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Promising Practices in African American Rural Education College Transitions and Postsecondary Experiences

**Loni Crumb
Crystal R. Chambers**

“We are preaching to the choir.” This statement often reflects how we feel when we speak on or write about topics concerning race, particularly when related to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) populations. The audiences for our work seem to be made up of majority BIPOC educators, scholars, and community activists who are already engaged in social justice endeavors. Nevertheless, we forge our efforts forward, as racial, geographical, educational, and other inequities are still existent and systemically and unfairly impact BIPOC youth generally, and African American youth specifically, who reside in rural areas. We are grateful for the collaboration with the editorial team from *The Rural Educator* who have provided us a platform to provide promising educational practices to advance equity and advocacy efforts for African Americans in rural communities. We may be preaching to the choir, but the choir needs to practice.

In 1903, W.E.B. Dubois proposed, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” Unfortunately, 118 years later, African Americans confront the same issues in American (US) society, still striving for equality of opportunity in areas such as education, employment, and housing. The majority of African Americans contemporarily live in the South (DeShay, 2020), concentrated across the Southern Black Belt (Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia) and the Mississippi Delta (Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi) areas. Six of these states contain 20% or higher Black populations. Within this area and bordering mid-Atlantic states, 72 counties are 50% or more Black (Schaeffer, 2019). Despite demographic realities, the stereotypical imagery of rurality is Whiteness (Groenke & Roper, 2010), and the misconception that most Black people in the US live in impoverished urban areas abounds (Semuels, 2016).

To continue the legacy of advancing equity in education for African American students through a

particular focus on those in rural areas, we published a book entitled *African American Rural Education College Transitions and Postsecondary Experiences*. In this book, we brought forward novel perspectives and focused attention on the educational experiences of rural African American students, administrators, and educators. We focused on the transitional phases, from secondary to postsecondary education for African Americans, as the attainment of a four-year degree helps many achieve upward mobility in the United States (Walpole, 2007). The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the practices proposed by the contributing authors across multiple disciplines that may help to improve the educational and professional experiences of African Americans in rural spaces. We discuss promising practices in secondary and postsecondary education and conclude with critical perspectives from African American educators and educational leaders in rural spaces.

Secondary Education Pathways

Rural educators, administrators, counselors, families, and community stakeholders play vital roles in creating higher education pathways for African American students. Accordingly, an overarching promising practice is to promote African American youth's college aspirations via various school-university-community collaborations (SUCCs) starting at the elementary school level (Cokley & Crumb, 2020; Davis et al., 2020; Gafford, 2020; Hines et al., 2020).

Towards this end, one of the greatest assets in African American rural spaces is the community. Gafford (2020) recommends building on the social and cultural capital already present within these communities to enhance African American students' academic self-concept and college knowledge. For example, school personnel at all levels can host alumni days, wherein former successful students return and talk about their college attendance and

experiences and discuss challenges and lessons learned with younger students, including innovative ways to finance college.

Furthermore, the issue of isolation and transportation access is an ongoing concern for rural African American students. Thus, school trips to varied types of higher education institutions (e.g., two- and four-year, minority serving, predominantly White, private, or public institutions) are essential to providing collegiate exposure for rural African American youth. Within this vein, school personnel must be intentional to target students who face the most obstacles and involve families in these endeavors to account for students with first-generation college attendance status and families who may not have adequate financial resources to take these trips independently. Gafford also proposes several creative options for early college exposure for rural students, such as virtual reality college tours, online college scavenger hunts, or digital pen pals with a college student or representatives to provide early college exposure and providing information about hybrid and online options for education. Such activities promote early positive collegiate experiences and help establish long-term relationships between rural African American students and various colleges/universities (Gafford, 2020).

Mentorship programs with local sorority or fraternal organizations are also a key pathway to increase college knowledge for rural African American students (Cokley & Crumb 2020; Gafford, 2020; Hines et al., 2020), as these groups can galvanize the cultural, social, and economic capital already present in these communities. Such initiatives are vital for African American males to edify their academic efficacy, thereby changing the narrative of athletics as their primary pathway to college (Hines et al., 2020).

Lastly, thousands of rural African American students lack access to advanced learner and gifted education programs, typically made accessible to White and Asian students (Ford, 2013). Scholars of gifted education (Davis et al., 2020) argue for adopting inclusive, culturally conscious definitions and measurements of achievement, as traditional intelligence tests do not reliably predict the potential for successful academic performance and retention on the collegiate level. Hence, rural educators and leaders must disavow deficit orientations that often translate into biased identification protocols for recruitment in gifted education for rural African

American youth. For example, avoiding racialized tracking, a by-product of deficit-oriented ideology, in which teachers make referrals to gifted and advanced learner programs based on the stereotypical beliefs that racial groups are hierarchically ordered according to intelligence and ability (Cokley & Crumb, 2020; Davis & Moore, 2016). Additionally, processes to increase the representation of rural African American youth in gifted education should also consider aspects such as intellectual, creative, artistic, and leadership capacities aligned with the federal definition of gifted education (see The International Gifted Consortium, 2019). Overall, SUCCs across all levels of secondary education can help secure resources for intentional student programming, professional development, and networking opportunities for those living and working in rural areas while simultaneously providing collaborative spaces for researchers to address issues facing rural schools.

