The African American Student Experience at Predominantly White Colleges:
Implications for School and College Counselors

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Abstract

Research from higher education and cultural studies that has examined the African American college student experience at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) is presented with a focus on providing an understanding of how African American college students’ relationships with faculty, family, friends from home, and peers in African American student organizations can become either assets or liabilities to their academic achievement and persistence. Implications for counseling practice are provided to assist secondary school-based counselors in preparing their African American students for the academic and socio-cultural challenges they will face when transitioning to PWIs. Implications are also provided for counselors working in college counseling centers, career counseling centers, and academic advising and retention programs at PWIs to effectively support and retain their African American college students.
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The year 2005 marked the 50th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* guaranteeing equal access to education for all Americans. In the 50 years since that landmark ruling, African Americans have made substantial gains in educational attainment. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau (Stoops, 2004), 80 percent of all African Americans age 25 and older have attained a high school degree, placing them only 5 percent below the rate for White Americans. Additionally, nearly 45 percent of African Americans have attended college compared to 53 percent of White Americans. These data indicate substantial progress has been made in narrowing the educational gap that exists between Black and White Americans.

However, despite the fact that African Americans are more likely than ever to earn high school degrees and attend college, they continue to be far less likely than White Americans to earn college degrees. This continued disparity between the educational attainment of Black and White Americans is clearly reflected in the significantly higher attrition rates experienced by African American college students. Recent statistics indicate that only 40 percent of African American students who begin college will ultimately graduate compared to over 61 percent of White students (Cross, 2004). The college retention gap between White and Black students becomes even greater when focusing solely on the vast numbers of Black students enrolled in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), which are often more accessible than Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Flemming, 1984; Gloria, Robinson Kurpius,
Hamilton, & Willson, 1999). Additionally, Black students who graduate from PWIs tend to have substantially lower grade point averages than White students (Bowen & Bok, 1998).

A widely held notion is that the discrepancy between rates of academic performance and college retention between Black and White students at PWIs stems from lack of academic preparation, which has bolstered initiatives aimed at preparing and supporting Black students at PWIs (see Levin & Levin, 1991). Recent research, however, has challenged the notion that inadequate academic preparation is the primary reason for low academic achievement and persistence rates among African American students at PWIs (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; McCauley, 1988; Sedlacek, 1987; Suen, 1983). Additionally, Bowen and Bok (1998) found African American college students’ class ranks continued to be lower than White students at PWIs even after controlling for variables such as SAT scores, high school GPA, socio-economic status, gender, selectivity of schools, and fields of study. At almost every selective college in their sample, minority students’ academic performance was below that of White students and at levels lower than what was predicted by their SAT scores. These data strongly support the notion that Black students face challenges beyond academic preparation and ability that impact their chances to succeed at college. This research suggests that there is clearly room to improve upon the ways in which counselors prepare African American students for the college experience and support them once they are enrolled.

School counselors in particular are in ideal positions to prepare African American students and their families for the unique socio-cultural challenges they face when transitioning to PWIs. Likewise, counselors working in college counseling centers and in various academic advising and student support and retention programs are well suited to provide support and systemic changes that will assist in the success of African American students at PWIs. However,
although counselors have become leaders in promoting social justice in education, disseminating research on effective multicultural counseling processes, and identifying links between racial identity development and mental well-being, little attention has been paid in counseling literature to understanding the African American college student experience at PWIs (see Alford, 2000 & Schwitzer, Griffen, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999 for two exceptions). This is an important gap in counseling literature given the central role of higher education in generating opportunity for historically marginalized populations and the American Counseling Association’s mandate to promote social justice by understanding and serving the needs of diverse populations (Arredondo, et al., 1996).

Although research focusing on the African American college student experience has not been given high priority within counseling circles, there is a well-developed tradition of scholarship within the higher education/student affairs literature that explores the challenges encountered by Black students in higher education. In particular, higher education researchers have learned a great deal about how African American college students at PWIs are impacted by relationships with faculty, their families and friends from home, and their peers in African American student organizations. Additionally, scholars in cultural studies have offered important perspectives for understanding how cultural practices within the African American community can influence contemporary African American college student academic achievement and persistence.

