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For the first three and a half centuries in the life of this nation, it was official policy to deny formal education to blacks. Although equal protection of the laws of the land was granted to the newly free by the Fourteenth Amendment, discrimination against blacks and obstruction of their access to formal education remained brutal facts of American life. Blacks in the Northern states had been granted freedom after the Revolutionary War, but Martin Delaney's contested admission to Harvard in 1850 illustrates how ineffective the laws were in securing access to education for blacks.

Along with two other blacks, Delaney was granted admission to Harvard with the stipulation that he practice medicine in Africa upon completion of his degree. After students learned of the admissions, they protested that the presence of the black students would lower Harvard's reputation and lessen the value of the Harvard degree. Many students also refused to attend class with the black students and threatened to transfer to different schools; faculty argued that their commitment to teaching and academic excellence conflicted with the admission of blacks and that the blacks' presence would interfere with the "success of their teaching." Harvard officials capitulated to these anti-black alarms and reversed the three black students' admissions (Takaki 127-128).

National policy makers—like the Harvard administrators, faculty, and students—were unable to live up to the nation's constitutional creed, which proclaimed the equality of all men. Therefore, national policy makers sidestepped the entire issue by establishing black colleges, first in the North and later in the South, thus bringing into existence a dual system of higher education in America. As a consequence, until some thirty years ago, the majority of blacks who had earned baccalaureate degrees in this country had earned them from historically black colleges. As recently as 1967, 80% of blacks with BA degrees were graduated from black colleges, and it has been estimated that black colleges have provided 75% of all blacks holding PhD's, 75% of all black army officers, 80% of all black federal judges, 85% of all black doctors, and the majority of black public school teachers (Fleming 8-9).

This social phenomenon of blacks' being educated in predominantly black colleges continued into our lifetimes. In the late '60s, however, the trend of blacks attending predominantly black colleges was reversed. I can distinctly remember the look of disappointment on my elementary school teacher's face when I told her that I had chosen to attend Michigan State University instead of a historically black college, which was where she and all the other teachers who taught in my segregated Michigan elementary school had gone and where she assumed I would go. Quite

likely this option became a possibility as a result of the civil disturbances of the '50s and '60s, and black high school graduates of the late '60s, like me, were reaping the benefits of civil rights activism. Today, more than half of blacks in college attend predominantly white colleges.

In the wake of the civil rights movement, some mainstream institutions relaxed admissions criteria in order to admit "disadvantaged" students; some aggressively recruited only high achievers who would have gone to elite black colleges; many offered generous financial aid inducements to all black students without regard for their academic preparation. After gaining some experience with merely admitting black students, colleges and universities, alarmed at high attrition rates for black students, developed a number of programs aimed at retaining black students. However, those academic support systems earned cloudy reputations at best, and even though they supported as many or more academically underprepared white students, these programs were perceived as unwelcome supplements to the college curriculum. The combination of such admissions policies and curriculum interventions with subsequent affirmative action policies have resulted in a climate in which all black students are stigmatized, whether they are academically underprepared or not. This stigma follows every African-American student who attends a predominantly white college or university and creates tension and anxiety which, in most cases, neither black students nor institutions have been able to alleviate. A student here at Grand Valley described this situation:

> I have achieved over a 3.0 every semester I have been at Grand Valley State University, yet I am still defined as an at-risk student. I will complete a four year program in three and a half years, yet I am still defined as an at-risk student. I have held leadership positions, spoken at banquets, and even addressed the President of this university, yet I am still defined as an at-risk student. I am defined as an at-risk student not because I have shown any qualities that would suggest my inability to succeed at any task this school should throw at me, but because I am an African-American.

Therefore, when today's African-American students come to the campus of a predominantly white college, they walk into an atmosphere that is already charged with negative preconceptions of their intellectual adequacy. At the very least, this is disturbing to all black students, and for some it may create creeping self-doubt, which slowly erodes their will to achieve. Unfortunately, such negative preconceptions are not the sum of black students' problems on predominantly white campuses. Research on African-American college students, which is framed within the preceding historical constructs, documents numerous other problems confronting black students on predominantly white campuses.

Most of the research is framed in terms of a comparison which matches African-American students in predominantly white colleges and universities with African-American students in historically black colleges and universities. The research shows clearly and unequivocally that a black college environment offers greater

chances for academic progress and success for most African-Americans who desire a college education. This is a commonplace realization in some circles in the black community, so it was not a new insight for me; however, I was startled to see popular wisdom so indisputably validated by the research. Furthermore, the research had some very practical implications for me: my daughter is a senior in high school and we are, at this very moment, trying to make decisions about which college she will attend. What I've learned from the research has convinced me that I should not take lightly my daughter's insistence that she be allowed to attend a historically black college. Several of her friends received academic scholarships to attend the University of Michigan. One is majoring in engineering and another in pre-med. Although both of them are doing well academically, they have advised my daughter not to come there if she can get a scholarship to attend a historically black college.

