Profiling the African American Student Network

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Abstract

The African American Student Network (AFAM) originated at a large Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the Midwest. Including a sample of 163 network participants, the current paper profiles the academic performance of students in the network over its first 4 years. Findings indicate that although participants were similar to the average African American undergraduate on campus in terms of academic precollege characteristics and 1st term GPA, when compared to African American undergraduates on campus who did not participate in the network, AFAM participants trended toward higher 1-year retention rates, 4-year retention rates, and 4-year retention and graduation rates.

Achieving equity in education is a "wicked" problem. Wicked problems are not only complex but also dynamic, interdependent, and context-bound (Rittel & Webber, 1973). At the turn of the century only 40% of eligible Black students went to college, with only 46% of the 40% graduating within 6 years (Astin & Oseguera, 2005). Available data from one Predominantly White Institution (PWI) indicated that the 4-year graduation rate for even the highest ability students was approximately 25% higher for Whites than for Blacks (Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008). All students face social and developmental challenges in pursuing a college education (Cole & Arriola, 2007). However, Black students face distinctive challenges. Not only must they develop a stance toward other Black students, Black culture, and social organizations (Smith & Moore, 2000), but they must also establish some level of comfort in their interactions with White students and faculty (Mack et al., 1997). This may leave the administrators, faculty, and staff of PWIs searching to find factors that allow Black students not only to survive on campus but also to thrive in a setting that may be unchartered territory. If educators can understand the relationship between such factors and academic success, they may be better equipped to address

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the issue of equity in education and be better able to explain why some minority students attain a sense of membership within predominantly White academic communities while others do not (Kraft, 1991). This article studied 163 participants over four years to explore whether the African American Student Network (AFAM) might improve retention and graduation rates.

Background

According to research by Fleming (1984), Black students who attend predominantly Black colleges have less difficulty attaining a sense of membership within their academic community and, consequently, experience less stress than their peers who attend predominantly White colleges. For those Black students who choose to attend PWIs, over half at 4-year colleges fail to graduate within 6 years (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002). For almost 20 years, researchers have been reporting on the importance of social support for the retention of Black students, including the importance of how institutions provide resources that help students overcome barriers (Francis, Kelly, & Bell, 1993). In a landmark study, Allen (1992) drew attention to the differential outcomes for Black students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and those at PWIs, where he concluded that college outcomes for Black students are influenced by both the immediate social contexts and by interpersonal relationships that serve as important mediating factors in adjusting to institutional contexts. More recently, these findings have been echoed by Lang (2001/2002) who suggests that while liaisons between students and institutions are especially crucial for the retention of Black students at PWIs, institutions continue to ignore the social and psychological needs of Black students, relying instead on the general perception that Black student attrition is due to academic and financial problems.

Black students' completion rates at HBCUs are higher than that of any other racial/ethnic group (Lang, 2001/2002). Lang suggests that this may be due in part to "more familiar cultural settings; schoolmates [who are] more likely to share similar values and backgrounds; problems [that are] examined and addressed from an African-American perspective; and increased opportunities for leadership roles and access to positive African American role models" (p. 222). In contrast, a number of studies have documented the hostile campus climates Black students face at PWIs and the importance of counter spaces or spaces in which people of color are affirmed and validated rather than negated or marginalized (Davis et al., 2004; Jones, 2004; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Swim et al., 2003). The African American Student Network (commonly called AFAM) is one such counter space; it was developed Fall 2005 at a large PWI in the Midwestern United States. A recent study (Grier-Reed et. al., 2008) using qualitative methods revealed some of the ways the group seemed to be acting as a counter space on campus: Whereas some students experienced a sense of marginalization or hostility in other spaces on campus, when they were in AFAM, students' experiences included safety, connectedness, resilience, validation, empowerment, intellectual stimulation, and a home base on campus.