The purpose of this article is to present this relevant literature from college student affairs and cultural studies to counselors working in educational settings so that they will better understand the African American college student experience at PWIs. Implications of this work will be targeted toward assisting (a) counselors working in schools so they can effectively
prepare their African American college-bound students and their families for their transitions to PWIs and (b) counselors working in college counseling centers, career counseling centers, and academic advising and retention programs at PWIs so they can better understand, support, and retain their African American college students.

_African American Student Experiences in Higher Education_

Experiences with Faculty

Research indicates that strong relationships with faculty are crucial to student success at college. Faculty/student relationships are strongly positively correlated with student satisfaction with college (Astin, 1984, 1999), academic achievement (Astin, 1993; Davis, 1991; Terenzini & Wright, 1987), and retention (DeFour & Hirsch, 1990; Stoecker, Pascarella, & Wolfle, 1988). Although research suggests that relationships with faculty are especially important to the success of minority students (Braddock, 1981), studies indicate that Black students are often unable to form strong relationships with White faculty at PWIs (Arnold, 1993; Eimers & Pike, 1996; Flemming, 1984; Mayo, Murguia, & Padilla, 1995; Nettles, 1991; Schwitzer, Griffen, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999).

One reason for the failure of Black students to connect with White faculty is that Black students often perceive White faculty as culturally insensitive. Examples of cultural insensitivity on the part of White faculty include making stereotypical comments about African Americans, generalizing students’ opinions in class as representing those of all African Americans, and failing to acknowledge and incorporate African American perspectives into their curricula (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Guiffrida, 2005a; Marchesani & Adams, 1992; Sedlacek & Brooks, 1973). For these reasons, it is not surprising that students of color are hesitant to approach faculty for help (Schwitzer, et al., 1999) and may be more apt to
seek academic help from family, friends, or academic counselors who are minorities than White faculty (Burrell & Trombley, 1983; Guiffrida, 2005b; Sanchez, Marder, Berry, & Ross, 1992; Suen, 1983).

A second reason that Black students often fail to establish strong relationships with White faculty at PWIs is that Black students tend not to not view White faculty as realistic role models. Research indicates that connections with Black role models who have been successful in higher education can increase the self-efficacy of Black students (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996; Hackett & Byars, 1996) and lead to academic success (Burrell, 1980; Sedlacek, 1987; Tinto, 1993; Willie & McCord, 1972).

While teaching White faculty at PWIs to be more culturally sensitive and hiring more Black faculty to serve as mentors and role-models for Black students continue to be imperatives for improving the experiences of African American college students, Guiffrida (2005b) has found that there is much more to successful Black Student/faculty relationships. In a qualitative study with high-achieving African American students at a PWI, Guiffrida found that students perceived African American faculty as much more willing than White faculty to “go above and beyond” to assist students in succeeding at college (p.708). According to the students in this study, African American faculty went above and beyond to become student-centered by (a) providing students with comprehensive academic, career, and personal advising; (b) actively supporting and advocating for students at college and at home; and (c) demonstrating beliefs in students’ academic abilities. While students also perceived supportive relationships with White faculty, they perceived White faculty as much less willing to go above and beyond their roles as teachers and academic advisors to assist them in their college success. Guiffrida related this expanded definition of student-centeredness to a long-held tradition of education within the
African American community called “othermothering” (p. 715) as a means for understanding the unique needs and expectations that some African American students may have for faculty.

Othermothers, which have existed in African American communities since the first slaves were brought to the U.S. (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999), are defined as “women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities” (Collins, 2000, p. 178). Caring for other people’s children was necessary in slave communities because slave children were often orphaned by the sale or death of their mothers or because their mothers were too young to properly care for their children (Collins, 2000). Because formal education was forbidden to slaves, and because men were often separated from their children at birth, these community othermothers often became the primary educators in slave communities, teaching a broad range of academic, social, psychosocial, and spiritual lessons to children and their families in ways consistent with African traditions and values (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999).

