

Chapter 6

Toward an HBCU–Based Model of Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from the non-Eurocentric and Afrocentric approach of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), the authors advance the first HBCU-based learning communities model in the literature to date. The model combines institution-level assets and inputs with student-level assets and inputs to foster a supportive learning community environment that is consistent with HBCU tradition and postmodern organization. Implications for practice and research conclude the chapter, with an emphasis on preparing HBCUs to meet relevant challenges and opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

Fusing tradition and innovation is a pressing challenge for American higher education, and nowhere is this truer than among this nation's historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Enterprising and entrepreneurial stakeholders, including administrators, faculty, staff, and alumni are needed to renovate HBCUs for this century with the skill and care of talented craftsmen. Indeed, given their non-Eurocentric or Afrocentric (Asante, 1998) approaches to students, HBCUs provide a critical counterpoint to the Eurocentric ideals of predominantly white institutions (PWIs) (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Arroyo, Palmer, & Maramba, 2016; Exkano, 2013).

Vital to present-day HBCUs are the perspectives of GenX and Millennial stakeholders because they are the emerging caretakers of these institutions. As products of the 1960s-1990s, these generations tend to favor postmodern organizational paradigms that are lean, nimble, horizontally organized, and include marginalized voices—in contrast to the heavily bureaucratic, technocratic, and oppressive institutions of

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the modern era (Boje & Dennehy, 1993). GenXers and Millennials also favor working alongside students in endeavors typically reserved for “educated professionals,” including programming, instructional design and delivery, and the creation of new knowledge through research (Arroyo, Kidd, Burns, Cruz, Lawrence-Lamb, 2015a). They treat students as active partners in the (re)creation and perpetuation of transformative experiences (Arroyo, 2010; Arroyo et al., 2015).

Guided by these ideas, the current chapter was written by two GenX and two Millennial professors, researchers, and student affairs professionals at a public, four-year HBCU. In an effort to ensure the ongoing relevance and sustainability of HBCUs broadly, the authors advance an institutional initiative for addressing myriad issues of critical importance to these institutions. Specifically, this chapter presents an original HBCU-based model of learning communities that combines institutional and student assets and inputs to create a special non-Eurocentric or Afrocentric (Asante, 1998; Exkano, 2013) experience that is consistent with principles of postmodern organizations (Boje & Dennehy, 1993).

The model adapts the high-impact, widely practiced strategy of learning communities (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Kuh, 2008; Tinto, 2012) to the special HBCU approach for Black student success (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Exkano, 2013), which remains vital for the continued upward mobilization of hundreds of thousands of Black Americans (Gasman, Lundy-Wagner, Ransom, & Bowman, 2010). To this, the model also weds students’ community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) in order to create a culturally responsive, cooperative space. The result is a flourishing institution that positively impacts student success, while also fostering a satisfying work environment for administrators, faculty, and staff that might contribute to higher productivity.

The paradigm grows organically from the special HBCU tradition and mission, as well as from the special socio-cultural experiences of Black students. Whereas Meiklejohn’s (1932) foundational work on learning communities privileged Greek knowledge by proclaiming that “no other civilization [than Athens] could be so illuminating” (p. 72) for college students, this new model disagrees profoundly and proposes a clear alternative. It takes an anti-deficit stance toward African and Black culture, colleges, and students by focusing on the strengths of these agents rather than their weaknesses (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012; Yosso, 2005). Its Afrocentricity reverses what Exkano (2013) dubs the “legacy of colonialism” by “centering the experiences of historically marginalized people who have become objects in their own stories” (p. 66). In sum, HBCUs are ideal sites for learning communities that seek to improve Black college student engagement and retention in culturally responsive ways, making them also rich ground for the production of a tailored learning community model.

The current chapter aims to contribute to research and practice in two ways. First, by offering a non-Eurocentric, HBCU-specific learning community framework, it should provide practitioners with a sturdy, research-based model for ready application. This should be more effective than attempts to retrofit learning community models that developed in and through Eurocentric environments and philosophies. Moreover, by adding to the very limited extant literature on learning communities at HBCUs (e.g., Ericksen & Walker, 2015; Ericksen, Walker, Laws, Fitzgerald, & Burwell, 2015; Freeman, Alston, Winborne, 2008; Yancy et al., 2008), the model should open new avenues for further study. To the authors’ knowledge, although others have adapted HBCU and multicultural principles in the formation of learning communities at non-HBCUs (see Decker Lardner, 2003; Washington, 2008), the conceptual model advanced here is the first of its kind to appear in the literature to date.

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