The AFAM was developed as a response to the pressing challenge of increasing persistence-to-graduation for Black students at PWIs. As national data make clear, Black students at PWIs are at a disproportionately high risk for dropping out. Many students begin college unprepared for the challenges, but psychosocial and academic stressors can be elevated for Black students (Negga, Applewhite, & Livingston, 2007). Social support acts as a buffer against high stress levels (Chiang, Hunter, & Yeh, 2004; Edwards, Hershberger, Russel & Markert, 2001). In particular, for minority students who experience barriers as a result of the cultures of PWIs, institutional subcultures can be a critical factor in their ability to find membership on their campuses (Kuh & Love, 2000). Consequently, spaces such as AFAM can be a remedy or safe haven for Black students to cope with the elevated stressors they experience. The idea of group sanctuaries for coping with race-related stressors is not new, and Blacks who seek social support tend to have the best outcomes (Jones, 2004; Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000; Watt-Jones, 2002).

College can be a time of freedom and exploration, but for those students who feel that they are not wanted, be it in the subtle glance of the eye that asks "What are you doing here?"; the avoidance of eye contact that indicates "invisibility"; or the sudden quietness that occurs when the topic of race comes up with classmates or faculty members of the majority race, the effects of racial microaggressions can be devastating (Feagin, Hernan, & Imani, 1996). D.W. Sue and colleagues (2007) describe racial microaggressions as the everyday, commonplace experiences of racism, including the subtle snubs and invalidations people of color encounter on a regular basis. Grier-Reed (2010) has argued that by providing a safe space in which Black students can find support and encouragement for reflecting on and making sense of their experiences, AFAM is a sanctuary for exploring and coping with racial microaggressions.

Currently in its 6th year, AFAM was originally developed to help address the problems Black students face. The basic idea was to provide students with a safe space to exercise their voices, critically reflect on their experiences, and find support for improving their lives and the lives of others. A weekly network meeting over the lunch hour, AFAM provides students with food as well as opportunities to find community, resources, support, and encouragement from other Black students, faculty, and staff on campus. Much like HBCUs, in this network, the cultural setting is familiar; schoolmates are likely to share similar backgrounds and values; problems are viewed from an African American perspective; and students have ready access to positive Black role models and leadership opportunities.

AFAM seems to bring important sociocultural attributes of the HBCU to the large PWI, where the worldview, students, and setting in AFAM are culturally familiar and students find positive role models and leadership opportunities. Given that PWIs have not been as effective as HBCUs in retaining and conferring degrees upon Black college students (Rodgers & Summers, 2008), one logical question to ask is whether participation in AFAM is connected to increased retention and graduation rates for Black students. This is the focus of the current research.

To profile the African American Student Network over its first 4 years, the current study explored participation rates, college entry data, and graduation/retention outcomes. Specific research questions were the following:

- What is the distribution of AFAM student participation in the network from 2005-2009?
- How do AFAM students compare with non-AFAM Black undergraduates in terms of ACT score, high school rank (HSR), and 1st grade point average (GPA)?
- How do AFAM students compare with non-AFAM Black undergraduates on campus in terms of 1-year retention rates, 4-year retention rates, and 4-year retention/graduation rates?

Method

Participants

AFAM was developed at a large public, predominately White, Midwestern University in the United States. This university had 16 colleges and schools (e.g., Education, Management, Liberal Arts) and was located within a large metropolitan area. The university served approximately 51,659 students, of which 33,236 were undergraduate and 18,423 were at the graduate level. Of the self-identified student population, 45% were women and 41% were men. The racial and ethnic makeup was 73% White, 9% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5% International, 5% African American/Black, 2% Hispanic, and 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native.

Approximately 200 students participated in the network from 2005-2009. Of those 200, 163 agreed to participate in the current research. Students participating in AFAM came from all over the university including a college designed to prepare under-prepared students to succeed. Fields of study included liberal arts, education, business, technology, biology, and natural sciences. The age of students included in this dataset ranged from 19-30, with a mean age of 22.53 and a standard deviation of 1.67. Women (n=102) comprised 63% of the sample, and men (n=61) comprised 37%. Most students (88%) were Black; however, other race/ethnicities included American Indian (2%), Asian/Pacific Islander (2%), Chicano/Latino (2%), and White (4%). The other 2% included International students and students who did not specify race/ethnicity.

