They Only Talk to Me When They’re Drunk: The African American Experience at Small Predominately White Institutions

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Abstract

This article tackles the issue of diversity programming and social identification for African American studies at predominately White institutions. As opposed to a specific argument, the author offers solutions and/or distinct ways of viewing diversity education in a majority-White institution. As a former diversity coordinator, the author proposes ways to mentor African American students and provide White administrative and faculty support for diversity programming. The central reason for this is that students of all races at these institutions need to realize that diversity education is not just therapy for “the others” but an experience that enriches everyone’s lives. And the biggest proponents of that attitude of learning need to also come from White people in higher education, not just people of color.

Keywords

African American, race, college, diversity, identity

The title of this article might be familiar to people who work in Student Affairs offices at colleges and universities throughout the United States. For one, binge drinking is still a major issue on many U.S. college campuses, or better stated, the perception of binge drinking as a part of stereotypical college culture and enjoyment has prompted many college-bound adolescents to indulge in this dangerous hobby. The seduction of social compliance coupled with postadolescent insecurity is temporarily suspended through the ritualistic debauch of a college fraternity party, especially in small-town colleges. The suspension of this insecurity seems to give courage and self-security to many White students who would have previously been too shy, ashamed, or concerned about their personal appearance to be seen speaking with a student of color, particularly an African American student. Why does this apprehension and shame through association still plague the campus climate of many predominately White institutions in the South and why does it still occur in the 21st century? This article will suggest reasons why this has persisted, and it will offer suggested ways to mentor African American students and other students of color through this isolating experience.

Assimilation and Expectations:
The Party Principle

In many small-town colleges, more specifically schools where the great majority of the students are from the state of the college or other surrounding states, Fridays frequently bring a mixture of relief that there is a pause to the rigorous sleepless night, organization/service club-heavy, busy course load, and study schedule week. Coupled with this relief is the anxiety that the very same pause to the workweek will also mean a pause to their collegiate social life. The pervasive Friday afternoon question is, “Are you going home this weekend?” instead of “Which fraternity parties are you invited to this weekend?” In my experience as the multicultural affairs director of a small Southern school, I was given the opportunity to experience this same anxiety in my very own social life, being an urban-born and raised single Black woman in my 30s embarking excitedly on my first “real” postgraduate school job experience in a small country town where one can reach one end of downtown to the other in less than 10 min. As a professor, I realized quickly that my interests in students could only be fully explored and realized with the students that frequented my office hours. I knew that I was only getting half the story of what their lives were really like. When I accepted a position in diversity education, I understood that there was a whole other world

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of issues that Black students faced. My experience in Student Affairs changed the way that I interacted with students and allowed me to more fully understand the continued complexities that racial identity perceptions play outside of the classroom.

So, what do you do? I frequently ask students what they do on the weekends. There are several occasions where students will recommend events that I will find interesting. I was surprised to hear from a group of highly motivated African American women on campus that watching movies in one of their friends’ apartments was the highlight of their weekends. When I would question why these students did not take advantage of the myriad of events that Student Affairs sponsors, the response was that those events are lame (the “I’m too cool to do a college-sponsored event/contrived social event for my enjoyment thing on a Friday night” response). The irony of this is that students would frequently complain if these events were not offered. My next response would be for them to enjoy the cultural/social life in the city? “Did you know there was a poetry/hip hop flow show at the Art Institute 10 minutes walking distance from the university on Friday?” And the response would be, “Where is that? But Event X was this weekend. Didn’t you see the flyers all around campus?” (If the student does not receive a Facebook message, text message, and/or a personal invitation, there is no guarantee that they will attend the said event). Many of my older colleagues have expressed frustration that today’s students do not check their email. The idea of email etiquette is not a major priority for this generation, and they are causing us as educators and administrators to shift the way we communicate with them. I make sure that fraternity parties are my last question because I can already predict the answer: “No, I wasn’t invited” or “No, that’s not my thing” or “Yeah, I went and Molly acted like we were best friends and then on Monday she did not even look at me in Bio.” This brings me to the name of this article, “They only talk to me when they’re drunk.”