Research indicates that the practice of othermothering continued to influence the roles that African American teachers played in segregated schools (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). Moreover, recent research suggests that this holistic approach to teaching that goes beyond academic skill acquisition is still readily apparent in contemporary African American schools (Case, 1997; Foster, 1993). In fact, Foster (1993) found that Black teacher trainees at HBCU’s often learned that it was their moral and spiritual obligation to uplift the Black community by attending not only to students’ academic development, but to their social and psychological development as well. Data from Guiffrida’s (2005a) study suggests that some African American students at PWIs share these expectations that faculty will go above and beyond their formal roles as academic advisors and instructors to attend to students psychosocial and emotional development as well.
Guiffrida (2005a) also found one surprising limitation that Black students perceived in some relationships with Black faculty, which revolved around a notion that students referred to as “raising the bar” (p. 712). Students reported that 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 that they also must perform at higher levels than White students to be viewed as equals. As a result, some Black faculty enforced higher academic standards on Black students, held them accountable by continually monitoring their academic progress in their courses, and pushed them to reach new limits in their academic work. For several students, *raising the bar* was perceived as another way in which student-centered faculty went above and beyond to assist in their students’ academic success. However, other students believed that imposing higher standards 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. Several African American female students in the study included the issue of *raising the bar* when describing liabilities to their academic success.

*Families and Friends from Home*

A second factor identified by college retention researchers as crucial to African American college student success at PWIs is student relationships with their families and friends from home. In his seminal theory of student persistence, Tinto (1993) indicated that successful college students need to *break away* from their families and friends from home in order to become integrated into the social and academic realms of college. Because African Americans are more likely than White Americans to come from low-income households and to be first-generation college students (Mortenson, 1993; Thayer, 2000), it is logical to hypothesize that breaking away from families and friends from home might be even more important for them.
Indeed, several studies have found that failure to break away from families can contribute to the academic difficulties of students of color (Arnold, 1993; Sanchez, Marder, Berry, & Ross, 1992; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Terenzini et al., 1994).

Recent research, however, has challenged the assumption that minority students must break away from members of their home communities to succeed at college. For example, Tierney (1992) argued that Tinto’s model, which was based on van Gennep’s (1960) transitional model, is not appropriate when used to describe minority college students’ transitions to college because the model was intended to describe development and transition within a culture (i.e., from adolescence to adulthood) rather than transitions from one culture to another (i.e., from a minority home community to a PWI). This argument has been backed by a number of studies that have concluded that family support was a strong predictor of minority student success at college (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Eimers & Pike, 1996; Gloria, Robinson Kurpius, Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999; Hendricks, Smith, Caplow, & Donaldson, 1996; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

Recognizing the potential for families to be both an asset and liability to African American college student academic achievement and persistence, Guiffrida (2005b) conducted a qualitative study that revealed some of the conditions under which families support and hinder African American college student academic achievement and persistence. The results showed notable differences among the ways in which academically high-achieving students described the influence of their families on their academic achievement and persistence when compared to the perspectives shared by low-achieving students and students who did not graduate (leavers). High achievers frequently mentioned the emotional, academic, and financial support they received from their families as among their most important assets while at college; whereas leavers and
low achievers frequently described lack of support from their families as contributing to their attrition.

Several of the leavers in Guiffrida’s (2005b) study said they felt their parents should have helped more with their college expenses. Although they recognized their parents’ often limited financial resources, they believed that even small amounts of financial support would have helped with additional living expenses. Other leavers and low achievers talked about feeling “guilty” or “selfish” for taking away from scarce family resources so that they could go to college (p. 56). Several of the leavers identified this financial guilt as a main reason for their attrition. Similarly, many low achievers raised this issue of financial guilt when describing how the long hours they worked at their on- and off-campus jobs had contributed to their poor academic performance in college. Many of these students said they refused to ask for or accept money from home and some even felt obligated to provide financial support to members of their families while they were at college.

Guiffrida (2005b) found that high achievers in the same study perceived their families, irrespective of their incomes or levels of education, as among their most important assets at college. Rather than encouraging them to come home to lend support, like the families of leavers and low achievers, the families of high achievers encouraged them to focus on school, regardless of the needs of the family. In fact, families of high achievers in this study often encouraged students’ to view their academic success at college as their most important obligation to their family and to the Black community. High achievers also described their family members as their most important academic counselors, even family members who did not have experience in higher education. From these family members, they were encouraged to follow their hearts, take risks, and try new things; advice which sometimes conflicted with the practical advice given to
them by faculty. After doing poorly on a test, many would go to faculty for help with content or to make their presence known, but they would go to their families for academic encouragement.

In summarizing the characteristics of supportive families, Guiffrida stated the following:

“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)

Guiffrida (2005b) concluded that to succeed at PWIs, it is important for African American students to strengthen relationships with family members who provide emotional, academic, and financial support and encourage their children to make healthy separations when transitioning to college. He also noted, however, that African American college students from families who did not value education, did not provide strong emotional and financial support, or relied on students to fulfill head-of-household duties while they were at college were at-risk for academic under-achievement and attrition.