Procedures

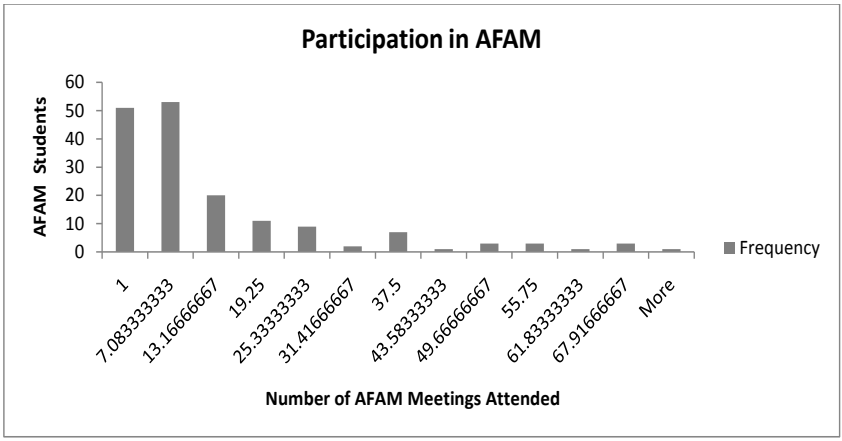
This research was conducted with the approval of the Institutional Review Board of the participating institution. We provided AFAM students with informed consent, and only those students who consented to the research were included. Comparative data were based on general institutional reports. Data for 2 comparison groups were included: 1) Non-AFAM African American undergraduates on campus; and 2) The general population of undergraduates at the university. We used descriptive statistics to illuminate trends.

Results

Participation in AFAM

Students who participated in AFAM were not asked to commit to a certain number of weekly meetings and were free to come and go as they pleased. For the 163 students included in this study, the average number of visits to AFAM was 11, and the standard deviation was 15, demonstrating a great deal of variation, where the range of meetings attended was 73. The mode, or most frequently occurring participation rate, was 1 weekly meeting, and the median attendance rate was 4 weekly meetings (See Figure 1 for a distribution of weekly meetings attended). When comparing ACT scores, high school rank (HSR), and 1st term grade point average (GPA) across students who came only once and those who came more than once, there were no clear patterns.

Figure 1: Distribution of Weekly Meetings Attended by AFAM Participants



College Entry Data

Of the 163 students included in the sample, 11 were transfer students and 152 entered the university as new freshman. To facilitate meaningful comparisons, transfer students were excluded from comparative analyses of pre-college and academic performance data. Instead, across AFAM and Non-AFAM groups, academic performance statistics were based on students who entered the university as new freshman.

To get a sense of the academic profile of students participating in AFAM, the study compared these students to a matching group of African American students at the university who did not participate in AFAM (n=1,188). In addition, the study compared AFAM students to the general population of undergraduates at the institution (n=26, 717). The average ACT score, HSR, and 1st term GPA were calculated across the 3 groups. The academic profile of AFAM students closely resembled that of the matching group.

However, both groups on average had a lower ACT score, HSR, and GPA than the general undergraduate population (See Table 1).