Social psychology professor Dr. Claude Steele has written several articles outlining issues of perceptions and racial stereotypes. Today’s students are looking for an overall enriching social experience, and a successful collegiate social existence makes the whole “college thing” worth it. Many African American students become concerned that being black at a predominantly White institution (PWI) will inherently block their abilities to have a successful and rewarding social life. This perception connects with Steele’s “stereotype threat” theory. Here is his definition, “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (Steele, 1999). In my 7 years as a graduate student in the early 21st century, I only had one graduate-level class with a self-identified Black male who had an African father and a French mother. The lack of numbers also produces a racialized group identity that negates social class differences between people of diverse races and also individual tastes and preferences of non-White people. This becomes exemplified when people of color feel like others consistently reflect who they are as non-Whites above who they are as individuals. One example of this could be when one college senior African American female admitted feeling personal shame when another Black student listened to his headphones really loudly in the corridors of one of the academic buildings. She had heard the upstairs music from a downstairs location and was “hoping and praying that the person would not be Black.”

Race theories suggest the “collective” identification of African Americans and other non-White groups provokes an anxiety that another non-White student’s supposedly stereotypical behavior reflects on all non-Whites, despite the fact that the students might not even know each other. I would have liked for this particular student to not feel the anxiety of stereotypical reflection, since at the end of the day, it was not her who was listening to her music too loud. Also, why is listening to music loudly a “Black thing?” That feeling of hypersensitivity and perceived “stereotype threat” has unfortunately provided an obstacle for many non-White students to fully realize their identities and individualized potential. Steele states, “Will his (or her) race be a boundary to his experience, to his emotions, to his relationships” (Steele, 1999).

Students of all races want to be able to have the power of selectivity, once again a testimony to the current times of constant autoreflection and documentation. Students want to be able to choose their roommates via Facebook or other websites that will ensure them a “seamless” 1st-year living experience. Both parents and students are becoming more interested in the social climate of the college experience. A myriad of socially and racially sensitive organizations have attempted to pick up this slack—perhaps a result of the surge of interest in multiculturalism in the 1980s and 1990s education. Today’s college students can pick and choose from a wide variety of organizations that seek to provide and cater events to the idea of multiculturalism on a predominately White campus.

Organizations with names such as Latinos Unidos, Ebony, Minority Association of Pre-Medical School Students, and the Muslim Students Association provide support systems for many students. Dr. Claude Steele mentions the model of assimilation versus integration. In the case of these organizations, as much as they may provide a safe haven for some students, there is a level of segregation that leaves them feeling further vulnerable when they go back out into a predominately White, privileged, Christian campus. Steele states, “Segregation, whatever its purpose, draws out group differences and makes people feel more vulnerable when they inevitably cross group lines to compete in the larger society” (Steele, 1999). Many African American students whom I had worked with would frequently complain that White students did not attend their events. This need for acceptance and acknowledgment from the wider White student population, in
many cases, determined the success of the event for these students. They experienced the strange dichotomy of wanting to have their spaces a part from the White students and their organizations and activities, yet these same African Americans students felt a need for validation from the White students. Because many small, predominately White college campuses do not promote non-White, student-sponsored events as much as fraternity parties and other activities catering to White students, the non-White organization leaders face tough competition for reluctant audiences at their events. Many African American and other non-White students at these universities also have a network of White friends. Many of these White students choose not to support majority non-White organizational events for a variety of reasons. Because of this, many students of color also might choose not to participate in non-White events. They fear further alienation from the few White friends who connect them with a “feeling of belonging” to the larger campus and its social scene. The result at many of these events is that they tend to be poorly attended and there is always an undercurrent of resentment at the other non-Whites who chose not to come, especially if they did not have anything better to do. Also, the non-Whites who choose not to go to these events could have their own reasons. Not all African Americans want to go to a poetry night or a step show. Black students from other countries might identify less with these types of events. Also, if a non-White student has an issue or does not like another student who is a part of this organization, they might choose not to go to the event all together, simply because the numbers are so small, an infraction against a person can cause someone to escape to safe spaces where they will not encounter the person as regularly as they already do. This leaves me with a belabored question—“What do we as administrators, advocates, and educators do?” One of the more frequently suggested answers is, “Well, we will hire more faculty and staff of color!” Although this is a legitimate and well-intentioned answer, I will explain why this might not be the saving grace of solving the issue of racism and non-White, particularly African American, student isolation in PWIs.

