

## **Bridging the Gap to Increasing the Number of Black Student into Graduate School: An Academic Advising Tool**

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Since *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), there have been an increasing number of black students enrolled in colleges and universities. This increase has allowed a greater number black people to become more educated, marketable, and competitive in the job market. Yet, only 13.5% of college students are black (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2010) and the six-year graduation rate for black is a “dismally low 42%” (Herndon & Hirt, n.d., para. 1). The degree completion rate for black males is even lower at 35%, compared to a 46% for black females (NCES, 2010). Compounding the issue is that of those black students that graduate with a bachelor’s degree, few successfully pursue post-graduate educational opportunities. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2010), only 5.3% of black students have earned a Master degree and 0.6% have earned a doctorate in 2007-2008. Given these striking numbers and alarming facts, it is clear that changes need to be made to increase the number of black students pursuing and obtaining graduate degrees. In short, “the place of post-graduate studies in the educational system has a special reference to the need to produce highly trained[,] high quality personnel capable of making a unique contribution to the development of a country's resources” (Laguzzi, 1978, p. 1). Given that academic advisors interact with black undergraduate students on academic matters, the purpose of this article is to provide those academic advisors with specific tools from the Appreciative Advising framework for encouraging black students to pursue post-graduate degree opportunities.

### **Challenges that Black Students Face**

The three most prominent challenges that black students face are: families’ norm, having greater financial disadvantages, and being on campuses that are not fully representative of people that look like them (Watson & Protinsky, 1988). Family structure is very significant in black communities and black families’ cohesion levels are high. Therefore, they are very attuned to community norms. Erickson’s psychosocial theory proposes that black students face challenges when they decide to pursue anything outside of their families’ norms (Watson & Protinsky, 1988). Given the low representation of blacks that have completed higher education degrees, they are less likely to have family members that have attended college and thus this could help explain why black students are reticent to break their family tradition of not attending college. Furthermore, if black students do not get the adequate support from their families that they need in order to succeed, they will more likely to not be successful in college (Herndon & Hirt, 2004).

Another challenge that black students face is that they often have a greater financial disadvantage. By the time black undergraduates obtain their degrees, many of them are overwhelmed by financial debt. Simonds (2010) stated that 81% of black students depart from undergraduate school with financial debt, versus the 64% of white students. Furthermore unfortunately for many black students, this means that furthering their education is not a viable option because they feel pressured to begin paying off their student loans and other debts (Simonds, 2010). Their heavy dependence on student loans may be a byproduct of their lower

SAT scores (Benton, 2001). Since black students tend to be raised in urban communities that typically have weaker educational systems, they do not emerge from high school as academically prepared as their white counterparts and thus are not as competitive for academic-based scholarships and this also means that they begin their college educations at a competitive disadvantage compared to their classmates (Benton, 2001). This cycle must be broken and one way to help break the cycle is for more blacks to pursue advanced degrees.

Finally, one of the biggest challenges that black students face is not being valued on predominately white campuses (Benton, 2001). The campus environment can play a part in deterring a black student from successfully matriculating into graduate school. Consequently, if black students do not feel welcomed or valued at higher education institution, or perceive that institutions genuinely support their black students, there may be little incentive for them to continue their educations. A lack of family, financial, or campus support can inhibit black students' ability to be successful as undergraduates and may stand as significant barriers to their pursuit of post-graduate degrees.

### **Appreciative Advising**

There are a myriad of theories or mechanisms that advisors can use to empower black students and to assist them with the challenges that they face. The major models that advisors can use to empower black students include Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1987), Astin's Theory of Involvement (1984), and Pascarella's general model (1985). These theories are based on how students persist which can help to understand how black students may enter graduate school. This paper takes a different approach and utilizes a model/technique that serves as a vehicle to help black students enter graduate school. The model is called Appreciative Advising and can be applied to all students, but the focus of this paper will be on how to specifically use it to encourage black students to pursue post-graduate degrees. Appreciative Advising can be defined as "the intentional collaborative practice of asking positive, open-ended questions that help their students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials" (Bloom, Hutson, & He, n.d., para. 2). The six phases of Appreciative Advising are: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle.

In the Disarm phase, advisors use, "positive, active, and attentive listening and questioning strategies to build rapport with students" (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008, p. 11). When working with black students, the first key to disarming them is to understand the challenges they are facing. The previous section of this paper highlighted some of those challenges, but individual students will likely be facing other challenges on campus. Black students may initially be cautious about working with a non-black advisor, so it will be important for non-black advisors to spend some additional time disarming students and letting them know that the advisor is sincere in wanting to assist students. Taking time to engage in small talk about current campus events or the weather allow students to see that the advisor is a real person and genuinely interested in working with students.

