Psychosocio Drama as a strategy for Enhancing Retention and Graduation of African American Males in Higher Education

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Abstract

The issue of low retention and graduation rates of African American male (AAM) college students is widely acknowledged. The persistent low retention and graduation rates of AAM are attributed to their under preparation which manifest mostly in inadequate cognitive or academic abilities, and low levels of non-cognitive or psycho-social skills. Institutions address the challenge of low retention and graduation rates of AAM and other under prepared students by focusing mostly on enhancing cognitive or academic competencies; they typically lack strategies for systematically developing or strengthening non-cognitive competencies. Hence, this paper underscores the fundamental importance of non-cognitive competencies as a basis for academic success; and then proposes the utilization of psychosocio drama as a strategy for strengthening AAM students' non-cognitive competencies. AAM students are likely to embrace psychosocio drama and positively participate in it because of its compatibility with African American epistemology.

Keywords: African American male college students, non-cognitive competencies, psychosocio drama, African American epistemology and pedagogy

Introduction

The issue of low retention and graduation rates of African American males (AAM) in higher education is widely acknowledged as a significant challenge for colleges. AAM in higher education still lag behind African American females and white males in enrollment, retention and graduation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Palmer, Davis, Moore and Hilton, 2010; Strayhorn, 2008; The Ohio Board of Regents, 2011). For instance, of the bachelor's degree awarded to Whites and Blacks ages 25-29 in 2014, 43.9% were earned by White females, 37.7% by White males; while 23.8% and 20.8% were earned by Black females and males respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2014b).

The underachievement of African American males in higher education affects their ability to compete in contemporary knowledge- and skill-based, technologically-intensive, and highly professionalized American and globalized economies. It severely limits their labor force participation and access to the resources they need to establish and sustain their families; and negatively impacts their ability to live fulfilled lives (Palmer et al., 2010; The Ohio Board of Regents, 2011). The adverse consequences of persistent low graduation rates for AAM, their families, communities, and for the United States economy make it morally and professionally imperative for higher education institutions to be more resourceful and effective in addressing the low retention and graduation challenge.

Studies show that many AAM who typically are first generation students come to college underprepared to persist and successfully complete their studies (Greenwald, 2012; Hargrove & Seay, 2011; Michael-Chadwell, 2010; Whiting, 2014).

Evidence in the literature indicates that under preparation of AAM manifests mainly in inadequate cognitive or academic abilities, and low levels of non-cognitive or psychosocial competencies (Farrington, Roderick, Allensworth, Nagaoka, Keyes, Johnson & Beechum, 2012; Johnson, 1993; Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004; StriveTogether, 2013). Cognitive and non-cognitive factors combine to influence academic success. Cognitive factors generally include content knowledge, core academic skills and variables that measure intellectual ability as operationalized in test scores such as SAT, ACT, other school placement scores, and grade point average (GPA) (Farrington et.al, 2012; Johnson, 1993; Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004; StriveTogether, 2013). Non-cognitive factors generally include self-esteem, self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), academic goals, achievement motivation, self-awareness, contextual factors (Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004); academic behavior, academic perseverance, academic mindset, learning strategies and social skills (Farrington et al., 2012); growth mindset or mastery orientation, grit, emotional competence, self-regulated learning and study skills (StriveTogether, 2013); and social awareness, relationship and communication skills, self-management, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2015).

Some scholars have questioned the use of the terms cognitive and non-cognitive, and suggest that the cognitive/non-cognitive dichotomy is misleading and a misnomer, considering that both cognitive and non-cognitive factors involve some level of human intellectual processes (Borghans et al., 2008; Conley, 2013; Farrington et al., 2012; StriveTogether, 2013). Borghans et al. (2008) observe that "few aspects of human behavior are devoid of cognition" (p.974). Notwithstanding, the use of cognitive to denote content knowledge or intellectual capabilities and non-cognitive to refer to psycho social and contextual factors has gained wide currency. Although it is generally accepted that cognitive and non-cognitive factors interact to influence students' academic success, non-cognitive factors are a necessary precondition for academic success (CASEL, 2015; Farrington et.al, 2012; Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004; StriveTogether, 2013).

How Institutions Respond to the Low Retention and Graduation Challenge

Higher education institutions have been utilizing a variety of strategies to address low retention and graduation. Programs colleges use include remediation, supplemental instruction (SI), tutoring, advising, and mentoring (Gibson, 2014; Levine et al., 2007; Lotkowski et. al., 2004; Palmer, et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2008).