**Is Black Faculty and Staff the Answer?**

There might be a disagreement as to what the answer to the subject title of this section is. I think many educators would agree that, above anything else, the student must be valued. It is vital for the student to realize their own potential, but a part of what the educative goal from the staff or faculty perspective is to see something in the student that she or he cannot see for herself or himself. According to the 2006 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), “Students who interact with faculty members get better grades, are more satisfied with their education, and are more likely to stay in school.” We all have probably had our own intimate experiences with this NSSE result. There have been moments where we as students have needed the encouragement and friendship of one of our respected faculty members. The respect, encouragement, and care have allowed many students to propel from coasting in class to realizing their full potential and thriving inside and outside of the classroom setting. If this was the goal of all faculty members and if faculty had the freedom to realize this goal without worrying about the myriad of political issues that one faces as a new faculty member, then more students would feel that they were a part of an academic community.

Administrators, however, also have an intimate responsibility with students and the larger campus community. In my limited experience as a staff member, I have learned that many staff members feel isolated from not only the students but also the faculty. In many cases, the faculty have no idea about the contributions of staff to the greater college experience. Because of this, many institutions have a silent or not-so-silent rift between administration and faculty. Sociology professors Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa talk about the importance of effective administration, “Effective administrators provide the vision; motivate broad engagement and openness to change, continuous evaluation, and growth; and ‘get and keep the right people’—those committed to undergraduate learning” (Adrifi, 127). If you have had the experience of working in a university—as staff and/or faculty, you know that these ideals are exactly what everyone strives toward. Arum and Roksa follow up with this: “Many higher-education administrators and faculty today have largely turned away from earlier conceptions of their roles that recognized that providing support for student academic and social development was a moral imperative worth sacrificing for personally, professionally, and institutionally” (127). A huge component of this “moral development” in PWIs is to make sure that the majority White students understand that they do not live in a “privileged White bubble.” Diversity is something to be experienced daily. For many privileged White students at PWIs, this diversity is more readily accepted in a study-abroad context, where the student is forced to realize themselves as “minorities” for the first time in their lives. In this sense, their boundless privileges are relegated to only that of a U.S. national. This can be a freeing experience for many of them. They come back satisfied that they bonded with their Japanese descended roommate from Seattle while in France or that they kissed a Chilean girl and had their first relationship with a non-White person. Maybe they become best friends with their Afro-Brazilian family’s extended family, and their relationship extends past the one-year or one-semester limitation. This relationship might even continue years later and be solidified by another trip abroad in the future to revisit the family. When I hear that my students have had these experiences, I am happy they have stepped out of their psychological cultural boxes and experienced diversity as not scary, but normal. And it makes me happy to hear that they had realized that people are people, despite color differences. Despite this important awakening, when
they come back to the United States, many of them fall back into familiar patterns. The freedom that a White person feels to hang out in an all-Black social group in South Africa might not extend to their lives in Wisconsin, or South Carolina for instance, where they might not have one single Black friend. My intention in writing this passage is not to judge this process of majority/minority socialization but simply to say that for many diversity coordinators in PWIs, the issue of social integration across racial lines is something that White students, of a variety of classes, struggle with, despite whatever experience they might have had in India or even community service projects in U.S. indigenous communities in New Mexico or in the Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans.

How does administration seek to resolve this issue? The increasing economic awareness of administration and the fight for students in a dismal economy, coupled with the current generation’s hunger for social interaction and connections has changed the way education is currently consumed. A part of this change is to strive to create a “look” of equality in universities and colleges that clearly cater to and attract a certain sector of the population. In the case of PWIs, this population is economically privileged White students from Christian backgrounds. And in the case of small liberal arts colleges, many of these students are from the surrounding areas, producing a campus of little regional diversity if nothing else. I must first emphasize the importance of distinguishing class when we mention White students in PWIs. There are many working-class and poor White students who attend these institutions, and their challenges are in many ways distinct from upper-middle and wealthy White students. One seemingly simple way the issue of diversity has been addressed is through the implementation of Diversity Education programs across institutions of higher learning in the United States.