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for ACT, High School Rank and 1st Term GPA for AFAM and Other Students at the university

Student Group	ACT Mean (SD)	HSR Mean (SD)	GPA Mean (SD)
AFAM Students	19.41 (3.79)	69.66 (18.61)	2.73 (0.74)
Matched Group	19.95 (4.26)	72.55 (19.44)	2.80 (0.83)
General Population	25.47 (4.08)	82.53 (14.12)	3.12 (0.69)

Retention and Graduation

Trends emerged for retention and graduation rates: AFAM students seemed to be retained and graduated at higher percentages than their Black student counterparts who did not participate in AFAM. For example, the 1-year retention rate for AFAM students was 87%, and the 1-year retention rate for the matching group was 80%. Across 4 years, this trend was even greater, where AFAM students' 4-year retention rate was 53%, and the matching group's retention rate was 33%. Moreover, with respect to 4-year retention plus graduation, AFAM students were retained and graduated at 68%, but Black students not participating in AFAM were retained and graduated at 52%. In sum, when compared with Black students who did not participate in the network, higher percentages of AFAM students were retained and graduated.

Discussion

Preliminary data are promising for illuminating the potential of AFAM to improve retention and graduation rates for African American undergraduates at a PWI. Although there was a wide range of participation for AFAM weekly meetings with a mode participation of 1, results suggest improved graduation and retention outcomes. This is particularly striking given that the students who participated in AFAM seemed no more academically prepared than other African American students on campus.

With respect to college entry data, students who participated in AFAM may have been somewhat less prepared than their counterparts given the statistics for HSR and 1st term GPA. However, what is most striking between the African American students who participated in AFAM and those who did not are the similarities. Across ACT, HSR, and GPA, the differences between the two groups were minimal.

It seems that, at least academically, the students who were attracted to and participated in AFAM were much like the average African American student on campus, but their retention and graduation rates surpassed that of their counterparts. The percentage of AFAM students who were retained at

the university exceeded those of African American students not participating in the network by 7 points over 1 year and 20 points over 4 years. Moreover, 68% of AFAM students were retained and/or graduated within four years compared to only 52 % of their African American counterparts.

Limitations

Even though the trends found in these preliminary data are promising, it is important to note the limitations of this study. For example, this study can best be described as quasi-experimental, in which students self-selected either into the treatment group (the AFAM network) or the comparison groups. Moreover, AFAM students self-selected into the research study; therefore, selection bias is a threat to internal and external validity. Because there was no random selection, self-selection bias is a threat to the external validity or generalizability of the results. In addition, because there was no random assignment, self-selection bias is threat to the internal validity of the study. For example, there may have been pre-existing differences between the treatment and comparison groups that contributed to retention and graduation but were not controlled for in this study.

With respect to attrition, although we were able to include a majority of the 206 students who participated in AFAM from 2005-2009, for approximately 20% we were unable to obtain informed consent. Using a passive consent process, we mailed informed consent letters indicating that students would be included in our research unless they opted out by contacting the first author via telephone, email, or returning a self-addressed stamped postcard included with the letter. Approximately 5 students opted out, but for a much larger group (approximately 35 students) our consent letters were returned unopened because students could no longer be found at the addresses we had on file; interestingly, most in this group were transfer students.

Finally, the 163 students we did include in our study were not part of a single cohort—all starting in fall 2005, for example. Instead, the date of entry for students was variable, with some predating AFAM.

Recommendations for Further Study

Future research including larger cohort datasets is needed to explore whether the trends found in the current study are viable. In addition, future research that sheds light on the active ingredients of AFAM is recommended; that is, research that sheds light on the question of how it is that AFAM students no more prepared academically than their counterparts trend toward higher rates of postsecondary success, particularly given the high range and variability of student participation in the weekly meetings. The current study suggests that the trend is not linear (better academic performance simply based on higher participation rates in the network). Research that applies a broader perspective, including social network analysis, may be fruitful in future explorations.

Conclusion

AFAM shows promise as one way to improve retention and graduation for Black students at a PWI, but future research is needed to determine whether

the trends found in this preliminary profile are viable. This line of research is especially important given that Blacks are still underrepresented in higher education and still graduate at lower rates than Whites and Asian Americans over a 5-year period (Thompson, Gorin, Obeidat, & Chen, 2006). Finding ways to support the graduation and retention of Black students who do matriculate into college is essential, where access to higher education is not just about letting students in but supporting them through to postsecondary success.

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