The research also indicates that the environment on a predominantly white campus offers an alienating atmosphere for African-American students primarily because there is a shortage of supportive interpersonal networks both in and outside the classroom. Mental health professionals know that such a supportive social network is critical to continued cognitive growth in late adolescence. Researchers have tried to delineate what this supportive environment entails. Fleming (1984) found three primary features:

- At historically black colleges, black students have unlimited opportunities to engage in informal interactions and to form friendships not only with student peers but also with other adult staff and professionals who can become role models. On the predominantly white campus, there is a glaring lack of a supportive network of peers, staff, and professionals who are willing to become role models and who are willing to serve as buffers when students experience stress.

- Secondly, at a historically black college, students have almost unlimited opportunities to participate and assume leadership roles in campus life and extracurricular activities, where much informal learning actually takes place. Such participation satisfies an adolescent's need to belong, to be visible, and to be recognized. On predominantly white campuses, black students feel rebuffed by fellow students and frustrated in their efforts to assume leadership roles in any but all-black organizations and activities. This situation contributes to black students' feelings of invisibility on predominantly white campuses.

- On historically black campuses, students report that they feel a sense of progress in their academic pursuits because they can gain the attention of faculty, and they receive the assistance they need to overcome academic deficiencies. Black students on predominantly white campuses report that instructors are not interested in them, that instructors do not give them encouragement, and that instructors grade them unfairly, all of which lead to an overall feeling of lack of general intellectual improvement. In other words, black students on predominantly

white college campuses may earn a degree by passing classes, but they may feel that they did not become educated (Fleming 18-22).

Gibbs (1974) found that

- Black students in predominantly white colleges rated their communication with their instructors poorer than their counterparts did at predominantly black colleges.

- Black students in predominantly white colleges rated their courses less relevant than did black students at predominantly black colleges (particularly those majoring in social sciences and education).

- Black students at predominantly white colleges saw competition among students as a serious problem.

- Black students in predominantly white colleges suffered psychologically as a result of inadequate social life because their total numbers on campus were so small and they lacked access to urban life (476-469).

This last finding startled me until I considered that the vast majority of African-Americans live in large urban centers, whereas the ideal site for most predominantly white institutions is a small town or a semirural area. Most black students underestimate the impact upon them of moving from a large urban environment to a small town or rural locale. Still, this particular issue did not seem significant enough to be given so much attention in the research. Trying to imagine how these findings affected me, I realized that my undergraduate studies were done in East Lansing, which is quite similar as well as close to my small hometown. I came to realize that college location can be a critical issue. One way to get GVSU faculty and staff to appreciate the importance of locale might be to ask this question: How many would have accepted their positions if their contracts required residency in Allendale?

Accordingly, I have a clearer insight into the uniquely different ways that the provisions of one's social environment (or lack thereof) may constrain one's behavior and pursuits. From a conventional perspective, social adjustment factors are supposed to weigh less and be less important than intellectual factors in a college education; therefore, extra-curricular activities and social networks should be secondary to intellectual pursuits. From an African-American student's perspective, however, social factors may loom very large and consume an excessive amount of time, because these are precisely the provisions that African-Americans cannot take for granted outside a black community.

Conversely, white students on predominantly white campuses can reasonably expect that they will have a large pool of people with similar backgrounds from which to choose friends, develop supportive networks, and engage in informal learning activities, because such social supports exist on almost any campus they choose to

attend. Furthermore, white students have no reason to expect that the college social environment will be less supportive than any other environment they have encountered throughout their lives. Since white students can take such social supports for granted, white students' behavior and pursuits concerning college seem to be driven more by intellectual than by social desires. Conversely, black students' behavior and pursuits seem to be more driven by social desires. Perhaps this is why so much of a Minority Affairs program's budget goes to social programming.

My hypothesis is that this distinction between black and white students' social desires is an illusion. Since white students' social needs usually are provided for on almost every college campus, they seem to be less preoccupied with social concerns. This does not mean that white students are less motivated by social desires than black students, but rather that white students' social desires can be taken for granted on the typical college campus, whereas the provisions to meet black students' social desires must be articulated and created. This implication raises interesting questions for further research. Perhaps one way to get at it would be to encourage white students to attend predominantly black college campuses and then to study their concerns; or we could study the concerns of American students who attend college in other countries.

