University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

GSE Publications | Graduate School of Education

1-1-2009

Race-Conscious Student Engagement Practices and the Equitable Distribution of Enriching Educational Experiences

Shaun R. Harper, Ph.D.
University of Pennsylvania, sharper1@upenn.edu

Suggested Citation:
Harper, S. R. (2009). Race-conscious student engagement practices and the equitable distribution of enriching educational experiences. Liberal Education, 95(4), 38-45.
http://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/le-fa09/le-fa09_Harper.cfm

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/208
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Race-Conscious Student Engagement Practices and the Equitable Distribution of Enriching Educational Experiences

Abstract
In this article, race-conscious student engagement is offered as an effective approach to narrowing racialized achievement disparities among college students, while simultaneously improving the experiences and outcomes of racial minority undergraduates. This version of student engagement is defined, and the mutual benefits it confers to students, educators, and predominantly white institutions are described in the article. But first, current racial gaps in the engagement of undergraduates are illuminated and discussed.

Disciplines
Education

Comments
Suggested Citation:
Harper, S. R. (2009). Race-conscious student engagement practices and the equitable distribution of enriching educational experiences. Liberal Education, 95(4), 38-45.

http://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/le-fa09/le-fa09_Harper.cfm

This journal article is available at ScholarlyCommons: http://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/208

SHAUN R. HARPER

Race-Conscious Student and the Equitable Distribution

FEATURED TOPIC

Race-conscious student engagement can compel more racial minority students to reflect on powerful learning opportunities, institutional enablers of achievement, and outcomes-productive experiences

TO REFLECT ON THEIR EXPERIENCES at a private liberal arts college, ten students of color met with the president, key administrators, and several white faculty members a few weeks before graduation. All from low-income families and urban environments, these undergraduates had entered the institution through a program designed to protect them from the alienation and disengagement often experienced by underrepresented students. Before the start of their freshman year, this cohort was equipped with resistant responses to the racist stereotypes and differential treatment they would likely encounter, they were socialized to rely on each other for friendship and support, and they were exposed to recent liberal arts college alumni who shared with them useful navigational insights. In sum, they entered this predominantly white institution prepared to productively confront racially stressful educational conditions. Four years later, they attended a meeting to reflect as seniors on how strikingly different their college experiences were from what they had initially expected. Most notably, they felt institutional agents had done a commendable job of engaging them, both inside and outside the classroom.

Each student described meaningful collaborative experiences with professors on campus. Given the racial homogeneity of the faculty and administration, they were admittedly surprised to have been sought out for participation in an array of enriching educational experiences. The four who studied abroad characterized the experience as life-changing. Those who spent summers working in professional settings related to their majors spoke enthusiastically about the value internships added to their classroom learning and readiness for postcollege endeavors. All expressed gratitude for the effort educators expended not only to make them feel welcome, but also to ensure they graduated with the same outcomes and portfolios of rich learning experiences long enjoyed by white students at the college. Finally, seven of the ten attributed their admission to highly selective graduate schools to the investment professors had made in them; the remaining three suspected they would have fared less well on the job market had they not been afforded opportunities to enhance their leadership, problem-solving, and communication skills via out-of-class activities, student organizations, and service learning experiences.

This fictitious story indicates *what is possible* when educators and administrators take seriously the responsibility of engaging diverse student populations in educationally purposeful ways. The ten students' reflections substantiate claims regarding equity and inclusiveness that institutions make in admissions materials, on Web sites, and in mission statements. Furthermore, their assessment of the college experience differs markedly from what has been routinely reported in higher education research concerning the disengagement and alienation of racial minorities at predominantly white institutions.

In this article, race-conscious student engagement is offered as a method likely to

SHAUN R. HARPER *is assistant professor of higher education management at the University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education.*
This article was adapted from a paper presented at "Liberal Education and Effective Practice," a national conference cosponsored by Clark University and the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Engagement Practices of Enriching Educational Experiences

University of Pennsylvania

University of Pennsylvania

compel more racial minority students to reflect on powerful learning opportunities, institutional enablers of achievement, and outcomes-productive experiences similar to those described by the seniors in the story. This version of student engagement is defined, and the benefits it accrues for faculty members and institutions overall are made clear later in the article. But first, current racial gaps in the engagement of undergraduates are illuminated and discussed.

