



Educational Considerations

Volume 18
Number 1 *The Academic Success of African-American Students*

Article 12

9-1-1990

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Recommended Citation

Steward, Robbie J. (1990) "An Editorial Comment," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 18: No. 1.
<https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1536>

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An Editorial Comment

Robbie J. Steward, Ph.D.

Recommendations for change in increased access and equity in education for African-American individuals: What do we do while we wait?

In reviewing the literature addressing African-American student success, researchers and theoreticians often open articles by describing institutions of higher education as racist, culturally biased, and/or multiculturally ignorant. Maybe not in these words specifically, but I often hear this message in conversation and see it in literature. I must also admit that I have collected many experiences in the role of student, counselor, and professor that reinforce these perceptions. What is intriguing to me is that these same articles and discussions often close with a presentation of what should be done by these racist, biased, and/or ignorant institutions of higher education in order to more effectively help African-American students.

I have been and will continue to be one of these researchers who attempt to objectively identify both the positive and negative impact of campus life upon African-American students (in fact upon all students) and I will continue to propose recommendations for change and remain hopeful that change is possible. I have lived long enough to see that institutions and systems can and do change. However, I also recognize that institutional and systematic change occurs slowly. For example, at this time in the history of the overall discipline of psychology, the premise that testing is culturally biased and discriminates against those from cultural heritages that differ from the Eurocentric perspective is well documented in the literature. However, the use of testing for purposes of selection for those who access the most attractive educational institutions and thereby gain an opportunity for positions of power and influence has not been significantly daunted by this current literature. The status quo has remained intact, and although some Caucasian individuals are negatively impacted by such practices, many more African-Americans have found themselves to be at the mercy of a "test," and then by an uninformed test interpreter who does not accommodate cultural diversity in its descriptive interpretations. Change is slow, but how long can we afford to wait for the social and political structure within the United States to change? This is a system which has not only been historically insensitive to those citizens of African heritage, but at times has actively denigrated any characteristic associated with our group. Can we afford to wait? And if so, at what cost?

This article addresses the implications of waiting for institutional changes, as well as the cost for doing so. The article will close with a list of suggestions developed by the special issue editor and the associate editor of *Educational Considerations*, G. Daniel Harden that aim to offer alternatives to the anxiety, anger and frustration that can result while the change slowly unfolds. We as African-Americans must attempt to maintain a healthy and productive focus as we wait for institutions to "do the right thing."

Can we afford to wait?

Just as we have applauded the acknowledgement of the cultural bias of testing, we have also found ourselves waiting for this knowledge to be implemented on a scale large enough to impact societal barriers that have hindered and/or discouraged African-Americans in engaging in upwardly mobile behaviors. As the decades have passed, we have watched and waited as African-American student enrollment on university campuses has decreased. We have watched and waited as the African-American male has become labelled an "endangered species." We have watched and waited as discouraged, disillusioned and disheartened African-Americans have increasingly moved toward substance abuse and Black-on-Black violence. We have watched and waited as a resurfacing of overt racist attitudes and behaviors by White Americans escalates. My fear is that the systematic change will occur at a time when the damage resulting from these current events will be so great that many African-American people will be unable to immediately respond to the long delayed change. The boat to the promised land may have finally arrived, but many African-Americans may be so tired, hurt, and suspicious that they are incapable or unwilling to board. It is my belief that we cannot afford to only watch and wait.

Another reason that we cannot afford to wait is that doing so reinforces the belief that we are fully dependent upon White Americans for whomever and whatever we are. This is a belief that is held by many White Americans today: that the African-Americans who have succeeded academically or professionally have done so only because of "affirmative action" programs or special consideration. African-Americans might in fact find themselves struggling with the identification of what successes can be attributed to competence and what successes can be attributed to minority status. Waiting for systematic change alone appears to reinforce faulty beliefs about African-Americans, feeding stereotypical thinking. Engaging in "only" waiting behaviors comes at a high cost.

What then?

The following alternatives have been generated only in the form of suggestions and do not in any way remove the necessity of systematic change in how institutions respond to African-Americans. Blaming the victim is not the intent, nor is discounting the unique experience of being objects of individual and systemic racism. The intent is to share some general guidelines that might be useful to all African-American individuals.

(1) Identify one's personhood with some stable transcendent moral order that: (a) provides the basis for objective decision-making; and (b) results in the development and maintenance of an optimistic and hopeful attitude. This requires the recognition that a functional, healthy self/self-image (physical and emotional) is at least as important as the struggle for a responsive political structure.

(2) Develop independent study programs that increase the knowledge base relating to the history and cross-cultural traditions of Africa and America.

(3) Acknowledge gains and opportunities that have come to this generation of African-Americans through the efforts of previous generations. Develop a responsible attitude toward future generations of African-Americans. "What I do and how I behave affects my people, whom I value, and it is my goal to affect those who follow me in a positive manner."

(4) Work diligently to identify all sources of support (emotional, financial, educational, etc.) and encouragement toward engaging in productive and validating efforts. Such

support can come from individuals independent of racial or ethnic divisions. Check personal biases and prejudices that might limit access to viable resources.

(5) Challenge and question unfair practices, beliefs, and barriers (interpersonal and systematic) that reinforce both positive and negative cultural myths regarding African-American and other racial/ethnic groups.

(6) Increase one's understanding of the dynamics of cross-cultural interaction, prejudices, and racism. Develop effective interpersonal styles that incorporate this knowledge into everyday life.

(7) Share what you know with someone else, particularly other African-Americans, and value learning (by observing and/or requested instruction). Watch and listen in order to better identify clearer connections between actions and consequences. Avoid rejecting contributions from any source, because everyone has something of value to teach.

African-American university students should find these ideas helpful in adapting to the sometimes alienating environment of campus life. Being aware of these alternatives might not decrease the waiting time, but they could make the waiting time easier.