Postsecondary Education Pathways

When one hears the phrase “college isn’t for everybody,” one often finds that not only was college foundational in the speaker’s pathway to adulthood but that without question, college is or will be part of the life experiences of their progeny. As such, “college isn’t for everybody” is essentialist marginalization of those deemed other. In the chapter from Chambers (2020), we find no difference in the mathematics preparation or performance of African Americans who attend two-year institutions, such as community colleges, and those who do not. As mathematics is the greatest predictor of college enrollment, there are no academic barriers to community college attendance from a predictive perspective and an institutional perspective. The concern raised is that political efforts to make community college education free may entice rural students to enroll, especially those who face financial difficulties and have the ability to excel in four-year institutional domains (i.e., academic undermatching). Therefore, echoing Gafford (2020), it is essential to get messaging about college to students earlier in their academic careers and provide them with informational and nurturing supports through teachers, counselors, and other school personnel to help students make optimal decisions for their lives.

As Flowers (2020) explains, once rural African American students matriculate college, they can indeed flourish. Using DuBois’ conception of double

consciousness, he finds that rural African Americans within his study had college dreams instilled within them at early ages. These students shared that they had the requisite academic knowledge, skills, and abilities to succeed in college. Nevertheless, they experienced challenges common to college students writ large: adjustment to the rigors and lower academic performance, particularly within the first year. However, those students at predominantly and historically White institutions experience isolation and marginalization at significantly higher rates than their peers at historically Black institutions.

These experiences are authentic and are not a new phenomenon (Willie & McCord, 1972). To address the challenges of African American rural students transitioning from high school to college, Combs, Boettcher, Lange, and Hanks describe the Emerging Scholars program at Clemson University. In its eighteenth year, this program provides a model of how to build university-rural community relationships. Through the program, Clemson University partners with seven high schools within the state. The program specifically targets students who are in good academic standing but unsure about postsecondary pathways, looking at whether they will go to any institution and, if they do, which context is best suited for their success. Over the summer, students participate in a two-week residential program where they take academic content courses in Math, English, Public Speaking, College 101 (focused on study skills and familiarity with the institution), and a participatory action research course.

This summer programming is supplemented through an after-school program during the year, including SAT/ACT preparation, STEM engagement, and leadership development content. The program communicates directly with the student's family, sharing with them community expectations and how to be most supportive of their children. For many African American families, sending their children to college is an experience full of unknowns, but through demystification of the process and proactive and regular communication, trust is built over time. When these steps are taken, participants surmount the challenges Flowers (2020) identifies, building a cohort of likeminded peers and perhaps lifelong friends. Moreover, the institution seizes the opportunity to proactively address equity and inclusion for rural African American students on their campus.

Critical Perspectives from African American Educators and Educational Leaders

Rural educators and school leaders must be equipped to navigate the dynamics of diverse rural classrooms, which begets the task of navigating their own privileged and marginalized identities and addressing various facets of students' identities which may all impact the teaching and learning processes. Emby and Hammonds (2020) proposed a list of insights into how African American rural educators, in particular, can manage their experiences working in rural spaces. The authors asserted that in some rural spaces, such as in rural Appalachia, many students have not had an African American educator and may present tactics to discredit these professionals or deem them as unworthy to fulfill the role of an educator. Emby and Hammonds noted that their visual cultural identities (e.g., race, gender) often preceded their voices, moderating the curriculum content that they delivered. Thus, the authors suggested educators first identify and contextualize students' resistance within the framework of Whiteness as normative.

Additionally, the authors suggested that African American educators build rapport and emphasize the instructor-class relationship to challenge anti-racist views. The authors suggested that educators join students in a personal journey of understanding White privilege and the students' roles in perpetuating it and facilitate students' self-reflection. They encourage educators to engage in a recursive process of critical reflection incorporating four essential elements: (1) instructor self-awareness (i.e., Who am I in terms of my identities, contexts, and roles?), (2) student worldview (i.e., Who are my students?), (3) teaching relationship (i.e., Who are we together as instructor and students?), and (4) teaching practices (i.e., What am I doing as an instructor to foster cultural understanding and professional development?).

Additionally, chapter authors who hold positions as teacher educators and educational leaders propose the value of cultivating culturally relevant classrooms and training novice teachers on responsive practices within the rural context. Essentially, culturally competent teachers should never discount the daily challenges that African American students face on their educational journey and acknowledge the systemic discrimination and personal prejudices of others who may negatively impact their ability to reach their highest academic potential (Davis et al.,

2020; Stewart et al., 2020). Moreover, teacher education programs should note that classroom behavioral challenges are a significant contributor to novice teacher turnover. As such, embedding culturally relevant classroom management strategies into the teacher education curriculum is a viable strategy to prepare novice teachers for real-life teaching experiences (Young & Chambers, 2020).

In summation, the contributing authors of *African American Rural Education College*

Transitions and Postsecondary Experiences make compelling cases for the importance of understanding rural African Americans within their contexts, elucidate steps to create pathways to higher education for rural African American students, and highlight factors for African American professionals working in rural spaces to consider. We hope that the readers will take heed of the promising practices and points discussed to advance equity in education for rural African American youth.

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