TAKING THE PULSE

Practice or Perish: How Overexposure and Premature Claims of Success Undermine Men of Color Initiatives

Steven Thurston Oliver warns of the institutional tendencies and practices that disrupt the creation of communities for marginalized students.

By Steven Thurston Oliver

IT'S LATE ON FRIDAY AFTERNOON, AND JUST AS I am packing up to head home, the phone rings—I foolishly decide to answer it. On the line is someone I've never met asking, "Are you the person who is doing something with men of color?" I respond, "Yes I am," already feeling discouraged and knowing from experience precisely how the conversation will unfold. What follows is a request for any information I can provide for a report that is of course due by the end of the day. This same scenario has played out several times at all three universities where I have worked over the past 20 years. The individual making the call is not as interested in how men of color are faring on campus as they are in meeting the looming deadline requiring the institution to demonstrate what they are doing in the name of diversity and inclusion. As always, I feel reluctant to provide the information, fearing that overexposure and exploitation of students and programs might unwittingly work against our efforts to nurture and support them.

The Importance of Healing Spaces for Men of Color

IN MY OWN CAREER, MY goal has been to learn from my research and then attempt to put into practice the things I have learned. My dissertation was a qualitative study that sought to understand the value black males attending an elite private university in the Northeast found in support groups established specifically for men of color. Upon asking them about their experiences as black men on campus, I learned that not much had changed since many of the seminal studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s that looked at the experiences of black college students. In the mid-2000s, Michael Cuyjet, in his book African American Men in College, revealed that students describe the experience of being black and male on a predominantly white campus as one of isolation, occasional overt racism, and, most frequently, an environment filled with microaggressions. Microaggressions are essentially defined as

unintentional slights or insults inflicted by otherwise well-meaning and unaware individuals. Many studies on this topic in more recent years, most notably in the work of Shaun Harper, highlight the ways in which the impact of microaggressions on the psyche and well-being of students of color is cumulative and often debilitating. It makes sense that the primary value the men in my study said they found in being part of black male initiatives was that it provided space and time for them to heal, share experiences, and strategize about the future with a group of men dealing with similar issues.

Shortly after successfully defending my dissertation, I accepted a position as Assistant Vice President for Institutional Diversity at a large public institution in the Southeast. Using the knowledge gleaned from my doctoral work, I began the work of creating a black male initiative. This is where I experienced first-hand how building community happens, as well as the institutional habits that often get in the way. I started with pulling together focus groups of black males to learn about the experiences they were having on campus. Similar to the experience I had conducting the initial study, I found the students were excited to be together and to talk about their experiences. The focus group itself was a validating experience for them.

The next step was to call a meeting of black faculty, staff, and community leaders to engage in dialogue about what the Black Male Initiative could mean for students. I understood that we couldn't invite students to be part of a dialogue if we hadn't done the work of establishing community among ourselves as colleagues. Over the next three years, the effort was expanded to include Latino males, and we were able to have several dialogue sessions that provided an opportunity for students to make sense of things happening on campus and in the larger society.

It is important for all of us working with students not to underestimate the degree to which men of color on our campus feel threatened in this era of disproportionate treatment of black males by the police, Black Lives Matter, a societal climate of heightened racial tension, and—most recently—the election of Donald Trump. Having space and time to express and release these tensions is critical to the overall well-being of our students and their learning.

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Allowing Research to Inform Practice

I AM WRITING TO SHARE insights gleaned from my experience as a black scholar practitioner that may be helpful for faculty and student affairs professionals of color and others seeking to create supportive spaces for students of color and campus leaders who want to engender campus cultures that allow everyone to thrive. It is important to shed light on common institutional dynamics that thwart experimentation and innovation from taking hold in the ways it must for our efforts to impact the lives of students. To be clear, I am not suggesting that institutions reporting data are intentionally misleading but, rather, that the dynamics are as such that many fall into the trap of prematurely claiming success in ways that undermine efforts to engender trust and place nascent diversity efforts at risk.

As a scholar practitioner, the goal of my research has been to gain a deeper understanding of student experiences, with the hope of becoming more skillful in the ways I endeavor to support them. Doing the work in real time with students, making mistakes, and trying new approaches go hand in hand with producing scholarly work. Research informs practice, and one cannot exist with authenticity without the other. This holds true not only for faculty but for student affairs professionals attempting to bring the knowledge of the field to fruition in the programs for which they are responsible. In my current role as a faculty member on a tenure track, I often think it would be wonderful if the charge were "practice or perish" rather than the "publish or perish" ethos that exists at many of our institutions. The impact such a shift would have on campus culture and the benefit for students would be immeasurable.

Many junior faculty members are advised to flee from students and student affairs professionals in order to protect their productivity needed for getting tenure. Rather than the sole goal of publishing articles in scholarly journals, faculty within Higher Education programs and related disciplines could implement their research directly to the benefit of students by working in collaboration with student affairs professionals on their own campuses. Ultimately, our work is about improving the experience of students and finding ways to facilitate their development and well-being.

