

Introduction to the Special Edition: Pedagogies that Work for Students of African Descent

by

Guest Editor

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Dr. Jessica James is Professor of Sociology and Africana Studies and the Living Learning Community Coordinator at Wesley College in Dover, DE. Her primary research interests include African American College Student Success and Best Practices in Higher Education. Dr. James's teaching career began in 1995 after graduating Tulane University with a B.A. in History and a minor in African and Diaspora Studies, and since then she has been involved in nearly every level of education. As a team member in AmeriCorps, she taught Adult and Family Literacy to low-income women in New Orleans, LA. After spending another year teaching second graders in a public school in New Orleans, she became a community educator for the Philadelphia History Museum, the Atwater Kent. While pursuing her graduate studies, she worked for the Center for Literacy in Philadelphia, PA for seven years, teaching adult and family literacy and writing for social service managers, and she coordinated the Pennsylvania Literacy Corps, a service learning program that trained college students from Swarthmore College and Temple University to become adult literacy tutors in their college communities. Dr. James began teaching undergraduate university courses in 1999, and received her Ph.D. in African American Studies from Temple University in 2006. Dr. James created an Africana Studies minor at Wesley College in 2011, and established a Living Learning Community program in 2012. She is the faculty advisor for the Fit-to-Serve learning community, a service-learning community that focuses on food culture and social inequality in the U.S

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In the wake of Black student protests against hostile conditions on predominantly white campuses (PWI's) such as the University of Missouri, Occidental College, Georgetown University, Purdue University, Princeton University, Yale University, and University of Alabama this past year, a special issue on teaching and institutional strategies that promote African American student success could not be timelier. African American student attendance at PWI's has steadily increased over the past six decades since the *Brown v Topeka* (1954) supreme court decision began to open the doors of institutions that had been heretofore reserved for White students. Prior to the 1960s, most African American students were educated at Historically Black Universities, but today over 87% of African American college students attend predominantly white institutions (Rodgers and Summers, 2008). In the early years of the integration of higher education institutions, students of African descent were met with violence and hostile campus climates. In response, Black students formed student organizations to advocate for inclusion in university communities, and they criticized PWI's for their lack of African American faculty and staff and for a dearth of courses focusing on Africans and African Americans. African American discontent with campus climates led to student protests in college and university communities across the country in the late 1960s and 1970s, and resulted in the creation of Black Studies programs and departments. Over the past half-century, we have seen the institutionalization of Black/Africana Studies and the development of more than 275 programs, certificate programs, centers or departments in the United States, including thirteen doctoral granting institutions. Since then, Black/Africana Studies has made numerous curricular advances by filling voids of institutionalized knowledge of both phenomenon and people (Okafor, 2013). The discipline of Black/Africana Studies has also made pedagogical and conceptual developments as evidenced by the growth of Classical African Studies, Black Women's Studies, Afrocentric/African centered studies. The discipline of Black/Africana Studies also has a number of peer-reviewed journals to advance the discipline and issues affecting people of African descent, such as the *Journal of Black Studies*, the *Western Journal of Black Studies*, *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, and the *International Journal of Africana Studies*.

Despite the numerous disciplinary advances in Black/Africana Studies, African American students still face a multitude of obstacles when they aspire to obtain college degrees, especially at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Although more students of color are enrolled in higher education—one out of three college students today versus 17% in 1976—persistence and degree completion rates for African Americans continue to be lower than for other groups (Swaner and Brownell, 2009). This is especially true for African American students at Predominantly White Institutions. Higher educational research “suggests that regardless of levels of academic preparedness, a disproportionate number of students of color who manage to get through the doors of PWI’s find themselves ill prepared to thrive on these campuses” (Marbley, Bonner, Williams, Morris & Ross, p. 92.) Nationally, 39.4% (2 out of 5) of all college students graduate within 4 years. For Black students, 20.8% (1 out of 5) graduate within 4 years, compared to 43.3% for white students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Among Black males, 15.7% graduate within four years. Three out of five (59%) students seeking a bachelor’s degree in 2007 completed a degree within six years. Forty-point three percent (2 out of 5) Black students graduate in six years, while 60.7% (3 out of 5) of white students graduate within six years (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Recently, a professor commenting on the student protests of the 2015-2016 academic year in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* aptly summarized the student protests:

Students on campus after campus are assailing the culture of the academy as one that supports and extends white privilege; minimizes the presence and influence of people of color in the student, faculty, and administrative ranks; and presents Eurocentric studies as the only legitimate sources of knowledge, while simultaneously ignoring or minimizing the contributions of nonwhites to the development of American society and world civilizations. (Harvey, 2016)

Indeed, multiple studies have pointed out that PWIs’ organizational cultures still alienate students of African descent, and African American students spend a great deal of time trying to establish their academic credibility at PWI’s, fit in socially, and make the transition to college life. (Love, 2009). According to Kuh (2001-2), organizational culture is “the collective, mutually shaping patterns of institutional history, mission, physical settings, norms, traditions, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in an institution of higher education and which provide a frame of reference for interpreting the meanings of events and actions on and off campus.” (p.25).

