

# Chapter 11

## The African American Course Mystique: A Forum to Strengthen Student Engagement and Learning for White HBCU Students

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### **ABSTRACT**

*One of the challenges in building an inclusive and engaged college campus is empowering students to leverage campus resources while creating an environment that afford academic success. It is common for colleges and universities to offer diverse courses such African American studies courses to enrich students' learning. Drawing from a larger study focused on the factors influencing the engagement of White students attending public HBCUs, this chapter presents select aspects of the experiences of 22 White students attending two public HBCUs who were required to enroll in an African American studies or African Diaspora course toward degree completion. Despite instances of hypervisibility, a term associated with racial spokesperson roles or feeling as if one stands out due to characteristics, such as race (Peterson & Hamrick, 2009); students pointed to the positive impact of diverse interactions with peers; strong faculty interaction and difficult class discussions that challenged their critical thinking skills and identity development and growth.*

### **IMPACT ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

This inquiry was guided by the Benchmarks of Educational Effective Practices (National Survey on Student Engagement, 2009), a framework that includes five key categories along with a set of robust, high impact activities delineating the ways students can have deeper engagement and learning experiences. Examples of the benchmarks include: (1) Active and Collaborative Learning; (2) Student-Faculty Interactions, and (3) Enriching Educational Experiences (NSSE). Collectively, these benchmarks encompass

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behaviors such as posing critical questions during class discussions, engaging with faculty members to discuss topics outside of class (e.g., office hours), and developing relationships with peers outside their race. The findings suggested that the students' experiences, whether positive or negative, were influenced by the mandatory African American, African Diaspora and other social science courses (e.g., History, Sociology, etc.). These courses offered opportunities for White HBCU students to discuss complex topics centered on race and class in a conducive learning environment (Carter & Fountaine, 2012). These courses resulted in a condition that the author has coined as *extended engagement*. This mode of engagement is a condition "where the effort and energy of both the individual and the institution were mutual and the students tended to have multiple engagement experiences" (Carter & Fountaine, p.60).

*I just had a great professor for the African Diaspora course. We used the book and watched movies and stuff, so really hands-on, and that's how I learn. But when it came to debating in class, there's just a lot of heated discussions and, that was the only intimidating part. And I was not the only minority in that class. There was another White student as well as a Middle Eastern student but it seemed like the teacher came to my liking just because I wasn't the type of student that would just sit back and just absorb all of this, I would get involved in the discussion..." –Myles, white student participant. (Carter, 2010)*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Increasing diversity on Historically Black College and University (HBCU) campuses continues to be an interest of educational scholars and stakeholders across the United States. In the last five years alone there have been a plethora of dissertations, journal articles, books, and op-ed pieces focused on an array of student development topics that include the experiences, perceptions and attitudes as it relates to non-Black student populations such as White, Latino/a, international students (Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Greenfield, 2015; Palmer, Maramba, Allen, & Goings, 2015; Shorette, 2015; Krah, 2013; Mutakabbir, Closson & Henry, 2015; Strayhorn, 2010); non-Black faculty (Johnson & Johnson, 2015); Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and Ally (LGBTQIA) students (Strayhorn, Blakewood & DeVita, 2015), women students (Wagner-Winkle, 2015) and Black male collegians, a population that has been covered extensively in the research for a number of years (Billie & Carter, 2012; Cuyjet, 1997; Frazier & Rhoden, 2011; Hilton, Wood & Lewis, 2012; Palmer, Davis & Maramba, 2011).

The core of many of these studies is a focus on student engagement. In the research literature, a well-known definition of student engagement is the amount of time and level of participation students commit to purposeful activities influencing their learning and overall educational experiences (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991). Although several studies have examined students' engagement from the context of student involvement through activities such as study abroad, internships, and student organizations (Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Kezar & Kinzie, 2006), there is much to be learned about the ways that engagement through the classroom environment can enhance students' collegiate experiences and encourage critical thinking, intellectual growth, and identity development through diversity courses such as African American studies and African Diaspora courses.

Petchauer (2012) argued that ethnic studies courses, such as African American studies, are just as valuable for White students as students of color. The author noted three critical reasons to support this point. First, when White students are introduced to diverse perspectives and different ways of viewing ideas, this practice reinforces critical thinking skills, perspective-taking, and evidence-based augmenta-

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