

The Pan-African Studies Effect and Its Impact on Undergraduate Students

by

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Abstract

Black students enrolled in predominantly White colleges and universities (PWCs) have historically had difficulty persisting and graduating at the same rate as their White counterparts. In constructing services for Black students in their transition to college, institutions have overlooked the academic programs designed to support Black students and their intellectual and interpersonal development and thereby positively impacting their retention and graduation rates. At the University of Louisville, the growth and development of the Department of Pan-African Studies (PAS) over the past 40 years has contributed to the “Black Studies Effect.” This article examines the empirical research on students who have taken courses in or graduated from PAS and its impact on their academic performance, rate of persistence, and racial identity formation from the theoretical viewpoint of resiliency.

Introduction

Black Studies programs have decreased since their introduction in the late 1960s and 1970s (Bobo, Hudley, & Michel, 2004; Rojas, 2007). Some programs have been merged with others addressing issues of diversity, dissolved, or diminished to minors or varied course offerings. Although there is much discussion nationally on the infusion of diversity content throughout the curriculum and persistent questions regarding the legitimacy of departments like the University of Louisville’s (UofL) Department of Pan-African Studies (PAS), the reality is that Black Studies programs and diversity programs are not the same—and the Black experience, which is central to Black Studies, is all-too-often marginal, if not invisible, in many diversity programs.

However, UofL's PAS has flourished since it was introduced in 1973. A department that began as a program with only two joint appointed faculty has grown into one with 15 full-time tenure-track positions that offers the only undergraduate degree in Black Studies throughout the state of Kentucky as well as postgraduate degree programs. Beyond the department's degree-granting capacity, PAS educates a large segment of students from the general student population through general education, cross-listed, supporting, and elective courses with an average of 1,900 students enrolled and 55,702 credit hours produced in PAS courses between 2006-2013 (Office of Institutional Research, 2013). PAS has achieved a "critical mass" programmatically, and generated sufficient quantitative and qualitative data over time to support a comparative analysis of the impact the department has on the performance, retention, and graduation rates of undergraduate students (Adams, 2009).

A series of studies at UofL chronicled the experiences and successes of undergraduate students who enrolled in PAS classes and PAS's graduating seniors (Adams, 2005; Adams, 2009; Adams, 2012). These studies found a significant impact on how students engage their overall academic experience after their exposure to the PAS curriculum and faculty. This academic and interpersonal experience has served to increase self-efficacy and academic resiliency on a predominantly White campus (PWC). The exposure to PAS's liberatory education is instrumental in positive racial socialization and developing social consciousness by increasing identity awareness and creating space for students to think critically throughout their educational encounters. Students learn resiliency, or an ability to recover from adversity, through PAS that ultimately influences their academic success (Hanley & Noblit, 2009). Therefore, this piece examines academic resiliency of undergraduate students using a series of studies on PAS's student engagement, liberatory curriculum, and racial identity development.

The Culture of PWCs

Hanley and Noblit (2009) stated educators and institutions of education worked with a sense of assimilation logic, or the thought that once Blacks and other students of color were integrated into predominantly White schools systems, their academic success would follow. However, this logic was flawed. Black students are susceptible to marginalization or covert discrimination. In the current system, Black students must learn how to handle cultural biases and bridge aspects of Black culture with the majority culture, or what DuBois described as the maintenance of a double-consciousness in order to thrive (Cropper, 2000; Sedlacek, 1987). When racial identities are at odds, or an institution does not provide Black students the cultural environment that supports their participation in campus activities, there is a greater likelihood students will become marginalized and lost to attrition (Davis, 1991; Sedlacek, 1987). So, while the country debates whether or not it is a post-racial society, Black students witness the dismantling of Black Studies programs across the country and attacks on affirmative action (e.g. Proposition 209) that prompted the immediate and drastic decline in Black college student enrollment in some states (Briscoe, 2008), and the continuation of a traditional curriculum without systemic inclusion of the contributions and experiences of Blacks in the U.S.