Counseling and mental health professionals agree that healthy maturation depends on both cognitive and social development; and, when an environment fails to provide in one area, healthy maturation may be inhibited. Such inhibition occurs more frequently in black students on predominantly white campuses than in black students on predominantly black campuses. Research shows that some black students on white college campuses experience role confusion, anxiety, and depression—classic symptoms of what psychologist Erik Erikson defined as a psychological identity crisis (Fleming 21).

Research also reports that black students on white campuses experience an increased "consciousness of their blackness, and sharpened . . . perceptions of themselves as an identifiable minority" (Fleming 20). Black Harvard graduate Sylvester Monroe wrote that, "during his years at Harvard, he and his cadre led an almost totally black existence, making every effort to avoid any contact with whites, immersing themselves in black solidarity to buffer themselves against . . . insults, ignorance, and prejudice" (Fleming 20).

The research on black students has also contributed to our understanding of how black students on predominantly white campuses cope with their precarious social situation. Researchers have identified several different patterns of adaptation to cope with the identity conflicts that arise. Jewel Taylor Gibbs, an African-American counselor at Stanford University, found that the majority of black students from all socioeconomic backgrounds who sought counseling coped by withdrawing, the symptoms of which are apathy, depression, despair, alienation, depersonalization, and avoiding contact with the conflict-producing situation. The following description is an example of withdrawal which may be all too familiar:

Sandra T., an 18 year-old freshman from a professional family, was reared in a predominantly white suburb in New England. After attending a girls' prep school for four years, where she was one of five black students, she convinced her parents to send her to a coed school where she could meet other middle-class blacks. Although she tried to mingle with the black students, she felt self-conscious because they constantly teased her about "acting like a white chick." After several rebuffs, she began to feel hopeless about finding black friends with similar interests, but she discovered that she had very bitter feelings against white people, blaming them for her inability to find compatible black friends. She began to feel irritable and depressed, to cry frequently, and to lose interest in everything around her. When her studies began to suffer, she came to the [Stanford] clinic and requested some medication to relieve her feelings of depression and crying spells. She told the therapist that she could not relate to black students because she had been "culturally whitewashed" and she did not want to relate to white students because they were "part of the problem," so she felt she didn't know what to do. (Gibbs 733)

Gibbs (1974) also found that the second largest group of black students chose separation to cope with the stress brought on by alienation and identity conflict. Their separation was characterized by anger, hostility, rejection of whites, contempt for middle class white values, and active protests against white institutions and customs. Students who follow separation as a coping strategy may engage in aggressive or destructive actions which oftentimes result in their exit from the university.

The fewest number of students in Gibbs' study coped with their conflict in a manner Gibbs described as affirmation, which is characterized by upholding and approving their ethnicity, selecting elements of white culture to merge with, and retaining high self esteem and achievement motivation, as in the following illustration:

Pat L., a 21 year-old senior from the Bay Area, is the eldest daughter of an engineer and a lab technician. While growing up in an integrated neighborhood and attending well-integrated schools, Pat was encouraged to participate in activities oriented to black teens through their church and social organizations. During her senior year in high school, Pat organized a black history week observance and served on the student council, while maintaining high grades and an active social life. She continued this same pattern of activity during her college years, studying, socializing, and politicking with equal enthusiasm. She worked on university committees and with Black Student Union projects, but began to feel some pressures to withdraw from integrated activities during her senior year. When she changed her hairstyle to an Afro, some of her white friends seemed to feel this was a political act, although this was not her intention. Pat's boyfriend had begun to attend meetings of the Black Muslims and they had frequent arguments about this group's philosophy. When Pat felt that the crosspressures from her white and

black friends were becoming unbearable, she dropped in at the clinic one day to talk to a black female therapist. Pat felt that she wanted to clarify some of her ideas and relationships with people, because she was feeling confused and concerned about the future of her relationship with her boyfriend. She realized that there were many serious social and political issues affecting blacks, but she felt that she could relate equally well to whites and blacks as people and she did not want to alienate herself from either group. (739)

If these studies are reliable, an overwhelming majority of black students possess inadequate coping skills to effectively manage the psychological distress they face in predominantly white colleges. Black students need to be fortified with appropriate coping strategies both before and during their attendance. Most colleges and universities, including Grand Valley, have taken positive steps in this direction, with academic support and Minority Affairs programs. However, these programs focus on black students as the sole problem, implying that black students must accommodate themselves to the university and not the university to black students.

Students from Grand Valley and Grand Rapids Community College who participated on a panel for the workshop, "Encouraging the Voices of African American Students in the Classroom," confirmed this research with their own college experiences. The workshop audience asked questions and provided comments, which ranged from surprise that these problems still exist to willingness to rethink assumptions about black students and how better to include and encourage them in the classroom. Many of the faculty present expressed interest in a continuing dialogue focusing on how to decrease black students' feelings of alienation on Grand Valley's campus.

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