Diversity education and multiculturalism are terms that have been a product of the late 1990s politicized U.S. educational system, the onslaught of international Internet use, and the increasing awareness of how globalization effected the economy and the social and physical environment of the individual. The practice behind the ideology was and is for institutions to promote awareness of diverse communities that are underrepresented. This initiative took the form of “diversity months.” Black History was celebrated in February, Hispanic Heritage month was mid-September to mid-October, Women’s History month was in March, and so on. These months welcomed a myriad of programming dedicated specifically to honor, reflect, and/or produce conversation on underrepresented groups. No one would dispute that having a space for reflection on issues of diversity is important; the tricky part with having successful diversity programs is to present programs that not only enhance the understanding of the group’s struggles and contributions but also provide an educative experience for all people who attend. What about students who are part of any of these underrepresented groups?

One criticism to this approach to diversity is that it appears to be a trite resolution to a problem that is more nuanced. At PWIs, it is pretty clear that diversity is an issue. By providing more “diversity programming” instead of creating more profound connections between majority and minority students, programmers might be actually widening the rift. For instance, as a diversity coordinator, many of the African American students felt that it was important to have a wide variety of programs for Black History Month. A handful of hard-working students as well as myself put in a lot of time and energy into making the program-packed month. The African American students who participated felt an underlining anxiety that they were planning all of these great programs and that the majority White students would not be involved or participate. Many of our events were well attended by White faculty but not so well attended by White students. The problem with the “diversity months” is that the only people who attend them are people who represent those groups, further isolating “diversity” as a shallow pool that only people with memberships are allowed to dip their feet. There is also the question that one White mother proposed to me during a University panel for incoming students and their parents, “Why is it important for my kid to major in African American Studies?” I found myself choked up by the question because I felt that if it was not obvious to the parent, then I guess it is not important for their kid to know anything about African Americans. Being an African American, the question was an emotionally laden one. Despite a few White advocates, it was clear to me that White students at PWIs were just not that into Black History Month or acknowledging non-White students as a part of the overall student body. They felt free to cheer on the majority Black football team or to play nonstop rap music at fraternity house parties, but when it came down to participating in a discussion on Dr. Beverly Tatum’s Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? where were the White students? Two students did show up, but they were the White students that take African American studies and gender courses. They are used to dealing with “nasty issues” like White privilege, gender inequalities, and racism. The safety net for White students at PWIs is that they can ignore non-White students and their struggles. They do not have to participate in their events because they do not risk anything by not going. They rarely see African Americans in positions of power, so why would it be important to learn anything about the people that clean your restrooms and vacuum the school hallways? This may sound extremely cynical, but it is a clear reality in many PWIs, especially PWIs in the deep South. There also might be a shame factor in acknowledging the non-White cleaning staff. Acknowledging them is admitting to a colonial past that is still persistent. Higher education seeks to inform to hopefully transcend this past. However, in the midst of the intellectual and liberal ivory towers, inequalities and discrimination are part and parcel of daily life. Academia is not the bubble; in many ways, it is an exaggeration of where we come from and where we are going as a society.
This brings me to the question presented at the beginning of this section. Is Black faculty and staff the answer for successfully diversifying PWIs? My immediate answer is that it could not hurt to hire for diversity, be that of different abilities, sexualities, genders, race, and class. However, a more compelling question might be, “Are we hiring faculty and staff that have a personal commitment to diversity in all its forms—be that faculty and/or staff White, heterosexual, upper-middle/middle class, and Christian?” As a college-educated African American woman, I learned pretty quickly that some of my dearest advocates and the people who have mentored me and helped me out the most in my professional career have been people who have not been Black. That might come as a surprise to some of you, but to many African Americans, Black people in positions of power are not necessarily going to be the best mentors for you as a Black person. There are several reasons for this. African American counselors, professors who are at PWIs, especially PWIs in small towns, are put under extreme pressure to perform and to live up to the “colorful diversity” that the school longs for. There is also psychological pressure from Steele’s “stereotype threat” that you were hired because you were “of color,” not necessarily for your abilities and professionalism. Many African Americans, and possibly other non-White professionals, are concentrated on earning the respect of their White colleagues (or at least feeling like they constantly have to). Many of these White people have probably never had a non-White person for a colleague nor were socialized with anyone other than someone White and just like them. This puts enormous pressure on non-White faculty and staff. This pressure presents a block when students of color seek guidance and/or express their concerns with the university, the majority White students, and any other occurrence that comes up when you are in your late teens, early 20s, and dealing with the pressure to succeed at the college level.