There is an argument that legal segregation is non-existent in contemporary society, which work to diminish the need for discussions of race and racial climate at PWCs as well as the existence of Black Studies, but contemporary issues instigated by color-blindness and meritocracy remain a barrier for systemic change that support an inclusive environment (Delgado, 1995 ; Guinier & Torres, 2002; Briscoe, 2008). Therefore, an examination of climate and culture is imperative when assessing the need for Black Studies at PWCs.

The disparity in enrollment and graduation among Black and White students illustrates this point. The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) reported that from 1976 to 2010, Black student enrollment increased from nine to 14% among American college students – five percent over 34 years. At UofL, Black student enrollment has slightly declined from 2008 to 2011 from 12.2% to 11.5% of the overall student population (Institutional Research, 2013)¹. Black students at UofL tend to have a slightly higher first-year retention rate than their White counterparts at an average of 78.5% and 76.4% respectively from 2000-2011. Yet, the gap between Black and White students' six-year graduation rate is far more significant at an average 40.1% and 48% respectively between 2006-2012. What created the gap between Black and White student degree completions? Across the literature, reasons differ on why Black students are more likely to dropout of college than their White counterparts, and include common issues such as finances, academic under-performance, feelings of alienation, and/or discrimination (Fischer, 2007). The increase in Black student enrollment in PWCs in recent decades presented a new challenge for Black students as the climate of these institutions was not always friendly and their programs were not always culturally sensitive.

The expectations and ways in which students engage campus resources remain a vital component of their success. Black students expect campus values and norms to be more liberal, but when this is not their experience, the university environment seems confusing and hostile (Gibbs, 1973). Students are not always able to articulate feelings of alienation or marginalization by faculty or their peers, they simply state they are not connected to the campus or the community. Although there are continued debates on how much racial identification impacts students' expectations and academic performances, and contrary to Smith's (1991) premise that racial identification was unrelated to Black students' academic performance due to the influences of historical events (Smith & Moore, 1983), students continue to experience covert forms of racism. Students who receive positive feedback about themselves from peers, faculty, staff, and administrators and are involved on campus tend to succeed at the college level (Davis, 1991). In fact, Adams (2005) reported the importance students placed on their academic success had a significant relationship to their feeling socially successful, fighting racism, and having interaction with students of the same race, all of which contributes to student persistence. Racial identification provides both the intellectual tools and insulation needed to survive within PWCs and build resiliency.

Fostering Resilience through PAS

Increasingly, more research has been devoted to understanding and reinforcing the resiliency of people to overcome adversity through positive psychology. There is debate in the literature on whether people are born with or are socialized to have resilient characteristics (e.g. strengths, skills, resources, supports, or coping strategies) known as protective factors. In attempting to predict these characteristics, Richardson (2002) described three waves of resiliency as (a) resilient qualities - descriptions of individual qualities, e.g. self-esteem and support systems, that predict social and personal success, (b) resiliency process - process of developing coping skills to overcome adversity that may induce stress that results in some level of impact on protective factors, and (c) innate resilience - the process of reintegration from life stressors that prompt motivational energy that builds on a higher level of personal development (p. 308). Black students typically enter college within Cross's (1991) pre-encounter stage of Black identity development, in which they are disconnected from racial salience or experienced negative racial socialization. When faced with a racial climate that is hostile or marginalizing at a PWCs, these waves of resiliency become relevant as students engage in the resiliency process of knowing, self- understanding and increased strengths in resilient qualities or what Cross's stages would identify as the encounter and possibly the immersion/emersion stages (Richardson 2002; Cross 1991). It is in these stages that race becomes salient and a racial re-socialization begins that reinforces or develops resiliency characteristics.