Similar research indicates that relationships with friends from home can become both an asset and a liability to African American college students attending PWIs. For example, Terenzini et al. (1994) found that minority students perceived friends from home who did not go to college as hindering their college transitions. However, Gonzalez (2002) found that minority college students perceived relationships with friends from home as important sources of cultural
sustenance that assisted in their transitions to college. The conditions under which friends from home became an asset and a liability to African American college students are revealed by Guiffrida (2004a) in a qualitative study with African American students attending a PWI. He concluded that friends from home had the potential to become a liability to African American college student academic achievement and persistence when they expressed fear or disapproval of students’ adaptations to college or when they are unable to relate to students’ college lives. Friends from home were described by students in this study as assets when they could relate to their experiences and/or expressed strong emotional support to students.

The impact of family and friends on African American college student academic achievement and persistence can be further elaborated through the lens of the cultural-ecological model of understanding minority student academic achievement (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1992). In this model, Fordham and Ogbu argued that the meaning and value that members of students’ home communities place on education is most important in understanding African American and other underrepresented minority student academic achievement. Based on his own prior work and a review of numerous anthropological studies and theories, Ogbu theorized that involuntary minorities, or people brought into a society against their will by way of slavery or colonization (e.g. African Americans, Native Americans, some Mexican & Puerto Rican Americans) tend to have more difficulty in school than immigrants, even though immigrants experience similar language and other cultural differences from the majority.

Ogbu (1992) asserted that unlike immigrants, who seek to assimilate the values of the majority culture, involuntary minority groups tend to develop a shared sense of cultural inversion, or a tendency to reject norms and values of the dominant, oppressive culture and to embrace opposing values and behaviors. Cultural inversion among African Americans is most
easily recognized by differences in dress and language that contrast with mainstream American styles; however, according to Fordham and Ogbu, the idea of cultural inversion can also be used to understand and explain the educational achievement gap that exists in this country between Blacks and Whites. Ogbu argued that African Americans have developed a *collective identity* that devalues education and that this collective identity has been perpetuated in the years since slavery for two primary reasons. First, since the abolition of slavery, schooling has traditionally been defined by White culture and ideology and has had the visible presence of a predominantly White staff of teachers and administrators. Second, African Americans have come to the realization that, because of their birth-ascribed membership, school success does not necessarily equate to economic and social opportunities commensurate with Whites having similar levels of academic attainment and achievement.

In a qualitative study with African American students attending a predominantly black high school, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) found that students tended to equate academic success to “acting White”, meaning that academically successful students were consequently labeled by their peers as uncritically accepting of White values and were accused of crossing forbidden cultural boundaries. The researchers found that many students chose not to become academically successful for fear of being ostracized by their peers. Those African American students who did succeed academically faced what the authors described as “the burden of acting White” and developed survival strategies to cloak their academic success in order to maintain membership among their peers. Examples of these survival strategies included acting out in class (i.e., class clown behavior), hiding their study habits so others would think their achievement came naturally, refusing to answer in class or join academic clubs and organizations, and by avoiding social engagement with other academically successful kids. High achieving Black students
would choose instead to befriend tougher, less studious peers hence hiding their identity as scholars and academic achievers.

Ogbu (1992) argued that beyond the social pressures of doing well in school, there are also psychological concerns that can constrain African American student academic achievement, like the fear of being disloyal to their people and the fear of not being accepted by White America should they embrace academic achievement as a core value. Ogbu also argued that this problem was perpetuated among the African American community because unlike many immigrants, who maintain status within their immigrant communities after achieving academic/professional success, many African Americans view educational success as a way out and, therefore, those who do succeed academically tend to physically and metaphorically leave their home communities. Although the cultural-ecological model offered by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) has been criticized for ignoring individual developmental differences, including the role of racial identity, protective/resiliency factors, and individual reactions to indirect racism (see Spencer, Noll, Stolzfus, & Harpalani, 2001), the model, nonetheless, provides an important lens for counselors to understand aspects of the African American college experience and offers potential outlets for student support, advocacy, and systemic change.