Throughout my education, African American academic professionals have not been the most helpful and/or supportive in propelling me to be successful. As a professional, I have found more sisterhood counseling and mentoring sessions with the African American women who vacuumed my office than the one who occupied the office across the wall or the one who had the same doctoral status. This might be because they see themselves in me and in their other non-White students and either feel resentment that the other seems to have an easier time than they did, or they feel depressed and shut down when a non-White student complains about the same things that they are currently experiencing. When I was interviewing for my first professional teaching job out of graduate school, the only African American faculty member at the interviewing university did not take the time to meet me at the mixer component of the interview. She later apologized to me for not taking the time to meet me, and her excuse was that she did not want to “call me out because I was Black.” In not wanting to treat me like a “Black person,” she treated me like a “Black person.” I am not saying that African American faculty and staff have not been helpful to African American and other non-White students because that is not true. I am simply defending that placing “brown-skinned” faces in certain positions does not save the day. If I was on the hiring committee for a position, I would hire the White candidate who had a recorded and long commitment to diversity in all its forms versus an African American or other non-White candidate who did not have a commitment to counseling White and non-White students and aiding in diversity programming. This might be controversial to say, but White faculty and staff who make a commitment to diversity in PWIs set a powerful standard to White students that learning about diversity is significant.

As a new African American faculty member, I overworked myself trying to fit into the PWI culture at the Liberal Arts school that I joined. Reflecting back on that experience, I suffered from what psychologist William Cross called “spotlight anxiety,” which describes a hypersensitivity to one’s perceived “difference” (whatever difference that might be) and the feeling of pressure to perform. I was consistently defending my right to be there among the other majority White faculty. I worked too hard, I attended too many mixers, and I was too involved in everyone but myself and my own personal growth and research. This manifested in several small physical ailments, a failed relationship, and a feeling of resentment among some of the colleagues in my department that I was doing “too much” and that my interests were “too diverse.” I learned a valuable lesson. A White colleague and dear friend of mine from another department wrapped up my experience in a simple sentence, “This place likes the novelty of diversity,” and we know that the “novelty” and the “reality of diversity” are two distinct ideas. PWIs will not be able to retain non-White faculty and/or staff if “novelty” is a motivating factor. I left a well-paying job in a bad economy because I felt more like a mascot than a real person with professional and personal needs and wants. And I was blessed enough to be able to make that decision. The issue of diversity at PWIs cannot be resolved by treating the symptoms; the disease of racism, isolation, and White privilege needs to be addressed from within the most privileged circles in PWIs, from White students, faculty, and administrators.

**Social Class and Acceptance**

How can these issues be addressed? As educators we seek to challenge our students and complicate their learning. The idea of higher level, critical thinking, and awareness is the overarching goal for higher education. So, how are our goals manifested in our education and the activities that we provide our students? All students, despite social, racial, and gender differences, need to feel a sense of value and acceptance by the greater university culture. Although this is not true for many students of color, but for many African American students, education is still seen as synonymous with Whiteness. Education is stereotyped as what well-to-do
White people do. Steele writes, “For too many black students school is simply the place where, more concerted, persistently, and authoritatively than anywhere else in society, they learn how little they are valued” (“Schooling”). If you are African American and like to read, you have probably heard someone in your childhood (and/or maybe adulthood) accuse you of “acting White.” This person might be a classmate or people in your own family. This criticism extends beyond a simple racial critique to also mark the “educated Black person” as “uppity,” not working class, or “not cool.” Not only is there pressure in early childhood education for African American children to “play dumb,” but also, in many schools, African American contributions are not celebrated in the curriculum. For instance, I am currently tutoring a young African American high school student who refused to read the slave narrative assigned in her English class. When I asked her why she did not want to read it, she said that she was tired of always reading about slavery. This comment took me back to my own childhood education where I resisted learning about slavery in school because it was taught in such a patronizing way that depicted Africans as victims. Nor did we learn much about enslaved African cultures of resistance or the important cultural contributions that our ancestors have impressed on what we now call “American culture.” It must be disempowering to learn history from a victimization standpoint and to know that President Abraham Lincoln was the one who truly freed our ancestors from bondage. This type of education empowers Whiteness. Thus, maybe for many of us, childhood education was and continues to be for White people. This is not to mention the tracking system that relegates Black kids to regular courses and majority White students to advanced placement (AP) and other upper-level learning courses. However, many educators are now aware of this, and curriculums have changed accordingly, but the pervasive attitude still persists. And as long as educational divisions through tracking exist, this attitude will persist.