Brown (2008) studied the link between what teaches resiliency to Blacks related to their environment and racial socialization. She found that social support and racial socialization predicted resiliency in young Black adults and messages that emphasized cultural pride and increased knowledge on Black heritage were significantly related to resiliency, specifically with academic achievement and racial identity development (Brown, 2008, p. 43). Similar outcomes have been found in other studies (Andrews, 1971; Georgoff, 1968; Horowitz, 1939, Johnson, 1966, Young, 1994; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton & Smith, 1996; Livingston, McAdoo & Mills, 2010). Brown found the messages came from social supports that fostered this developmental process. PAS serves as the support and messenger for students related to their cultural heritage and history within its curriculum that takes them through Richardson's resiliency waves and prompts students to develop skills to cope with issues of race and social justice - adversity. As an academic discipline or field of study, PAS is unique in that it addresses the experiences and, often indirectly, the needs of Black people. Black Studies evolved into a complex and diverse discipline with several models across the country, but each educate from the mission to correct the myths of passive acceptance of oppression, acknowledge Blacks' contributions to society and a collective effort in the movement towards Black progress, as well as the psychological and sociological impact of racism among Blacks and society (Sharlet, 2000; Stewart, 2000). This creates an environment that not only supports academic excellence but also social responsibility. The benefit Black students derive from Black Studies, can be described as the "Black Studies effect" (Adams, 2009).

Black students found it important to feel a part of a community; they used knowledge gained through PAS courses and from reading Black authors to become their own advocates. PAS provided the environment, the opportunity, and the information, but the students themselves were active, not passive, agents in their own development. They had to do something with this information and these experiences to forge an alternative identity and an alternative model for success that did not depend on adopting the values of the White culture. In this case, PAS was perhaps more a catalyst than a cause (Adams, 2005, p. 296).

In this context, PAS provided an alternative model of success, one that did not marginalize others or undermine Black students' efforts to develop a healthy self-identification with their own heritage, culture, and history. One student had this story to share.

... I took... [PAS] 202...we talked about the difference of slavery in Brazil and slavery in the U.S. right. Yeah, that class was off the chains. It showed me a lot...we're all Black people and we're all going through the same struggle...I came from a predominantly White high school and I felt like I was treated like dirt, and I was like the little mascot and the little light-skinned girl with the pretty hair was ... more accepted because she was more like them and I think that was the whole stigma that I had. I know why I had it, I won't say it made much sense, but I think it just took that kind of a class to let me know that we're all in the struggle together (Adams, 2005, p. 296).

Redefining PWC Culture through PAS

Through the series of studies, PAS student perspectives were gathered on campus climate, student engagement within and outside of the classroom, and their academic performance through interviews, focus groups, surveys, and institutional data. Generally, students disclosed the supportiveness of PAS faculty and the significant role the curriculum had on their racial and social consciousness in comparison to non-PAS courses. One student interviewed from a PAS course struggled to describe his classroom experience. He stated, "...being an accounting major... sometimes it's just me...I don't feel... sometimes I feel like the professors—not that they feel sorry for me but it's like dang... I don't know what words to use!" (Adams, 2005, p. 293). Black students expressed a sense of being invisible in the classroom and a sense of apathy faculty had in their personal success. For example, this student spoke to this lack of interest a faculty demonstrated by stating:

I attempt to seek out all of my professors, but they're all not responsive. A lot of teachers in the PAS Department. . . are mentors. They are very responsive. Some of my [other] teachers... don't seriously just want to be bothered. And I mean, when you get that kind of response you don't want to be bothered either. Why waste my time when you aren't going to put forth a sincere effort to e-mail me back when I have questions? ...[I]f you have a student that has concerns that's attempting to look up to you, attempting to seek out a mentor of some sort why wouldn't you find time for them? (Adams, 2005, p. 296).

Another student stated, “[t]here’s no comparison – A lot of professors are out here for their job and not excited by their students. It doesn’t motivate me.”

Twenty-six of the 27 graduating PAS seniors interviewed over three years reported they felt supported by the PAS faculty and staff both within and outside of classroom. They felt faculty cared about them. One student stated, “[PAS faculty] want you to do better than a C. [In] [o]ther classes[, faculty don’t] don’t care if you graduate. They just went over the material and didn’t personalize the experience.” Other students stated, “I feel like [PAS] faculty understand the whole student.” “I don’t know how to describe it, it’s just comfortable. I never felt like I was being talked to as a child” (Adams, 2012, p. 6).

