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Spring 3-12-2009

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Recommended Citation

Clark/AAC&U Conference on Liberal Education and Effective Practice

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Toward the Equitable Distribution of Enriching Educational Experiences: Faculty Engagement with Racial Minority Students

Abstract

Peña, Bensimon, and Colyar (2006) noted: “Not only do African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans have lower graduation rates than [do] 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” (p. 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 are their disengaged peers to persist through baccalaureate degree attainment. Furthermore, engaged students typically accrue the desired outcomes that are central to liberal education. This is especially true for engagement in what Kuh (2008) refers to as “high-impact” educational experiences – study abroad programs, learning communities, undergraduate research programs, service learning opportunities, and summer internships, to name a few. Unfortunately, racial minority undergraduates are considerably less likely than are their White peers to enjoy the educational benefits associated with these experiences.

Keywords

equitable education, student engagement

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Peña, Bensimon, and Colyar (2006) noted: “Not only do African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans have lower graduation rates than [do] 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” (p. 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 are their disengaged peers to persist through baccalaureate degree attainment. Furthermore, engaged students typically accrue the desired outcomes that are central to liberal education. This is especially true for engagement in what Kuh (2008) refers to as “high-impact” educational experiences – study abroad programs, learning communities, undergraduate research programs, service learning opportunities, and summer internships, to name a few. Unfortunately, racial minority undergraduates are considerably less likely than are their White peers to enjoy the educational benefits associated with these experiences.

Much evidence exists to confirm racialized gaps in engagement. However, most published studies on this topic are problematic in at least two ways: 1) The blame is almost always placed on racial minorities for not taking advantage of resources and high-impact educational experiences offered on their campuses; and 2) researchers have been overwhelmingly concerned with student engagement in out-of-class activities unrelated to faculty work. In addition, literature regarding faculty and the classroom experiences of racial minority students focuses disproportionately on culturally-responsive pedagogies and culturally-inclusive curricula, not on the ways that professors often neglect to engage these students in some of the aforementioned outcomes-productive individualized experiences. Each of these issues is discussed in this paper. Moreover, institutional and personal accountability for faculty are emphasized. Also included is a synthesis of published research on the educational benefits associated with student engagement in high-impact experiences, as well as strategies for how faculty can help narrow outcomes disparities between racial minorities and White students. The paper also considers the potential benefits of including high-impact educational experiences in a liberal arts curriculum from the perspective of attracting minority students as applicants to a particular college and helping those who enroll achieve desired educational outcomes, including increased persistence and graduation rates. Critical race theory, specifically perspectives on interest convergence, and Rendón’s (1994) cultural validation model are used to frame the practical recommendations offered in this paper.

Selected Readings

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.

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