring for children’s basic needs to become the primary means of educating slave children (Dubey, 1995). The practice of othermothering allowed Black women to educate and socialize children in their own ways and traditions in order to uplift the Black community (Perkins, 1989) and to assist them in resisting White domination (Foster, 1993).

As slavery ended and segregated schools began, the practice of othermothering continued to influence the role of teachers in Black schools. In a literature review that explored aspects of segregated schools, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (1999) found that good teachers in Black schools
often went above and beyond assisting students in formal education. In fact, teachers in segregated schools were frequently considered important members of students' extended families (Dempsey & Noblit, 1993). In a study of the life histories of 14 seasoned Black women teachers, Foster (1993) found that most established kinlike relationships with their students and would habitually visit their homes to advocate for students, collaborate with their parents, and even tutor students and parents. Additionally, she noted that African American teachers who manifested an approach consistent with the philosophy of othermothering demonstrated a belief in the potential of every African American student to succeed academically. Foster concluded that the idea of teachers as othersmothers was passed on to these teachers indirectly through their own elementary and secondary education in segregated schools and also directly in their teacher preparation programs at HBCUs. From the all-Black faculty at their HBCUs, Black teacher trainees learned that it was their moral and spiritual obligation to uplift the Black community by attending not only to students' academic development but also to their social and psychological development.

Aspects of othermothering have also appeared in works that have examined qualities of successful African American educators in more contemporary elementary and secondary schools. For example, in a case study of an African American female elementary school teacher and female principal, Case (1997) found that the tradition of othermothering was present in their work with African American youth. The successful educators in her study attended not only to students' educational needs but also to their psychoeducational and emotional development. Moreover, these teachers developed strong relationships with students' families and "set firm expectations for the children" (p. 31) as a means of empowering them. Case concluded that African American student academic achievement is enhanced when educators implement an othermothering approach.

Similarly, Lomotey (1990) found that successful African American principals were viewed as "mother or father figures" to students because of the holistic approach they took to education (p. 190). This holistic approach included establishing close relationships with students' families; believing in and pushing all African American children to succeed; and incorporating African American student values, history, and culture into their philosophies of education. Although Lomotey did not relate these successful pedagogical approaches to the practice of "othermothering," the results suggest that this same holistic approach, where educators assume familial roles and emphasize holistic approaches to the education of Black students, is a successful philosophy shared not only among female teachers but also among successful African American male educators.
The importance of African American educators establishing othermothering relationships with students has been expressed by Foster (1993). Foster stated that “an appropriate pedagogy for Black students cannot be limited only to academics, but must deal with political, social, and economic circumstances of children’s lives and communities,” which she labeled “the hidden curriculum” that allows Black students to challenge the status quo (p. 118). Similarly, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (1999) argued that integrating Black children into White schools so that they could learn from the more qualified White teachers actually hurt many African American students because the teachers did not care for them as their own (Delpit, 1995) and did not take the same holistic approach to their development.

Data from the current study indicates that some African American students at PWIs share these expectations that faculty will go above and beyond their formal roles to become active not only in their academic development but also in their psychosocial and emotional development. Some students in this study arrived expecting that faculty would provide them with extensive academic, career, and personal advising; that they would advocate for them at the university and at home; and that they would push them to excel in their classes. While African American students appreciated the sympathy and concern they often received from White faculty, they did not perceive them as willing to go above and beyond to provide the type of support students needed. However, they have come to expect African American faculty to take a more holistic, comprehensive, and even parental role in supporting and advocating for them and the PWI.

The data also indicated that African American faculty were perceived by students as more likely than White faculty to demonstrate positive beliefs in students, which is an important ingredient to African American college student success (Steele, 1997; Tierney, 2000). In several instances students expressed that the high expectations imposed on them by faculty had motivated them to succeed in their classes. However, while most students valued, and in many cases expected, this extra support from African American faculty, some students became frustrated by the ways in which some African American professors demonstrated their beliefs in students’ academic abilities. Specifically, the idea of “raising the bar,” or holding African American students to a higher academic standard than White students, became discouraging to several students, reinforcing to them that they were different from other students and should be treated as such.

