Chapter 7
Cultural Competency and Meaningful Online Relationships:
Creating Safe Spaces for BIPOC Students

Ariel Harrison

iD https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3444-0249
Walden University, USA

ABSTRACT

Since their creation, online and distance-learning programs have afforded traditional and non-traditional students access to learning. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students represent many enrollments each year in online and distance-learning undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs. While the absence of in-person and synchronous learning can impact the connections made by all students, this learning modality has also amplified some existing challenges for BIPOC students in these higher educational settings. This chapter will describe themes of isolation, a sense of belonging, and the quest for safe spaces amongst BIPOC students. This chapter will also discuss the role and responsibilities of mentorship; the importance of fostering meaningful relationships that combat isolation linked to BIPOC students' perception of support, safety, and belonging; and the position of culturally specific virtual affinity spaces in uncovering links to connectedness in online programs.

The growth of online post-secondary education and educational programs with online components in North America has encouraged the discussion of inclusiveness and connection for students. Attending classes, receiving training, and attaining degrees while dwelling in places that provide internet access provide an opportunity and flexibility for many individuals to grow in their lives and careers. Access to this style of learning has supported working adults, frequent travelers, parents, caretakers, and individuals in rural areas with receiving education and training remotely.

While an advantage of online education includes the ability to provide access to learning for students all over the world, literature has disclosed an isolating component to online education, as different pro-

grams may not consistently provide optimal opportunities for student connection (Ajmal & Ahmad, 2019; Sadeghi, 2019). Students attend online colleges and universities for many reasons, including program type, accreditation, reputation, and lifestyle alignment. However, for many students, their selections also depend on their abilities to succeed and their capabilities to form professional relationships with faculty and other students. Online education provides access to learning, but programs can lack the component of social connection that also contributes to student success characteristics (Sadeghi, 2019). Factors such as isolation, lack of social interaction, loneliness, and disconnection can significantly influence students' academic success and retention in online programs (Ajmal & Ahmad, 2019; Sadeghi, 2019). Despite the efforts of many online schools and programs to provide social opportunities, Phirangee and Malec (2017) explained that students still reported negative feelings, resulting in a disconnection from course content and instructors and a lack of community within peer groups and possibly dropping out of their programs.

The goals of fostering cultural competency and strategies to develop meaningful relationships have become increasingly significant for academic leaders in online institutions. Instructors and programs must understand how to provide opportunities for connection and inclusion for all students in educational environments. However, explicitly focusing on the needs of historically isolated cultural groups, such as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) individuals, can become a starting point in helping to bridge educational and opportunity gaps. Identifying and understanding challenges and successful strategies that impact these students can support academic leaders in establishing systemic changes and supporting the retention of students (Hradilová & Chovancová, 2023). By understanding the challenges that BIPOC students may experience, academic leaders may find ways to evaluate their current resources and develop new support strategies to foster a positive educational experience and transition into the workforce.

This chapter will address specific challenges BIPOC students may experience that influence their perception of support, safety, and belonging in online degree programs. This chapter will also include the role and responsibilities of mentorship and the development of culturally specific virtual affinity spaces in uncovering links to connectedness and fostering meaningful relationships.

EXAMINING THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES OF BIPOC STUDENTS IN NORTH AMERICA

The description of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) involves person-first language that shifts away from the traditional labels such as "marginalized" and "minority" used to describe the cultural groups of Black, American Indians, or Native Americans, First Nations, Native Alaskans or Alaska Natives, Hispanic, East Asian, South Asian, and Hawaiian and Pacific Islander racial and ethnic individuals (Silverstein et al., 2022). These populations should not be viewed as monoliths but recognized as individuals with distinctive and shared life experiences based on historical occurrences, cultural traditions, physical attributes, and societal practices and treatments. As with all scholars, BIPOC students enter the field of higher education bringing life experiences and perceptions into their academic journeys (Silverstein et al., 2023). On the one hand, these understandings can shape how BIPOC students contribute to the practice of their future careers. On the other hand, these understandings can also impact how BIPOC students view their learning institutions, the educational process, their future career fields of choice, and the people responsible for preparing them for their future careers (Scott et al., 2022).

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