It is important that Black students feel part of a community, albeit this can be a difficult goal to achieve (Sedlacek, 1987). Therefore, it is of even greater importance that they have someone on campus to which they can turn for guidance. Guiffrida (2005) discussed the concept of “othermothering” and the mentoring Black faculty provides that positively impacts Black students’ rates of academic performance. He states that faculty work to parent Black students and establish high expectations that serves as an external source of motivation for their performance. Heyward (1985) concluded, “Blacks do not look to White faculty and staff as role models for their leadership. They look to other Blacks or develop their own styles and forms of leadership” (Sedlacek, 1987, p. 489). Several students described PAS faculty’s expectations as higher than other faculty they encountered. They stated, “...the expectations of the faculty were high and made me want to get A’s”. “Both faculty and staff push students to do their best and graduate.” “The teachers are always going above and beyond.”

It was a general sense across all of the studies conducted through PAS that students felt challenged by the PAS faculty as well a sense of mentoring. Students reported they were held accountable for their performance by PAS faculty. One student stated, “The most enjoyable thing for me has been [my professor]. I am grateful I took her class because I [came] to see that there [are] faculty members and/or administration at UofL who care about the students as well as encourage [you] and not knock you down because of the color of your skin” (Adams, 2005, p. 291). This relational dynamic prompts students to rise to the occasion (Guiffrida, 2005).

While it is clear that the presence of Black role models is a predictor of success for Black students, it is equally clear that Black faculty, staff, and administrators remain a small fraction of the academic workforce in American higher education. Student satisfaction with the University has a significant relationship with having contact with University faculty and administration (Adams, 2005). A graduating senior stated:

From the first time I decided to take the Slave Trade class...I felt a sense of acknowledgement and acceptance for the first time since my first semester at [an HBCU]... I took classes with [two faculty who] embodied a caring, thoughtful admiration for their students that they showed not only through their words but their actions. However, both demanded, through different methods, that their students excel in the classroom and beyond (Adams, 2012, p. 4).

Student reported that the number of contacts had with PAS faculty was not as important as the content of those contacts (Adams, 2005). Contacts with PAS faculty, coupled with the relevance of the curriculum, build the motivation and coping skills to manage adversity and reconcile racial identity issues.

PAS Liberatory Curriculum

Exposure to PAS, through its faculty and curriculum, represents Cross's (1991) stage of encounter in his Stages of Black Identity Development whereby students are able to define their racial identity and salience. PAS motivates students to develop their racial identity by empowering a voice that establishes a platform for their academic engagement and performance as well as personal identity and cultural appreciation (Adams, 2012). Thus, PAS provides a rare and important "space" for Black students at the University of Louisville.

Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to empower students and to assist in strengthening their critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills (Wilson, Mason, & Ewing, 1997). So, encouraging and facilitating these intentional connections with departments and programs that speak to issues related specifically to Black students' needs and interests can be related not only to their satisfaction, but also to their persistence. So, as PAS studies the implications and history of race and racism and the contributions of Blacks across the Diaspora, it also provides empirically supported research that prompts students to ask questions on what they haven't learned – corrective education that is grounded in a connection to current social, cultural, and political trends. A student reported,

[PAS] gave me an honest education. It made me stronger. Before I knew (race issues) were going on but I really didn't know how to respond or I could respond but it didn't sound intelligent to me. I didn't have any resources to back it up. So why say anything if I didn't have anything to back it up. So, PAS gave me a shield more or less. I can speak about things and speak about them intelligently instead of saying that I think this is wrong but not be able to say why (Adams, 2005, p. 293).