African American Student Organizations

A third factor apparent in higher education/student affairs literature that is related to African American college student academic achievement and persistence at PWIs is involvement in African American student organizations, such as Black student government, Black academic honors groups, local advocacy groups (e.g., NAACP chapters), Black Greek letter associations, etc. Because African American students’ norms and values often differ from those of the White majority at PWIs, Tinto (1993) has theorized that it is especially important for African American
students to become socially integrated into the life of the university in order to succeed. Tinto contended that unlike many White students, whose social integration into the college environment occurs largely through informal associations with peers, social integration for African American and other underrepresented minority students at PWIs occurs mostly through more formal associations like those inherent among members of minority student organizations. This hypothesis has been backed by research that indicates that involvement in minority student organizations can assist minority students in bridging the cultural gap that exists between their home environments and the environments at PWIs (DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Mallinckrodt & Sedlacek, 1987; McClung, 1988). Murguia, Padilla, and Pavel (1991) found that participating in minority student organizations allowed minority students to scale down the campus environment by providing “ethnic enclaves” (p. 436) and Trevino, Gonzalez, and Trevino (1997) found that participating in minority student organizations allowed minority students to “retain and nurture a sense of ethnic identity on campus” (p. 134).

Guiffrida (2003) conducted a qualitative study with 88 African American students attending a PWI to shed light on the social/cultural benefits to African American students at PWIs who participate in African American student organizations. His results suggested several important ways in which participation in these organizations supported students and facilitated their integration into the social environment at PWIs. First, students believed their participation in these organizations provided them opportunities to connect with Black professionals (both on-campus and in the local professional community) who would provide mentorship and support; relationships which research indicates can be difficult for Black students to establish at PWIs (Flemming, 1984; Schwitzer, et al., 1999). Participation in African American student organizations also provided students with opportunities to give back to other Blacks through
community service projects and by advocating for systemic changes on campus, both of which students felt were important in feeling like successful, contributing members of the African American community on campus. Most importantly, involvement in African American student organizations provided them with a “respite” from the White world and a place where they felt comfortable letting their guards down to dress, talk, and socialize in ways that were comfortable and familiar without fear of perpetuating negative Black stereotypes (p. 9). Guiffrida concluded that these benefits of participation in African American student organizations were particularly salient to the social integration of students from predominantly Black home communities, although he noted that Black student organizations also provided important but very different challenges and benefits to Black students from predominantly White home communities.

Although research has documented numerous benefits for Black college students who participate in African American student organizations, other research has called into question whether participation in these groups is beneficial for all African American students (McCauley, 1988; Nora, Cabrera, & Pascarella, 1996; Mayo, Murguia, & Pavel, 1995). In her seminal research examining the experiences of African American students at HBCUs and PWIs, Flemming (1984) found that involvement in African American student organizations can become problematic to the academic achievement of African American students at PWIs by diverting them from their academics. This finding was supported by results of three qualitative studies with high-achieving Black students at PWIs who reported that they tended to defer involvement in non-academic activities in favor of academic pursuits (Fries-Britt, 1995; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Hines, 1997). Additionally, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) suggested the potential for involvement in Black student organizations to hinder the social integration of Black students by isolating them from the larger student population.
In an effort to understand the conditions under which participation in African American students organizations supported and hindered the academic achievement and persistence of African American students, Guiffrida (2004b) compared the perspectives of academically high- and low-achieving African American students attending a PWI. He found that although most students reported high levels of involvement in African American student organizations, salient differences emerged among the ways in which high achievers and low achievers viewed and participated in these groups. Guiffrida found that low achievers were more likely to describe themselves as over-involved with African American student organizations to the point that their involvement interfered with their academic achievement. High achievers tended to describe themselves as actively-involved and detailed the benefits of their participation in these groups on their academic achievement and persistence.

In exploring the differences between self-described over-involved low achievers and actively-involved high achievers, Guiffrida (2004b) uncovered salient differences between the definitions of success and leadership styles between the two groups. Over-involved low achievers tended to hold definitions of success that valued service and giving back to the Black community over academic success, several even going as far as labeling academically high-achieving students who were less active in these groups as “selfish” (p.9). Actively-involved high achievers, on the other hand, valued academic success above all else in defining a successful African American student and labeled self-proclaimed over-involved students as using their involvement as a poor excuse for their academic lapses.