Despite Obama winning the presidency and other examples of positive, educated people of color making important strides in our political and cultural society, getting an education and being Black divorces you from many people. Even educated White associates of mine who have not finished their PhDs are somewhat baffled and disappointed within themselves at how I was able to finish before them. A sense of White privilege failed them. If they could not “beat out” a Black person, something was spiritually wrong with the world. There is a cultural-racist need to keep “uppity Blacks” in their place. White, patriarchal culture highlights the lives of Black athletes, rappers, sassy, angry, overdramatic Black “housewives” and “basketball wives,” and so on as the “real Black” people of society. So, for African American students, entering a PWI could mean to follow into a stereotypical trap of not shining and not achieving in an effort to fit in to White students’ expectations of the stereotypical images they see of us in the media.

Thinking of class and acceptance in PWIs leads me to a situation that has haunted me as an educator. PWIs have what I would like to call the “Football Players Versus Frat Boys” class structure. You could argue that almost all students would like to know and be accepted from men who are involved with either one of these groups. Being a part of either or both of these groups is extremely important and powerful in the social dynamic of college. There are social perks to being a friend of someone in these two groups. There are obvious similarities between the two, but the differences appear to be painfully racially and socially obvious. At PWIs, fraternity men are usually upper-middle to upper-class White men, and Football players are usually working class and African American. Of course there are deviations from these overarching generalizations, but not many. As a diversity coordinator, I quickly noticed that both of these groups had one important thing in common. Both groups were the least likely to attend any culturally related programs. Fraternity men are generally not as active in organizations outside of their own fraternity. This is true for athletes, especially football players.

This attitude represents a bigger isolation that athletes of all colors suffer. Students appeared to appreciate athletes much more when they are running for touchdowns than when they are participating in class or waiting in line for mail at the Student Center. Athletes and their busy schedules do not counteract this isolationist attitude. While many students are having a good time on a Friday night, athletes might be resting up for a big game on Saturday. Because many of them are used to only hanging out with each other, they become further isolated among their small group of athlete friends. This clear grouping might dissuade other nonathlete students from penetrating the strong group social dynamic. And because not every student is an athlete, the group has an exclusive feel.

The same could be said for fraternities. Fraternities thrive on exclusivity. It is costly to become a member. Not everyone who wants to be a member is guaranteed to become one. Membership can depend on if you are a legacy or not, if you come from the right family with the right net worth, if you know the right person. Many students join fraternities at the beginning of the year before they even get a clear sense of who they are a part of from these groups. Being a part of them offers the immediacy of a social life that does not require much self-exploration or courage to do it on your own in a completely different context. It gives students who can afford it the immediacy of high school cool without starting from a social square one. Many White fraternity parties are also exclusive. In general, you have to be invited to attend. At the PWI where I worked, I was surprised to hear that Black athletes could be cheered on by White frat boys as they tailgate with beers in koozies one night and then be rejected by these same gatekeepers to go to the Saturday night frat party the next day. This brings me to the idea of diversity as “novelty” that I presented in the previous section. It is ok to experience Blackness when it fits in with our stereotype of what Blackness should be. But, in terms of socializing with African
Americans on a more intimate level, this could appear foreign and even scary to a majority-White social crowd.

What I experienced firsthand was what could potentially happen when an isolated, minority group (athletes) struggles to fit into the social dynamic of a PWI. Most of these athletes do not attend many organization or club meetings because the meeting times usually conflict with their practice, study, or meal schedules. There is also the feeling of isolation that many have with other groups of color around campus. Because they do not attend many of their meetings, most athletes might feel a backlash or feel disregarded by other African American and non-White students for not being more active to the cause. When it is time for them to blow off steam after a long season and socialize with the other students, many are not welcomed with open arms.