Racial disparities in high-impact educational experiences

In a 2006 article, University of Southern California researchers Edlyn Vallejo Peña, Estela Mara Bensimon, and Julia Colyar observed that "not only do African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans have lower graduation rates than whites and Asian Americans, they also experience inequalities in just about every indicator of academic success—from earned grade point average to placement on the dean's list to graduation rates in competitive majors" (48). While these and other racialized outcomes disparities cannot be attributed to a narrow set of explanatory factors, one thing is known for sure: college students who are actively engaged inside and outside the classroom are considerably more likely than their disengaged peers to persist through baccalaureate degree attainment.

How students are advantaged by educationally purposeful engagement has been well documented and clearly explained (Harper and Quaye 2009; Kuh et al. 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Also, Rendón (1994) has revealed the academic and interpersonal benefits associated with using engagement opportunities to validate racial minority students, particularly at colleges and universities where they are underrepresented. Furthermore, engaged students typically accrue the desired outcomes that are central to liberal education—knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2008).

The Enriching Educational Experiences benchmark on the National Survey of Student Engagement (2008) includes a robust set of activities that are known to enhance student learning and development:

- having serious conversations with peers from different ethnic backgrounds, religious faiths, and political orientations
- actively participating in student organizations and out-of-class activities
- using the Internet, instant messaging, and other electronic resources to work collaboratively on class assignments
- participating in a learning community or some other formal program where groups of students enroll together in two or more common classes
- taking foreign language courses
- completing an independent study or self-designed major under the supervision of a faculty member

In addition to these, Indiana University Professor George D. Kuh (2008) has identified a set of "high-impact" educational practices that necessitate active learning and sustained engagement, such as study abroad programs, service-learning opportunities, undergraduate research programs, summer internships, and senior year capstone projects.

Kuh highlights these high-impact practices as being particularly profound because they require students to interact in educationally purposeful ways with professors and peers, including those who are different from themselves, often over extended time periods. Another feature of these practices is that students typically receive substantive feedback on their performance while becoming more skillful at synthesizing and applying what they learn in one setting (e.g., a community service site) to another environment or situation (e.g., an internship or the classroom). Additionally, they afford students deeply reflective opportunities to clarify their personal values and better

understand themselves in relation to others. Specifically regarding racial minority students, Kuh uses data from the National Survey of Student Engagement to acknowledge the *compensatory effects* of engagement in these high-impact practices. For example, he notes that, as they became more actively engaged, lower-achieving Latino first-year students earned grade point averages that surpassed those of their white counterparts. Also, highly engaged black students were more likely to exceed their white peers in persistence toward baccalaureate degree attainment. Kuh concludes that, "while participation in effective educational activities generally benefits all students, the salutary effects are even greater for students who begin college at lower achievement levels, as well as students of color, compared with white students" (19).

Despite the magnitude of these high-impact engagement experiences, racial minority undergraduates are considerably less likely than their white peers to enjoy the educational benefits associated with them, as shown in Table 1 (below). At first glance, engagement differences between white seniors and their racial minority peers may seem trivial. However, taken as a whole, the sum of these gaps is both troubling and noteworthy. Across the five experiences, white students cumulatively outnumber Latinos by 23 percent, blacks by 20 percent, and Asian Americans by 6 percent. Service learning is the only high-impact activity in which racial minorities are invariably more engaged than white students. At the end of his report, Kuh offers several important suggestions for improving achievement and increasing student engagement in high-impact educational experiences. In the next section, I offer an approach to educational practice that can effectively close racialized engagement gaps between students of color and their white peers.

What are race-conscious engagement practices?

Effective educational practice demands consciousness of the environmental factors that either stifle or enable engagement among racially diverse groups of students. Such awareness should compel educators and administrators to respond in ways that increase their capacity to normalize the kinds of experiences described by the ten students of color at the beginning of this article. What I propose here is a version of student engagement that is fundamentally different from commonly accepted definitions of the term.

In my view, effective educators treat engagement as a verb, rather than a noun, and attribute the presence of engagement inequities to institutional dysfunction. That is, the popular approach of only determining *what students do* to become engaged must be counterbalanced by examinations of *what educators do* to engage students. Put differently, questions concerning effort must be shifted from the individual student to her or his institution. Effective educators avoid asking, what's wrong with these students, why aren't they getting engaged? Instead, they aggressively explore the institution's shortcomings and ponder how faculty members and administrators could alter their practices to distribute the benefits of engagement more equitably. Accepting institutional responsibility for minority student engagement and success is the first step to race-conscious educational practice.

