

# Minority Populations at Predominantly White Campuses

## Graduating Black Students From Majority Institutions Is an Elusive Concept

**T**his fall, over 1 million African American students will be enrolled in undergraduate degree programs. Most of them will be enrolled in predominantly white institutions despite some recent trends in movement back to HBCUs. Hence, the vast majority of our impressionable 18-year-old students begin their college years on campuses that, by and large, have somewhat dismal records in advancing and graduating a good number of "people who look like us."

The graduation rates of these students has not kept pace with their increased enrollment trends. As few as one-third of them may graduate in four years. By contrast, HBCUs not only graduate the majority of their students, but also continue to award a disproportionate number of all African American undergraduate degrees.

One must ask, "Why?" Why don't mostly white institutions do a better job of advancing and graduating our African American students? Why, in view of the visible signs of an African American presence on college campuses — minority affairs programs, a proliferation of student socio-political organizations, endowed faculty chairs, separate residence halls and "the block" — does it not translate into significant graduation rates?

Such questions are tough and necessary and cannot be simplistically answered in terms of: "It's racism, stupid." This response, however, is probably at the core of many of the problems still encountered by African American students who represent a segment of an institution's minority population.

When an African American professional working on a predominantly white campus who, like myself, must address this question, it becomes all the more disturbing when our very existence on campus is aligned with some *special population* or *special needs* program. I am all too familiar with the categorization terms and labels such as "minority student affairs," "multicultural concerns," "underrepresented students admissions," "minority recruiter," "Upward Bound," "National Panhellenic Council advisor," attached to programs designed to assist African American students.

Given such an overabundance of titles

and an apparent concern for student well-being, why can't my students graduate at a better rate? Am I making a difference here in the lives of African American students on my campus? Are my students not the best and brightest and most privileged of this generation's African American youth? Are they not better prepared, more focused and more accustomed to the high-stakes competition necessary for academic success?

**STOP!** If not careful, we African American professionals can be cobwebbed into the same fallacious cycle of self-doubt that our students encounter. We tend to position ourselves mentally into thinking that, individually, we can solve the race problem at our respective institutions. Each year, we muster our creative juices, rely on our spiritual connection and break our backs programming and developing activities and opportunities — tutorials, mentor programs, summer enrichment, community service projects, specialized first-year student classes, Kwanzaa celebrations, Afrocentric ceremonies.

We constantly wonder what else can be done to make a difference. We practice tough love and surrogate parenting in environments that gladly yield *in loco parentis* in favor of students' liberal personal freedoms and conservative social justice. We preach and pray for students to succeed academically and survive psychologically in teaching and learning environments that sometimes range from mild to moderately chilly to iceberg-cold.

Each September we see African American students who come to college feeling a sense of personal accomplishment and family pride that their hard work and determination have finally paid off. They are now part of a special breed on their way to a college degree. We see that many of these students are first-generation college students; if some parents did attend four-year institutions, they invariably matriculated at a HBCU.

We know that many students and parents alike feel that a student's success in high school assures success in college. We also see the miseducated ones who believe that attending a mostly white campus, in some way, is an extra badge of honor because they

are attending a "hard school" — one that validates their personal intelligence, assures their employability and scorns any notions of partying all night or ragging every day to class.

The dirty secret is that most African American freshmen don't have the faintest inkling of what they may encounter academically or psycho-socially at the mostly white institution of their choice. These students are leaving a high school environment where most teachers believe that graduating as many students as possible is a desirable goal. And, conversely, they are about to enter an academic environment where some faculty believe that African American students do not belong. Neither in the discipline nor on the campus grounds.

**REGROUP!** As professionally in-tuned individuals, we know that while many institutions are making the paradigm shift from a "process and programming" emphasis to an "outcomes" emphasis; we also know that many mostly white institutions have yet to make the shift from an emphasis on "acceptance and assimilation" to "affirmation and affiliation." This dated methodology and "business as usual" of setting numerical goals for an African American presence on campus and fostering assimilation (be it overtly or subliminally) via Eurocentric curricula, traditions and symbols, just won't cut it anymore with today's African American college students. This is something the students themselves discover either sooner or later in their academic experience. The ivory tower need but peruse last year's news articles and editorials that attempt to explain the new African American student protest agenda. In short, it's an agenda that embraces both equality *and* quality of life.

Today's African American students see well beyond the "feel good" student programs and the token visiting, adjunct, clinical assistant faculty appointments created to help solve "the race problem" on campus. The media and technology have made them sophisticated analysts and critics of insidious, diversionary and subliminal tactics that impede access to the real power to right egregious and persistent wrongs. Today's

See Concept, pg. 41, col. 1

**Concept**, from pg. 39, col. 3

students want and demand institutional affirmation of their humanity, cultural identity, historical legacy and societal contributions. Students know that without this affirmation in the form of substantive outcomes, they will feel little pride in, and affiliation with, their alma maters.

Those predominantly white institutions who doggedly refuse to acknowledge this reality — perhaps, for fear of caving in to political correctness — will continue to disadvantage and disenfranchise and just plain “dis” their African American students. What will result will be even more dismal advancement records, more student protests, more separateness and more student brain-drain to HBCUs. Therefore, when African American students choose to persist in environments that do not choose to advance, they will continue to self-affirm and self-affiliate in their own little corner of the campus — in dorms, dining halls, clubs and organizations and separate graduations.

With yet another generation of college students at our doors this fall, mostly white institutions must begin accepting the reality that the advancement and graduation of the African American students they so vigorously recruit requires an institutional-strength commitment. The burden of responsibility for the well-being and advancement of African American students must shift from individual shoulders and well-meaning programmatic thrusts to the heads, shoulders and hearts of the academy.

The burden cannot remain relegated to a minuet of African American professionals and a handful of sympathetic European American program administrators — both of whom are often out of the loop of major power-brokering in academe. The new response agenda calls for predominantly white colleges and universities to engage seriously in all of the following: meaningful dialogue about the outcomes rather than the benign intent of their policies, practices and decisions; involvement of African American students and professionals in proactive rather than reactive problem-solving; development of strategic plans that will lead to substantive changes rather than window dressing; and an understanding that multiculturalism cannot exist in an atmosphere of cultural disaffirmation.

Only then can we ascertain whether a mostly white college or university deserves an “A” for institutional effort — an effort that incorporates cultural affirmation and psycho-social affiliation as necessary ingredients in their advancement goals for African American students. ■

DR. RHONDA O. COVINGTON  
Coordinator of African-American  
Students Affairs  
North Carolina State University