It is important to note that the four students who described “raising the bar” as a liability to their academic success, while from different
academic majors, were all females whose problematic interactions occurred with African American male professors. Male students, on the other hand, tended to attribute the practice of "raising the bar" as an important ingredient to their success at the PWI. Moreover, while several students described meaningful interactions with African American female professors, students did not describe an instance when female faculty imposed higher standards on them than on other students. Given the small, single-institutional sample, it is unfeasible to conclude that the "raise the bar" approach is implemented solely by African American male professors or that African American female students are the only ones bothered when faculty impose higher standards on them than other students. However, the finding raises the possibility that gender differences may exist in the ways in which African American professors demonstrate positive beliefs in students' abilities and how African American students react to these motivational strategies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

African American students purposely sought to connect with African American faculty to serve as their mentors. Some students said they initially were more comfortable speaking to other Blacks because they felt they would understand them and their struggles. Others said the inspiration they received by having a Black role model at the university was important to them. These are aspects of support that even the most well intentioned White faculty could not provide. Thus, these findings strengthen assertions made by other researchers regarding the importance of hiring more African American faculty to promote the success of African American students attending PWIs (Fleming, 1984; Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, & Willson, 1999; Lomotey, 1990; Loo & Rolison, 1986).

However, while race was important, the main reason African American students preferred connecting with African American faculty was that they perceived them as more likely to meet their definitions of student-centeredness. Therefore, data from this study suggest that although White faculty cannot fill all the roles that Black faculty provide to African American students, they can support students by striving to adhere to their definitions of student-centeredness. Faculty interested in becoming more student-centered in the eyes of African American students can begin by incorporating more diversity into their curricula and by striving to reduce their stereotypical views and behaviors. However, to become truly student-centered in the eyes of some African American students, faculty must also dedicate sufficient time to attending to each
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student's unique academic, career, and personal issues. Institutions committed to improving the retention of African American students can support these faculty initiatives not only by providing faculty with the time and training necessary to meet these student needs but also by evaluating faculty advising (see Kramer & Upcraft, 1995) and rewarding faculty for outstanding advising (see National Academic Advising Association, 2000).

However, while providing a more thorough definition of African American students' needs is valuable to faculty members who are interested in more effectively supporting their African American students, such a comprehensive faculty-advising model may conflict with current advising models at some PWIs and, therefore, may be difficult to implement. Providing the level of personal advising, support, and advocacy that these students were seeking is time consuming and would detract from other, more traditional faculty responsibilities such as research, teaching, and professional service. In addition, some faculty might be hesitant to engage in personal counseling and advocacy with students or to collaborate with students' families because they view these services as crossing professional boundary lines.

A measured first step towards implementing comprehensive, student-centered advising at PWIs that are wedded to traditional models of faculty advising is to make more holistic, student-centered advising available to all African American students through student support and retention programs. Expanding the services of institutional offices of multicultural affairs, retention programs, and student-support programs such as those offered through federal TRIO grants, would allow institutions to provide all African American students with student-centered advising. While some African American students may arrive at PWIs expecting student-centered support from faculty, academic advisors who are skilled in advising, career guidance, mentoring, and student support and advocacy should be available to students if faculty are unable or unwilling to diverge from more traditional, reserved faculty-advising models.

While it was clear that African American faculty tended to be perceived as more student-centered than White faculty at this PWI, students in this study also described one way that their relationships with Black faculty could be enhanced. Although the idea of "raising the bar," or holding African American students to higher academic standards, was motivating to some students, others found it daunting, especially if they were already uncomfortable in the predominantly White environment. African American faculty who are sensitive to students who are intimidated or threatened by inflated expectations of them may improve their abilities to support these students by carefully selecting the ways in
which they encourage and motivate them. While more research is needed to understand better the effects of various motivational approaches on African American students, the results suggest that African American male professors should exercise caution when asserting a "raise the bar" approach to motivating African American female students. In some cases, a more student-centered approach might entail maintaining high, yet realistic standards for African American students that are comparable to the standards professors set for other students.

Although the results of this study provide a better understanding of what some African American students are seeking from faculty, more research is needed to understand the perspectives of African American students attending PWIs. Future studies that compare perspectives among minority and non-minority students at multiple institutions would allow a more detailed understanding of relationships among African American students and White and Black faculty to emerge. Additionally, more research is needed to identify and understand differences in motivational styles among African American male and female professors, as well as the impact of these approaches on different types of students. Future research should also examine faculty/student relationships from the perspectives of faculty. Identifying differences in the ways in which faculty and students view their relationships will allow college administrators to design more comprehensive training programs to enhance faculty/student relationships.

Finally, future research investigating African American students' perspectives of relationships with faculty should include data collected by African American as well as White researchers. While the richness of the data contained in these interviews indicates that an effective, supportive relationship existed between the participants and me, the substance of the interviews may have changed without a White interviewer present. Future research conducted by African American interviewers may allow a more detailed, diverse picture of the participants' perspectives to emerge.

References


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