Not Everything of Value Can be Measured

ONE PUSH BACK I HAVE heard from scholars and mentors for whom I have great respect is that while these kinds of dialogue forums are nice, if we can't draw a straight line from students who participate and their rates of graduation, then they are not worth doing. While I agree that there is a need to find ways to focus on helping students develop an academic identity and the skills and habits of mind that will increase the likelihood of their graduating, it seems that attempting to find ways of striking a balance between providing psychosocial and academic support is worth striving for.

Similarly, others have suggested that developing student initiatives of any kind is not worth my time as a faculty member on the tenure track if the efforts cannot produce research worthy of publication. In this way, faculty are often forced to choose between utilizing what they have learned from research in direct engagement with students and producing the kind of work most readily rewarded by the tenure pro-

cess. While there are differences among institutions, that is, research versus teaching, some element of this dilemma is usually present. When those in student life lament that there is not more faculty engagement, what I am describing is often at the heart of the matter. Our institutions create conditions that make it, if not impossible, then certainly inadvisable for faculty to engage with students outside of the classroom.

While it may be challenging and even heretical for many in the academy to accept the notion that not everything that has value can be measured, failure to allow space and time for men of color initiatives and efforts targeting other marginalized groups to be innovative in the ways they provide recuperative space will contribute to their dissolution. The value of what occurs with many of these psychosocial efforts resists standard assessment methodologies. Funds should be allocated for the hiring of individuals skilled at facilitating difficult dialogues centered on issues of race and ethnicity who can help increase the capacity of faculty and staff to engage with and support student growth and development. Higher education faculty should be rewarded for collaborating with student affairs professionals in the pursuit of finding new ways to support student growth and development. This is what it means to be a scholar practitioner and what makes the work so vital and transformative.

Understandably, institutions are often under pressure to provide evidence of all the ways they are promoting diversity, particularly around matters of race and the effectiveness of those efforts in bolstering retention. This dynamic that exists on most campuses is part of our present reality and a way of holding institutions accountable for doing the work of becoming more welcoming and inclusive at every level of the institution. In our current climate, men of color are often viewed and discussed through the lens of negative stereotypes. It makes sense that stories about college campuses supporting men of color that run counter to the pervasive narrative of failure are of particular interest. Pedro Noguera, an Urban Sociologist who is one of my mentors, would often point out that we already understand all the reasons why men of color are failing. What we need to understand more fully is success and how many men of color are demonstrating resilience despite the obstacles.

Ideally, the gathering of information to demonstrate institutional efforts around diversity and inclusion should be an overflow of the intentional work that is actually happening on campus. Any shortcomings should function as a catalyst for new ideas that move the institution forward. If, as is often the case, the information about diversity efforts is gathered in a panicked and defensive way to give the appearance

that more is happening on campus than is actually the case, it can have the unintended consequence of faculty and staff becoming disillusioned by a perceived lack of sincerity on the part of the institution. Making false or puffed-up claims is actually much worse than not being able to make any claims at all.

While there may be interesting things happening on campus related to issues of diversity, the more important question is the degree to which these efforts are institutionalized and adequately resourced. In the absence of this support, the quick diversity story that makes a big splash can place an unwanted spotlight and hyped-up expectations on individuals who, in many cases, created the initiatives with different measures of success in mind. I have observed that efforts to support men of color and other groups routinely start out strong yet lose their momentum and focus as institutions move quickly to capitalize on what is perceived as a diversity success story.

Placing a spotlight on particular programs and individuals may feel good in the moment but often comes with pressure to demonstrate measurable outcomes related to academic achievement and graduation rates. While assessment can be a valuable tool for making our initiatives more effective, all too often, assessment is used to make decisions about whether to continue an effort at all. We want results before providing adequate resources when the opposite approach would be far more helpful. When too many individuals with competing interests get involved, the work of supporting students invariably suffers. On one occasion, once our efforts were publicized, I was told that I needed to provide data to demonstrate that the initiative I had started was having an impact on student achievement as evidenced by GPA and graduation rates. The burden of proof was placed on our small initiative comprised of faculty and staff volunteering their time outside of their primary responsibilities rather than first looking at broader institutional factors that impact persistence

among men of color, such as diversity among faculty, culturally responsive academic support, and adequate financial aid. The questions I was asked were not only premature, they were in fact the wrong questions. We spent the first several weeks of that semester in dialogue with the guys about how they felt targeted and treated unfairly by campus police. We needed to engage students in discussions about how they might channel their anger and frustration in ways that are positive and not self-defeating. We were doing important and necessary work with students, yet the institution never asked us to share these vitally important stories of how students were experiencing the campus.

It is critically important that we give faculty, student affairs professionals, and students space and time to grow these efforts organically, deciding for themselves how these initiatives should look and how they will measure success. These days, when responding to a request to quickly provide information, most times, I ask for a meeting to provide context and explain the true value at the heart of our efforts and the unintended consequences of shedding too much light on the healing spaces we are cultivating for our students. Ultimately, doing the work is more important than being known for doing the work. I confess there are also times when the phone rings late on a Friday afternoon, and I let it go to voicemail in order to head home for the weekend knowing that the students will be there on Monday, and they will need us fully rested and putting into practice all that we have learned.

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NOTES

Cuyjet, M. J. (2006). *African American men in college*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Harper, S. R. (2006). *Black male students at public flagship universities in the U.S.: Status, trends and implications for policy and practice*. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.