Additionally, differences emerged in the espoused leadership styles of over-involved low achievers and actively involved high achievers in Guiffrida’s (2004b) study. Over-involved low achievers described leadership styles that were more hierarchical (see Allen, Stelzner, &
Wielkiewicz, 1998), meaning they were more active and controlling of the group and they tended to take on disproportionate amounts of responsibility and work when acting in leadership positions. Contrarily, actively-involved high achievers described themselves as having leadership styles that were more systemic, meaning they were more flexible, open to a greater diversity of ideas and skills, able to facilitate the group towards a process of adaptation, and shared group responsibilities with other members. In fact, several high achievers attributed their leadership styles to their abilities to balance their service obligations to their African American student organizations while maintaining high academic achievement. Guiffrida concluded that student leadership style may contribute to whether involvement in African American student organizations becomes an asset or liability to the academic achievement of African American students attending PWIs.

*Implications for School and College Counselors*

The results of the college student affairs and cultural studies research reviewed in this paper provide concrete directions for counselors working with African American students in high school and higher education settings. Generally, the counseling implications that emanate from these research studies underscore three important themes to consider when working with African American students. These themes include a) adopting expanded definitions of student-centeredness that are consistent with African American expectations, b) remaining mindful of the complexities inherent in maintaining strong ties to family and friends at home, and c) encouraging participation in student organizations that provide support for the shared concerns of African American students. Specific suggestions related to each of these themes are elaborated below.
Expanding the Definition of Student-Centeredness

Research suggests that college counselors at PWIs are likely to be more effective with their African American clients by working within a context that acknowledges African American students’ expanded concept of student-centeredness. When working with either individual students or small groups, college counselors can be more effective if they anticipate African American clients’ experiences with covert racial stereotyping that may occur in classrooms at PWIs and recognize the disappointment students may experience with the perceived lack of involvement from White faculty. Conversely, counselors can help African American students process the problems associated with the higher expectations placed on them by African American faculty. Counselors who anticipate the expectations and disappointments of African American students will be better prepared to process potentially injurious thoughts and feelings before they take a serious toll on academic achievement. Additionally, knowledge of student expectations around faculty relationships can help prepare counselors to strategize alternative sources of support for their clients.

Counselors in higher education are also well positioned to assume the role of change agents within their institutions. By offering professional development venues for professors and administrators, counselors can help teaching faculty develop strategies for assisting African American students in their adjustment to life in PWIs and can help college administrators involved in areas such as retention and residential life create structures and opportunities that address expectations related to adult support. More generally, counselors at PWIs should promote and lead additional diversity training for college faculty and staff in an effort to reduce
egregious stereotyping and to allow faculty and staff to become more sensitive to the unique needs of their African American students.

High school counselors can utilize insights concerning the African American notion of student-centeredness to inform a prevention program serving college-bound African American students. High school students who are anticipating entrance into a PWI would doubtlessly benefit from knowledge regarding potential feelings of alienation and lack of support as they enter college. Counselors who are mindful of these challenges can provide students with strategies and resources that will help them in meeting their full potential as they enter an unfamiliar academic environment.

Ties to Family and Friends from Home

College counselors at PWIs have the opportunity to assume a multiplicity of roles that can assist in the social adjustment of incoming African American students who are leaving friends and family behind. Prevention efforts might include a focus on the topic of social adjustment as part of an African American student orientation program. African American students and their families could be introduced to the common dilemmas and conflicts experienced by students as they attempt to integrate their new and old lives. Inviting African American faculty and administrators to participate in this effort to ensure students that they do not generally have to sacrifice friends, family and personal identity to be successful would also serve the function of allowing Black students to become acquainted with college personnel who understand them and are willing to work with them in a supportive role. Additionally, upperclassmen who have successfully made the transition into the PWI environment can be called upon to offer suggestions and act as
peer mentors. College counselors could also help parents to strategize ways of replacing financial and other support provided by the student.

College counselors who are providing individual or group counseling to African American students should remain mindful of potential interpersonal conflicts that may erupt as students are faced with trying to maintain secure relationships with family and old friends while adjusting to new relationships and new ways of being in the world that they fear will alienate family and destroy friendships. Having this knowledge is of particular importance when working with students unable to articulate their sources of anxiety, sadness and fear. Counselors working with this student population should know that there will be times when family and friends are uncompromising in their wanting the student to remain loyal and patently reject change. In these cases significant loss may become a painful reality. For students attempting to reconcile such painful emotions, forging strong new relationships is imperative and can be aided by the suggestions covered in the section below on the importance of connecting with individuals in Black student organizations.