PAS graduating seniors were asked to compare their experiences between PAS and non-PAS courses. All but three of the 27 students interviewed specifically mentioned the opportunity for discussion in PAS courses and/or the willingness of faculty to promote learning in the classroom rather than utilizing the banking education model (the teacher speaks and the student listens). For example, a student reported, "PAS classes want students to learn and succeed where those [professors] in general education [required courses] it was 'here's the stuff... you either learn it or you don't.'" Most students discussed the opportunity to develop their critical thinking skills and space to challenge and develop their own identity – a sense of their motivation. A student response was, "[I] enjoyed critical thinking and [the] philosophical approach to learning – it moved me beyond what I've been socialized to believe to be true. It was a matter of making sense of me and others who look like me." A PAS major stated "The information/content makes you want to go [to class] and not miss a day." Finally, another student reported, "What was taught in class was explicit to what to apply in life. It was the first time I learned something useful and it wasn't just me but all students in class (not just Blacks) to make people aware of their environment. Some [classes] pushed for it but PAS was consistent."

Although the content of the courses was invaluable to the student experience, the teaching methodology is just as vital to the liberatory educational experience. As previously mentioned, faculty engagement of the students fosters a learning environment that is conducive to the implementation of the liberatory educational paradigm. When students talked about what was most helpful in being a part of PAS, student responses included these statements: "The support of faculty makes it a lot easier [to take classes]. You actually feel like you're learning something." "[I] Learned a lot about myself. It changed my personality, and I didn't feel like a victim of race and [was] able to deal with it from a position other than anger." Education can be an exercise of domination in its traditional form that ideologically indoctrinates students to an oppressive state of thinking, but the goal of liberatory education is "posting the problems of human beings in their relations with the world" through acts of cognition, and the promotion of dialog, where authority that rests in the pursuit of freedom and justice through knowledge to transform individual and social realities (Freire, 1995, p. 60). In this context, it fosters students' academic success.

Academic Success

Adams (2009) found in her study of all self-identified² Black undergraduate students enrolled at UofL between Fall 1997 and Fall 2002 (n = 6,062), that Black students who majored or minored in PAS had a higher academic performance, and graduated at a higher rate than Black students who did not at statistically significant levels (Adams, 2009). While simply taking PAS courses did not enhance the academic performance of Black students, majoring or minoring in PAS, which entailed taking a greater number of PAS courses, did have this effect. The effect, however, was indirect in that PAS majors and minors performed better, not in PAS courses, but in courses offered by other academic programs. In other words, PAS majors and minors performed no better in PAS courses than did other Black students, but something from this more intensive exposure to PAS courses may have “carried over” and influenced their performance in courses offered by other departments. This may be attributed to students’ level of self-confidence in their academic and intellectual abilities based on a curriculum that addresses their history and culture (Adams, 2005; Livingston, McAdoo, & Mills, 2010).

Of interviewed PAS majors (n=27) graduating between Spring 2005 and Fall 2009, PAS graduates completed their degrees in an average of 4.46 years with a mean cumulative GPA of 2.89 (Adams, 2012). Many PAS majors reported they were unaware PAS was a major option until they were in their second to third academic year, thereby delaying their major approval process (Adams, 2012). When asked what helped them decide to major in PAS, students’ responses focused on various aspects of community and/or a sense of a global perspective. Other responses related to a specific course that “hooked” them, as a PAS major stated, “[I] was tired of being the only Black in class. It was irritating. Friends told me about [PAS] and they were also planning to take the class. I began coming up to the Department and it was all uphill from there.” Most PAS graduates articulated their passion was sparked by learning more about themselves and the sense of pride they gained through the knowledge acquired in the classroom. One student shared she improved academically after finding something that interested her after switching majors three times and deciding on PAS, and how the difference could be seen in her transcript.

PAS graduates indicated the knowledge they gained through PAS would translate to their lives and careers. The curriculum helped them to define who they were and how they engaged the greater society. “...[PAS] taught me to not take anything at face value. [It has] prompted me to ask questions more” (Adams, 2012, p. 5). Graduates found connectedness between the assigned readings and classroom discussions, their internships and study abroad experiences, and current events and social issues. This connection set the stage for them to develop their plans after graduation. All but one of the students expressed their intention in applying to or enrolling in a graduate program. At the time of their interview, 52% of PAS graduates had already enrolled in a graduate program, mostly in areas of Education, Pan-African Studies, or Social Work.