Remedial education programs address deficiencies in reading, writing and math. The development of non-cognitive competencies, which are generally considered a precondition for students' academic success is typically not the focus of remediation programs. Another strategy colleges use to address student under preparation is Supplemental Instruction (SI). SI provides academic assistance to students taking first- and second-year courses traditionally regarded as difficult or challenging. The essence of SI is to assist students master course contents and develop study strategies (Lotkowski et al., 2004). Development of non-cognitive competencies is not within the purview of SI. A program related to supplemental instruction institutions utilize is Tutoring. Academic tutoring typically occurs in a center or lab where students can drop in at any time or on appointment to get assistance from tutors (peers, faculty, staff, volunteers, etc.) in various subject areas. Tutoring focuses on enhancing students' performance in content areas. Academic Advising is another strategy colleges use to enhance students' academic success. It affords students an on-going, one-on-one interaction with faculty or staff (Habley, 1994). Although academic advising provides opportunity for a student/faculty or student/staff one-on-one interaction especially during course enrollment or registration, it focuses mostly on selecting appropriate courses, and pays very limited attention to how students can enhance their non-cognitive competencies. Colleges also use mentoring programs, for instance, student/ peer, and student/faculty mentoring to increase retention and improve educational outcomes. African American male-focused mentoring initiatives exist in some colleges (Gibson, 2014, Hoffman & Wallach, 2005). Of the strategies used by higher education institutions to address the problem of low retention and graduation, there is hardly any designed to systematically and sustainably assist AAM and other under-prepared students identify, develop and strengthen the non-cognitive competencies they need to persist and successfully complete college.

In spite of the evidence indicating that non-cognitive competencies are a fundamentally critical requirement for academic success (Borghans et al., 2008; CASEL, 2015; Conley, 2013; Farrington et.al, 2012; Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004), higher education institutions lack structured initiatives for systematically assisting AAM and other under-prepared students to develop non-cognitive competencies they need to succeed.

Hence, this paper proposes the use of psychosocio drama as a strategy that can be utilized to systematically guide and support AAM students to engage in authentic self-diagnosis and identify the non-cognitive competencies they need to develop or strengthen for a productive and successful college experience. AAM students are likely to embrace and participate productively in psychosocio drama because its tenets and methods are compatible with African American epistemology and pedagogy. In the section that follows, psychosocio drama is presented; then, the affinity between psychosocio drama and African American epistemology is highlighted; thereafter, how psychosocio drama can be used to guide AAM students to identify and acknowledge the non-cognitive competencies they need to strengthen is discussed.

Psychosocio Drama

Psychosocio drama is used here as a hybrid of psychodrama and sociodrama, both of which are credited to J. L. Moreno (Moreno, 1943, 1977). Psychodrama is a purposeful self-exploration through dramatized self-confrontation that makes use of the typical resources of drama (Moreno, 1943, 1977). It is a method of psychotherapy that focuses on the individual. Through spontaneous recreation and review of his/her real-life issues in psychodrama enactments, an individual gains realistic and deeper understanding of his/her experiences, challenges and opportunities with a view to resolving them (Blatner, 2000; Kellermann, 2000). Sociodrama, a corollary of psychodrama, utilizes spontaneous dramatic enactment of issues in life as a therapeutic strategy (Moreno, 1943, 1977). Sociodrama provides context and process for confronting, and exploring issues, patterns, events, normative beliefs, and ideologies within a group dynamics with a view to understanding and constructively changing behaviors and perspectives of participants (Kellerman, 1998). Unlike the single-client focus of psychodrama, sociodrama focuses on a group in the dramatization of personal life events and larger social issues (Kellerman, 1998). Sociodrama affords group participants and students an opportunity for experiential learning, the development of empathy and taking of perspectives. It fosters critical thinking and questioning and helps participants develop deeper appreciation of the intrapsychic, interpersonal and structural forces that contribute to individual and social issues (Propper, 2003).

While the concepts psycho and socio drama are used independently in the literature, the current paper combines the two concepts and uses the hybrid term psychosocio drama to denote the dramatization of real-life personal and social issues in a group setting with a view to understanding and constructively addressing them. Psychodrama and sociodrama typically utilize warm up, action, sharing and discussion as methods of enactments and employ a number of techniques including mirroring, doubling, role playing, role reversal, soliloquy and auxiliary (Blatner, 2000, 2005, 2009; Kellermann, 2000). Indeed, psychosocio drama can use any techniques and resources typical of drama in a conducive, non-judgmental and un-inhibiting context to enable reminiscing, self-reflection, and self-diagnosis that yield insights that prime participants to begin to take constructive action to realistically pursue personal goals. Psychosocio drama fosters psychological literacy, self-awareness and helps participants enhance their communication and problem-solving skills (Blatner, 2006).

Although psycho and socio drama are used in clinical practices by psychologists and counselors as a diagnostic and therapeutic tool, they are gradually emerging in education as a diagnostic and teaching tool (Blatner, 2006; Gershoni, 2003). The environment and dynamics of psychosocio drama, a hybrid of psycho- and socio-drama, are essentially compatible with African American epistemology. Hence, it is proposed that psychosocio drama can be effectively utilized to guide and support AAM students engage in self-diagnosis and identify non-cognitive competencies they need to develop or strengthen, considering that non-cognitive competencies are fundamentally necessary for academic success.