Furthermore, another suggestion for disarming students is to add flyers posted about graduate and professional student opportunities on bulletin boards in their offices and/or in the waiting area. These flyers should include pictures of students from a variety of different racial

and ethnic backgrounds. This gets students thinking about the possibility of earning a graduate degree before the appointment even begins.

Lastly, an advisor should be familiar with local role models from a variety of ethnic backgrounds to incorporate them in the advising process. By using these role models this could inspire Black students to see that it is possible to accomplish high goals for themselves. After building initial rapport with students, advisors should then segue into the Discover phase and begin asking students questions about their strengths, experiences, and accomplishments in order to get to know them better (Bloom et al., 2008). Sample questions that could be used specifically with black students include:

- Who in your family has influenced you the most? How has that person influenced you;
- Who influenced your decision to attend college? How did that person influence you;
- What is your proudest accomplishment since you have arrived on campus; and
- Tell me about a time when you really felt that you were performing at your best.

After the Discover phase, in the Dream phase advisors ask questions to understand what the students' dreams are (Bloom et al., 2008). A sample Dream question is, "What are your most ambitious hopes and dreams for your future?" When working with black students, one of the most powerful questions that an advisor can ask is: "Have you ever thought about pursuing a master's degree or a doctorate?" This very direct question, plants a seed in students' minds without telling them exactly what to do. Furthermore, this allows students to think about having graduate school as one of their options. Once this question is asked and absorbed into the students' minds, the advisor can reiterate how he or she thinks that the student can be successful in graduate school. Returning to Erickson's theory, it stresses on how black students need that constant affirmation; therefore, encouraging students to think about graduate school is a meaningful technique that can inspire them to go beyond their expectations (Watson & Protinsky, 1988).

The fourth phase, the Design, is the most important because advisors can assist students who indicate an interest in pursuing graduate studies become successful candidates for graduate school. Academic advisors are ideally positioned to help students create a plan for making their dream turn into a reality. Below is a list of specific things that advisors can do to help Black students become successful candidates graduate school. Advisors should:

- Encourage students to engage in undergraduate research opportunities on campus. In addition, they should let students know about summer undergraduate research opportunities in their field that are hosted by institutions across the country.
- Urge advisees to share their post-graduate degree ambitions with faculty members in their department. Advisors can also coach students about how to approach faculty members for advice on which graduate programs to apply to and how to strengthen their credentials.

- Encourage students to speak directly to current graduate students about their experiences as graduate students.
- Provide contact information for recent program graduates who are currently enrolled in graduate schools across the country.
- Assure students that they will be there to help guide them through the graduate school application process by editing their personal statements and applications, conducting mock interviews, and advising them about their graduate school options.
- Encourage students to connect with the Black Graduate Student Association, if available, on campus and attend some of their events. This will allow them to become more engaged and interested in graduate school if they have some uncertainty about it.
- Notify students of graduate school fairs and encourage them to attend. In addition, they should help prepare students by teaching them how to approach meetings with graduate school representatives.

In the Deliver stage, the students ultimately act on carrying out the plan in pursuit of accomplishing their dreams (Bloom et al., n.d.). The advisor's role for this particular phase is to explicitly reiterate his or her confidence in the students' ability to be admitted to graduate programs. The advisor can state specifically,

You have done an excellent job of obtaining excellent undergraduate research experience, selecting appropriate graduate schools to apply to, and preparing all of your graduate school application materials. I am very proud of all that you have accomplished, and now the waiting game begins. No matter what happens, you have prepared as well as you possibly could have, so now we will await the results. Please keep me posted – I am confident that you have done all that you can. Great job!

Advisors can assist students in sorting through offers they receive. However, if students do not get accepted into the schools that they applied to, the advisor should be there as a safety net and be there to provide moral support and to discuss their other options.

Finally, transitioning to the last phase, Don't Settle, advisors should follow up with students that have indicated an interest in graduate school. Advisors should encourage students to apply to some stretch schools, not just schools that are close to home or easy to get into. The responsibilities of the advisors in this phase are to challenge the students to raise their internal bar of expectations of themselves (Bloom et al., 2008).

### **Conclusion**

Bridging the gap to increase the number of black students in graduate school will not happen overnight, however, advisers that utilize models such as Appreciative Advising can certainly play a role in remedying this situation one student at a time. Appreciative Advising is a framework that academic advisers can use to encourage more black students to pursue graduate degrees. Although graduate school is not for everyone, advisors should at least ask all students

whether they are considering pursuing graduate degrees. You never know when planting that seed might result in a student eventually pursuing a graduate degree.

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