Table 1. Percent Participation in High-Impact Activities among College Seniors by Race

	Research with Faculty	Study Abroad	Service Learning	Internship	Senior Experience
African American/Black	17	9	51	45	27
Asian/Pacific Islander	22	14	49	50	28
Caucasian/White	19	15	45	56	34
Latino/Hispanic	17	11	47	45	26

SOURCE: National Survey of Student Engagement, as cited in Kuh (2008)

Tufts University

Also important is the distinction between equality (treating all students the same) and equity (giving students what they need to accrue the same outcomes as others in a particular context). Race-conscious educators acknowledge qualitative differences in the experiences of racial minority students, especially when few are enrolled and same-race mentors are in short supply. Pitzer College, for example, enrolled a total of twenty black male undergraduates and employed only three full-time black faculty members in 2007; Earlham College enrolled thirteen Latina undergraduates, but employed only one Latina professor full time in 2007 (National Center for Education Statistics 2008). Race-conscious educators

understand that on campuses such as these, the underrepresentation of certain minority groups requires tremendous institutional effort to make equitable the powerful educational outcomes associated with active engagement. This would entail, for instance, professors deliberately inviting minority students who ask interesting questions in class to their offices afterward to brainstorm ways in which they might collaboratively explore deeper insights into such questions.

Why would an administrator or faculty member voluntarily engage in all the practices necessary to engage racial minority students?

At the many institutions that are demographically similar to Pitzer and Earlham, expecting minority undergraduates to comfortably initiate interactions with faculty, seek out engagement opportunities with the same ease as their white peers, and visit campus offices staffed by people who lack cultural competence, unfairly puts the onus entirely on the students. Contrarily, institutional agents who embody what Peña, Bensimon, and Colyar (2006) call "equity-mindedness" proactively foster collaborative relationships with and on behalf of students who are likely to be harmed or distracted by racism, routine racial microaggressions and stereotyping, and constant reminders of their underrepresentation. In response to previously noted racial differences in study abroad, for example, instead of presuming racial minority students will be self-inspired to inquire about overseas learning opportunities, staff in the international programs office should work with ethnic culture centers, professors who teach ethnic studies courses, and leaders of minority student organizations to more effectively disseminate information. Also, assembling a panel of racial minority students who previously studied abroad to reflect on their experiences and demystify the application process is another way of making such opportunities more attractive to their same-race peers.

Race-conscious educators do not embrace colorblindness. They understand that "I do not see color" is an overused and offensive way of denying the unique experiential realities of racial minority students in predominantly white situations. Instead, these educators engage in qualitative questioning as a form of assessment. They regularly invite students to describe how they experience classrooms and the larger campus environment, to disclose how they spend their time outside the classroom, to articulate their expectations of the institution and its agents, and to recommend ways the institution can enhance their learning, development, and engagement. Race-consciousness compels educators to use firsthand insights from students in self-reflective ways by attentively pondering such questions as, how do I contribute to the cyclical production of engagement disparities that disadvantage racial minority students? How can I more deliberately engage these students in my research and other value-added, enriching educational experiences on campus? What have I done to help racial minorities who have taken my courses get into competitive graduate schools? How do personal biases and stereotypes affect my engagement with racial minority students?

Race-conscious educational practice also occurs without the tokenization of racial minorities. While educators and administrators should enact their engagement efforts with a high degree of intentionality, they must avoid congratulating themselves on working closely with one, two, or only a few of these students. Alternatively, they ought to collaborate with engaged students to strategically get other underrepresented minorities involved in high-impact activities. Lastly, race-consciousness requires replacing confessions of inadequacy ("I don't really know how to get minority students engaged") with committed efforts to remediate personal and professional shortcomings. This occurs through reading the student engagement literature, attending conferences where practical suggestions for engaging diverse student populations are offered, seeking corrective assistance from experienced colleagues, and pursuing instructive insights and creative techniques from high-performing institutions that effectively engage racial minority students. (For additional strategies, see Harper and Quaye 2009.)

How engagement can be mutually beneficial

For sure, race-conscious student engagement, at least as described in the previous section, requires considerable effort from institutional agents. So, why would an administrator or faculty member voluntarily engage in all the

Richard Freeland and Shaun Harper

practices necessary to engage racial minority students? On its own, an altruistic response like "because it is the right thing to do" is shortsighted. If that were indeed a sufficient motivator, more educators would already be actively engaged in working to close racialized engagement gaps between minority students and their white peers. Critical race theorists posit that whites who endeavor to improve the status and conditions of racial minorities rarely do so without first identifying the personal costs and gains associated with such efforts (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Thus, it is important to make clear how majority persons will benefit from their work with and on behalf of minorities. Not well documented in the higher education literature are the educational profits conferred to individual faculty and predominantly white institutions when racial minority students are engaged in an assortment of high-impact activities. To reveal these benefits, I continue the story introduced at the beginning of this article.