As the multicultural director of a PWI, I got firsthand experience with what that level of isolation could do to an athlete, especially a young, African American athlete from a working-class background who was on a football scholarship to attend the PWI. One day, I was working out at the gym, and I stared into the big screen TV in shock and sadness. A former student of mine, an intelligent African American philosophy and business major and football player was staring back at me. He and another player, who I had not worked with before, had been on the local morning news for selling marijuana to students. My first reaction was disbelief, and then anger. It was an embarrassing semester of several football suspensions and expulsions. The drug problem on campus, according to other staff, had escalated over the years. Many students were caught using or with drugs in their dorm rooms, but those students’ faces were not plastered on the morning local news. One of those students had been in one of my classes. He was one of the students who you looked forward to teaching. He raised the level of inquiry into the texts that we were reading. He was provocative in his comments and did not let other students off the hook too easily. I do not want to paint him as an angel. He would skip class often. But, in general, he was a stellar student. I immediately emailed him and then was able to get him on the phone to find out what happened. The details of what happened are not as important as understanding how an intelligent student with a sports scholarship and an assuredly bright future could put himself into this type of jeopardy.

There was an outrage with certain students on campus in terms of the “drug crackdown” from the administration. Rumors circulated among the students that administrators were using students’ cell phones and anonymously calling and texting to track down the students who were selling drugs. Most students understood the two-tiered system of accountability that had pervaded university politics and suspension. Well-connected students who broke the rules were let go with a slap on the wrist, whereas zero tolerance appears to be reserved for the students without connections. This football player was immediately expelled. He is now at another school, doing well, and continuing with his studies. However, psychologically, his situation has changed the way that I think about Black athletes at PWIs. As an on-campus drug dealer, he probably experienced more open doors than not from upper-class White students who could afford to get high. Selling drugs and receiving disposable income not only gives you a way to display conspicuous consumption but also inserts you into the exclusive majority community as a player in their game.

The issue with conspicuous consumption is important to consider because many students want to socialize outside of the confines of the university. While talking with an African student and friend, she admitted to me that it was hard to hang out with some of her well-to-do African American friends who frequently wanted to go shopping and spend money. For the African American football player, who was raised working class in the rural South, money gave him the opportunity to traverse the borders of social integration. I emailed the head football coach about talking with him about this issue. He was too busy to answer me. The dean of students, realizing the dismal pattern of three Black male athletes expelled in less than an academic year, called for a meeting with all of the athletic coaches and directors along with certain members of staff. Both sides agreed to work with each other. There was a consensus that no one wanted to take the blame for what was happening with Black male athletes. No one wanted to be responsible. Everyone did agree that retention was becoming more and more of an issue.

**What is Gained and Learned?**

I later left this job for personal reasons. The principal reason was that I did not feel free to be who I was as an individual. Some colleagues in my department would constantly question if that college was “the right fit for me.” Even the school chef would ask me, at least twice a month, “you still here?” As if he already knew that I did not belong there. This issue left me feeling strange and debilitated, as if my newly acquired PhD from a competitive research institution, my hours of hard work, and socializing would not be enough. I suffered from what Steele calls, “John Henryism.” According to Steele,

John Henry races the new steam-driven drill to see
who can dig a hole faster. When the race is over, John
Henry has prevailed by digging the deeper hole—only to
drop dead. The social psychologist Sherman James uses
the term “John Henryism” to describe a psychological
syndrome that he found to be associated with hyper-
tension
in several samples of North Carolina blacks: holding too rigidly to the faith that discrimination and disadvan-
tage can be overcome with hard work and persistence. (Steele, 1999)

My performance was constantly scrutinized, so my strategy was to work harder to make my majority White col-
leagues like me. Like some of my students, I hungered for approval and acceptance. At the end of the day, the question of “fitting in” haunted me, and I contemplated the idea of retention as it related to my life and the lives of the African American students I worked with.