High school counselors can assist in preparing African American students and their families for their transitions to college by helping them understand the complex challenges they may face when attempting to balance new academic and social connections at PWIs with connections to home. Helping parents and students understand that subtle changes in thinking and behaving are normal and can indicate positive growth and development rather than an abandonment of family/community values could ease the “burden of acting White” that some African American students may experience during their transitions to PWIs. Engaging the help of Black students who have already made the
transition to a primarily-White college environment can give high school students encouragement that the challenges they are about to face are not insurmountable. Helping transitioning students to anticipate interpersonal conflicts and providing them with coping strategies may effectively circumvent crises that impact academic performance and jeopardize the ability of the new student to maintain attendance at their PWI.

High school counselors should also strive to help parents understand how important the emotional and financial support they provide their children is to college success. Counselors can teach parents how to provide this support in ways that encourage and motivate students rather than induce guilt for taking away from family resources. Parents need to be reassured that their children are not abandoning them and that as much as ever, these children need their support as they engage in a daunting new chapter in their lives. In attempting to process parents loss and fear of abandonment, it is imperative that the counselor remain mindful of possible social and economic exigencies endured by the parents of upwardly mobile students and actively help these parents to strategize ways of finding sources of support that will partially replace that which has been provided by the child about to enter college.

More generally, school counselors as change agents in African American communities should seek creative ways to actively challenge community biases that may covertly connect academic achievement solely to White American values. Counselors can assist in deconstructing these long-standing biases not only through their work with students and parents, but also by finding ways to collaborate with academically and professionally successful African Americans in ways that establish them as community
role models. Successful and respected African American professionals can serve as examples to students and parents of how it is possible to simultaneously be a professional and maintain core aspects of Black identity.

_Fostering Participation in African American Student Organizations_  

Research conducted in PWI’s suggests that school and college counselors should, for a variety of reasons, encourage African American students to actively participate in African American student organizations. First, this contact with student organizations can serve as a means for students to give back to the African American community. At a time when new African American college students are coping with issues of abandoning relatives and friends in their home environment, working with organizations that strengthen the African American presence in the college community can give new students a sense of purposeful belonging.

Second, participation in organizations can connect students with African American mentors, and help them to find a comfortable place to socialize, connect and “be themselves” with other African American students. Not only can this contact begin to fill some of the void left by leaving the familiarity of home, students can process feelings about identity and close relationships with people who have experienced similar feelings and have found ways of reconciling these emotions. Similarly, new African American college students can be encouraged to join a church community that emulates their home church experience. Active membership in a religious community can foster belonging, provide mentorship and othermothering, reinforce identity, and keep spiritual commitment alive.
Third, college counselors can assume the role of systems consultant by providing expertise and insight regarding African American student college transition to campus organizations. This expertise could be extended to residential life administrators and counselors as well. Additionally, counselors can become change agents in PWIs where insufficient attention has been given to establishing African American student organizations. Counselors can not only help to establish more organizations, they can assume faculty advisor rolls. More generally, counselors acting as change agents at PWIs could lobby for sufficient resources and attention to attract, hire, and retain African American faculty and staff to serve as role models and mentors to African American students in student organizations and in the classroom.

Counselors actively promoting African American student organizations should be mindful of the time that students need to devote to scholarship in order to be academically successful. African American students should be cautioned about the dangers of becoming over-involved in organization activities to the point where academic work is neglected. This caveat is particularly important for students coming from school districts with limited advanced placement course options and classroom experiences that do not match the rigor found in wealthy, primarily White suburban districts. In this vein, counselors could also implement psycho-educational programs that teach students systemic approaches to leadership and that help to shape their definitions of success by prioritizing their own academic achievements as a service to the African American community.

Limitations and Conclusions

The research reviewed in this paper does not provide a blanket for understanding all African American students’ experiences at PWIs. There are certainly African American students,
especially those from predominantly White home communities, who may not experience the same issues that are outlined in this research. Counselors should use caution, critical thinking, and their own intuition in deciding which interventions are appropriate for preparing and supporting each African American student for their experiences at PWIs. Despite these limitations, the results of the research reviewed in this paper indicate that school and college counselors who understand the sociocultural challenges that African American college students face in their transitions to PWIs can provide an invaluable means of support and advocacy for these students in order to facilitate their academic success.
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