After listening to the ten seniors of color reflect on what they gained from participation in enriching educational experiences, the faculty and administrators shared their perspectives. A sociology professor began by talking about a paper she produced with a student of color who had been actively engaged in service-learning work. Reportedly, this student's deep understanding of poverty within the local community enriched their data analysis and enabled them to offer a powerful set of implications that the professor contends she would have been unable to conceptualize on her own. This example helped another faculty member recall his eight-week summer trip to Bolivia and how the Latino students who went along challenged him to reconsider erroneous interpretations he had long held about the culture. Later, after having previously received multiple rejections, he was finally able to get his article accepted for publication in a top Latin American studies journal. He attributed this and a range of instructional benefits to his study abroad experience with students who possessed a better understanding of Bolivian culture.

An assistant professor in the chemistry department confessed that she had attended predominantly white institutions all her life—in fact, there were no people of color in her doctoral program. Thus, her prior interactions with racial minorities had been practically nonexistent, and she began her faculty career with several misconceptions about their aptitude for high achievement in science. But working closely with one black male student on his senior thesis began to disrupt stereotypical views she had long held. Likewise, having a Native American senior work with her as a teaching assistant the following year also helped this faculty member become more comfortable interacting productively with people from different racial backgrounds.

Administrators in the meeting described how increasing minority student engagement had benefitted the institution. For example, the dean of enrollment management noted drastic improvements in first-to-second-year

persistence and four-year graduation rates. That is, as persistence and graduation rates escalated for minority students, the overall rates for the college increased. Another administrator quickly acknowledged how these higher rates boosted the college's upward movement in the most recent *U.S. News & World Report* ranking of liberal arts colleges. Moreover, the director of career services added that companies seeking to hire a diverse workforce were finally starting to recruit from the college because minority students were graduating with portfolios of experiences that set them apart from their counterparts at other institutions. And the president praised her colleagues for helping the college overcome its longstanding reputation as an alienating environment for students of color; as a result, racial minorities were applying and enrolling in record numbers. More importantly, the institution was finally starting to make good on its promise to offer an inclusive living-learning environment for *all* students, the president added. She also shared data on the increase in donations from young alumni of color, as well as a roster of recent alumni of color who were enrolled in highly selective graduate and professional degree programs at major universities across the country.

Again, this story indicates *what is possible* when educators and administrators take seriously the responsibility of engaging diverse student populations in educationally purposeful ways. Indeed, everyone in the meeting recognized the mutual benefits conferred to the institution, the faculty, and the students of color as a result of race-conscious engagement practices. Although the story is fictitious, the benefits described are quite attainable.

Conclusion

In our 2009 book, *Student Engagement in Higher Education: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Approaches for Diverse Populations*, Stephen John Quaye and I declared that "weak institutions are those that expect students to engage themselves. . . . A clear signal of institutional deficiency is when there are few ramifications for those who either blatantly refuse or unintentionally neglect to enact the practices known to produce rich outcomes for students" (6). Similarly, I argue here that an additional demonstration of institutional weakness is the mishandling of effective educational practices that could help close racialized gaps in engagement and student outcomes. For institutions that publicly espouse commitments to diversity, the inequitable distribution of enriching educational experiences ought to be shameful. Race consciousness in practice offers promising rewards for minority students, white faculty, and the institution overall. The outcomes achieved through high-impact educational activities are too powerful for us to continue to allow some students to accrue them while disadvantaged others passively observe. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author's name on the subject line.

REFERENCES

Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2008. *College learning for the new global century: A report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and American's Promise*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Delgado, R., and J. Stefancic. 2001. *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York: New York University Press.

Harper, S. R., and S. J. Quaye, eds. 2009. *Student engagement in higher education: Theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for diverse populations*. New York: Routledge.

Kuh, G. D. 2008. *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Kuh, G. D., J. Kinzie, J. A. Buckley, B. K. Bridges, and J. C. Hayek. 2007. *Piecing together the student success puzzle: Research, propositions, and recommendations: ASHE Higher Education Report* 32 (5). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

National Center for Education Statistics. 2008. *Integrated postsecondary education data system*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

National Survey of Student Engagement. *2008. Promoting engagement for all students: The imperative to look within*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.

Pascarella, E. T., and P. T. Terenzini. 2005. *How college affects students, Volume 2: A third decade of research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Peña, E. V., E. M. Bensimon, and J. C. Colyar. 2006. Contextual problem defining: Learning to think and act from the standpoint of equity. *Liberal Education* 92 (2): 48–55.

Rendón, L. I. 1994. Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education* 19 (1): 33–51.