In my last month of work, I researched for this article. I was given background data of all of the students that had left school during the previous academic year. I learned that this particular PWI did not have a problem retaining students of color. The majority of students who left school were working-class White students. Despite this fact, African American students, in particular, were so dissatisfied with the school that many incorrectly perceived that more of them were dropping out. A young Black Muslim woman called my office over the summer and wanted to interview me for her summer school project. She told me that her research was on how the university was having a hard time retaining African American students. I told her that she should start collecting data to see if she could even accurately argue that thesis. I emailed her the numbers that I received and told her that she should rethink her thesis. PWIs actually retain its Black stu-
dents, and at a higher rate than HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). I asked her to examine the root of her question. Maybe her project was really an inquiry into the socialization of African American students at PWIs. She argued with me that there were not enough events catered to African American students. As diversity coordinator, I know how hard the students’ leaders of predominately Black organ-
izations worked to provide programs and social events for students of color. I asked her if she attended any meetings with the Muslim Student Association. Her answer was “no.” I asked her if she knew about the Atlanta Trip to HBCUs, Olympic Park, and so on that was fully funded by the Diversity Office. I asked her if she knew about the Black History events, and so on. She said that she knew about all those things but was too busy with schoolwork to actually go. I told her that if she wanted to get something done, it would be easier to organize with a group or club. She felt like some-
thing needed to be done, but she did not offer any insight into what could be done. As I commented in the beginning of this essay, many of the students that complain most are the stu-
dents who generally feel isolated. Part of my job is to make them feel empowered to generate the types of activities that they want. White administrators see the importance of it, but few want an active part in realizing these events and engag-
ing African Americans and other students of all races in meaningful dialogue. Once again, diversity is a thing for “them” and about “them.”

One of the reasons that I wrote this article was to argue why these issues have persisted over time. My conclusions are nothing that has not been stated since the economic crisis. Education is still separate and unequal. The economic downturn has further exaggerated the distance between the “haves” and “have nots.” Even the “kind of haves” are real-
izing how extreme inequalities have forced them to downsize their lifestyle, whereas others appear to enjoy more wealth than imaginable (the 1%). I guess one of the solutions that comes to mind is to make an appeal, or more so a challenge to both White American and African Americans who work in higher education. Diversity is an issue to solve. It is something to be examined. White Americans need to be participants and not just observers of “diversity.”

How many times have you heard young White people claim that they do not have any culture? The idea of White normativity serves to divide White people from others. Also, class issues and privilege should be just as important to examine as “diversity.” “Diversity education” will not work unless White people actively participate and see themselves as a part of the process. Also, African Americans and other non-
White groups need to use diversity education as a way to examine the diversities that we have not fully analyzed in our own communities—sexism, homophobia, classism, and colorism among other issues that need examination within our groups.

Advocacy is another important issue that I would like to readress. Just because someone is “of color” does not mean that that person will be a diversity advocate. I am not saying do not hire people of color. I am stressing the idea that people of color are not necessarily the best mentors for people of color. When talking to faculty and staff about mentoring, several people would mention the importance of matching a student up with another student and/or a faculty and staff mentor who was like them in terms of phenotype and maybe social background. As much as I saw the merit in this, I will consistently play the devil’s advocate to this way of thinking. Chemistry cannot always be dictated by background and color. At the PWI where I used to work, the administration would mail a letter of invitation to all the black students to be involved with a mentoring program catered toward helping them navigate the “White waters.” In a focus group about recruitement for this program, one young African American woman expressed her distaste with receiving the letter. She stated that she felt insecure about it, as if there was already a problem with her going to that school because she was “pegged” as being Black and needing a mentor. A far more interesting question might be why working-class White men were not receiving the letter. Statistically, they were more likely to drop out of school than middle-class African American women. The letter is now going out to all students
and the mentor program is recruiting any student who needs a mentor.

So, the notion that “they only talk to me when they are drunk” will continue to be a by-product of this issue of inner shame that White students feel about their own sense of privilege. It is this sense of privilege that perhaps makes them unable and/or unwilling to regularly connect with anyone who does not look like them. And, of course, at the heart of it all is fear—fear that they will “not fit in.” And I imagine that this is what most White people in the United States feel generally, but I am not sure. Also, PWI White students who go abroad to a country where they are also the minority come back with an awareness and understanding of themselves that transcended their previous limitations of what it meant to always be surrounded by people who looked like you, by-products catered to your perceived tastes, and by media that verified your status as a part of the majority. They gain a sense of who they are, not by default.

It is a privilege to attend an institution of higher learning, and it is also important to realize the ongoing process of cultivating the type of society worth living in. This is my personal goal with teaching, writing, and relating to my students. We all have much to learn from each other. And we all have to take responsibility for our approaches to larger issues of privilege and race in society. It is this collective effort that will transform education and society.

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