Discussion

PAS majors and minors analyzed from 1997-2002 were found to graduate and persist at a statistically significant higher rate than their counterparts. Upon further analysis of PAS graduates, from 2005-2009, this trend continued with students graduating earlier than the 6-year national average. In each of these studies, students reported feelings of empowerment through their racial identification that was largely connected to the curriculum and interaction with PAS faculty and the fulfillment of the Black Studies mission. Although Smith and other researchers raise the question of whether there should be conversations on race because race may not be salient for all Black students and it generalizes the student (Smith, 1991; Gilbert, 2003; Carlstrom, 2005), students reported they would have experienced reduced anxiety about their academic and career options by increasing the time to have guided discussions specifically related to the Black Studies discipline and their career plans had the conversation happened sooner in their academic career (Adams, 2012). With the impact PAS has on academic performance, racial identity formation, and resiliency, there is a unique opportunity for Black students to engage PWCs in a way that decreases the psychosocial barriers that impede their progress towards graduation.

Receiving racial socialization messages specific to racial pride through an understanding of heritage and culture do, in fact, result in positive academic outcomes and other pro-social behaviors (Livingston, McAdoo, & Mills, 2010; Hughes, Rodriguez, Smith, Johnson, Stevenson, & Spicer, 2006; Caughy, O'Camp, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002; Bowman & Howard, 1985). There is a plethora of research that examines the positive impact of racial identity development, Black self-image or esteem through exposure to curriculum specific to Black history, culture, and politics from elementary school-aged children to college-aged young adults (Adams, 2005; Andrews, 1971; Georgoff, 1968; Horowitz, 1939; Johnson 1966; Sellars, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1996; Young, 1994). The studies that have examined the impact of PAS through its 40 year existence contribute to this literature and further supports not only its impact on resiliency protective factors, but specifically academic persistence and graduation among college students. Shifting the educational paradigm to embrace what Freire (2006), hooks (1994), Davidson and Yancy (2009) and others term a liberatory education, creates a schism between the liberatory education model and the traditional philosophical approaches to education. It is institutionally ethical to help students achieve competency areas related to issues of diversity, empowerment, and social justice for the future leaders of society (Reamer, 1999).

Based on the findings of these studies, it is clear that colleges and universities interested in the academic success and personal growth of Black students must make several commitments that are, at the same time, investments in Black Studies. First, there can be no Black Studies effect if there are no Black Studies programs. Thus, universities must establish viable Black Studies programs with faculty, curriculum, programs, and resources needed to produce the effects supported by the findings of the PAS studies. Second, universities must require that all students take survey courses in Black Studies in the same way that they require courses in areas such as English, History, and Mathematics.

Arum and Roksa (2011) stated the concern for the achievement gap is not limited to K-12, but impacts the learning that occurs in higher education as well. They stated that what students do in college matters, but more importantly, what faculty members do matters too. It is the institution's responsibility to create the space for learning. However, to create this particular learning opportunity, the institution must invest in the creation or expansion of programs and departments, as well as full-time faculty in Black Studies.

The value of academic resiliency in education pivots on the students' visual recognition of their growth and recovery during their college experience (Richardson, 2002). This research reveals that, to the extent that such an environment was created at the University of Louisville through the establishment and expansion of the Department of Pan-African Studies, the impact on Black students has been measurably positive. Arum and Roksa (2011) argue that students do not need many elaborate services, but faculty who are willing to make students read, write, and think create space for them to connect with their own cultural identity with the curriculum and faculty. Could PAS be the "answer" for everything? Hardly, but the research indicates that Black Studies is great place to begin the institutional transformation that can improve students' academic achievement and personal development.

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Endnotes

¹ The racial categories changed in 2010 to include categories for “Two or More Races” and Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, which may contribute to the decline for those who would identify as “African American, Non-Hispanic”.

² Students must identify race on their admission application to be able to be included in the query run through the Registrar’s Office. If a student does not self-disclose his/her race, they are automatically excluded from this portion of the study.