While much more research is needed on institutional cultural change and college-wide strategies that encourage African American student success, such as living learning communities, peer mentoring programs, and service learning programs, for nearly 50 years, Africana/Black studies departments, courses and professors have offered respite and refuge to African American students from the wider campus community at PWI's. The contributors in this special edition focus on the ways in which Africana/Black Studies faculty and courses can mediate the challenges students of African descent face at PWIs.

Samuel Beasley, Collette Chapman-Hilliard, and Shannon McClain explain the challenges that students of African descent face at Predominantly White Institutions, including racially hostile climates, the burden of "acting White," and academic disidentification in their article "Linking the Emancipatory Pedagogy of Africana/Black Studies with Academic Identity Outcomes among Black Students Attending PWIs." They demonstrate how Africana/Black Studies and Emancipatory Education Framework can help foster positive academic self-concepts among Black students. They offer recommendations for faculty, researchers and administrators that will attend to the social, cultural, spiritual needs of students of African descent. In her article "Utilizing an African American Studies Course to Garner Critical Consciousness among Students: Considerations for Improving Campus Climate," Blaze Campbell argues that institutions of higher education must provide transformative opportunities for students of all races to provoke critical consciousness of racial issues. She argues that PWI's whose missions purport to be committed to "diversity" or "multiculturalism" should create a required general education African American course for all students. Campbell offers four recommendations for designing general education African American Studies courses at PWI's

Collette Chapman-Hilliard, Samuel Beasley, Shannon McClain, Kevin Cokley, Athanasios Nioplias, & Desire Taylor examine the benefits of culturally empowering courses, or formal academic counter-spaces, for Black college student success, namely whether culturally empowering courses impact racial identity and academic motivation. They argue that formal academic counter-spaces influence cultural identity development and academic outcomes among Black college students. In her article, "Racial Identity Development of African American Students in Relation to Black Studies Courses," Jakia Marie conducted a qualitative study among students of African descent to examine the reasons African American students choose to take Black Studies courses and the benefits of taking Black studies courses. She found that African American students who took Black Studies courses reported having a more positive racial identity than students who had not taken Black Studies courses.

The next two articles focus on specific teaching strategies. Cedric Hackett's article describes a teaching paradigm known as *Kufundisha*, a culturally empowering teaching strategy developed by Neville and Cha-Jua. Dr. Hackett describes his experience implementing and integrating this practice into his undergraduate course on the Black man in contemporary times at Cal State Northridge.

He demonstrates that utilizing Kufundisha to design assignments can have a positive impact on the students of African descent in the course, and on the wider campus community through a public poster session that focuses on issues confronting African American men. Aimee Glocke defines the African worldview and African centered educational practices in her article, “Round Pegs into Square Holes: Teaching in an African-centered Way at a Predominantly White Institution.” Drawing on her experience of nearly two decades of teaching Black Studies, Dr. Glocke offers us multiple examples to demonstrate how an African centered classroom can be constructed. Giving concrete, detailed explanations of teaching strategies such as communal quizzes, structuring a safe and open classroom community, and navigating teaching at PWI’s, Glocke gives Africana/Black Studies faculty multiple strategies for becoming effective instructors at PWI’s.

Kwame Harrison’s piece “Black College-Radio on Predominantly White Campuses: A ‘Hip-Hop Era’ Student-Authored Inclusion Initiative” explores safe, welcoming, and empowering spaces for students of African descent through his examination of Black college radio on Predominantly White campuses in the 1980s and 1990s. His research suggests that contemporary campuses could foster a more inclusive environment for students of African descent through the use of “the college hip hop radio era” as an example to create student-authored spaces where music plays a central role.

Allison Sinanan’s article, “The Value and Necessity of Mentoring African American students at PWI’s” examines formal and informal mentoring as strategies to increase African American student satisfaction and retention at PWI’s. She contends that faculty mentors can serve as a valuable resource for African American students as they navigate the social and academic landscape of PWI’s.

The interview with Dr. Nathaniel Norment, who served as chair of the African American Studies department at Temple University for eleven years, explores his teaching and administrative career in Africana/Black Studies. Dr. Norment discusses the mission of Africana/Black Studies, pedagogical strategies, and the challenges that the discipline faces in the twenty-first century.

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