Psychosocio Drama and African American Epistemology and Pedagogy

In characterizing African American epistemology and modes of expression, Boykin (1994) and Hurston (1997) noted that ways of knowing and expression typical of African Americans include the following: spirituality and originality, harmony, holism and asymmetry, movement, angularity and dance, verve and drama, affect, communalism and relationships, and oral tradition. The characteristics and proclivities of African Americans Boykin and Huston describe are compatible with the ambiance and methods of psychosocio drama. For instance, the tendency of African Americans for spontaneity, originality, and creativity flourishes if the learning environment is action-oriented, warm, safe, non-judgmental and un-inhibiting (Gibson, 2014; Neely, N.d; Shaw, 1993). Psychosocio drama provides optimal, lively, experiential, safe and non-judgmental, multi-sensory and collaborative environment for spontaneous and creative dramatization of personal and social issues of life for the purpose of gaining deeper and holistic understanding needed for problem-solving and positive change in behavior.

African Americans are expressive and affective -- an expressiveness that has a richness, vitality, vibrancy and color; and that manifests in multiple forms such as language, storytelling, symbols, gestures, art, panting, craft, music, dance, sports, humor and jokes (Boykin, 1994; Hurston, 1997). Psychosocio drama is necessarily an active multimodal expressive engagement in which participants think, see, hear, feel, touch, tell, and interact with themselves and others as they soul-search and self-diagnose. African Americans are most productive, resourceful and successful in environments that allow for collaboration and enable constructive problem solving and holistic learning. Psychosocio drama is a group activity in which two or more participants collaborate and engage in dramatization for purposeful self-exploration and understanding that enable self-development.

It is in light of the philosophical and practical similarities between psychosocio drama and African American ways of knowing and expression that psychosocio drama holds promise as a strategy for guiding AAM students to self-diagnose and identify non-cognitive competencies they need to develop or strengthen to successfully complete college.

Using Psychosocio Drama to Guide AAM Students to Self-diagnose and Identify Non-cognitive Competencies they need to Develop

Non-cognitive competencies can be said to be the attitudinal means or vehicle through which academic success is achieved. Like most first generation and under-prepared students, many AAM, as a result of their social learning history, come to college without having cultivated high enough levels of non-cognitive competencies that would enable them to apply themselves successfully to academic tasks. Besides, many under prepared AAM students tend to lack a clear awareness of the non-cognitive competencies they need to develop in order to successfully go through college. Currently, higher education institutions do not typically have programs designed to validly diagnose students to determine the non-cognitive competencies they need, and then systematically guide them to develop the competencies. Psychosocial drama provides an authentic self-diagnostic process through which AAM students can self-diagnose and identify non-cognitive competencies they need to develop or strengthen. Through participating in dramatization of the issues that represent their academic challenges, they can gain epiphanic awareness of themselves, especially in relation to their strengths, limitations, and opportunities. Attaining self-awareness is one of the most important benefits an AAM or any student would derive from psychosocio drama enactments because successful college experience, arguably begins with having the non-cognitive competence of self-awareness. Self-awareness is one's ability to recognize one's own values, emotions, thoughts and their influence on one's behavior. It is foundational to one's ability to assess one's own strengths and limitations, and clarify his or her goals (CASEL, 2015). Students with heightened self-awareness tend to be more ready and capable to take steps to address their limitations and take advantage of opportunities. Whiting (2014) underscores the benefit of self-awareness for AAM, "Black men who have a realistic grasp on those areas [of their lives] in need of work are willing to consider and process new information, ideas, and societal expectations toward their self-improvement (e.g., they seek a tutor in classes where they are not doing well, they study longer and more often …). And finally, they take immediate and sustained actions to make appropriate transitions based on their situation" (p. 95-96).

An AAM student whose self-awareness is enhanced through his participation in psychosocio drama would now come to grips with reality and begin to take necessary steps from a place of truth. If, as a result of honest self-appraisal, the student, for instance, realizes that he has low self-esteem which may have been impacting his academic performance adversely, the student self-refers or is referred to a center on campus charged with the responsibility to work systematically with students to develop their self-esteem and other key non-cognitive competencies. Self-esteem is a critical non-cognitive competence students need to succeed. It is how one feels about oneself, especially in terms of the value one attaches to oneself. Essentially, self-esteem is "the evaluative component of self-concept whereby "good" or "bad" labels are attached to aspects of the self" (Hughes and Noppe, 1991, p. 409). It is one's sense of self-worth, self-respect, self-pride or positive self-image (Bandura 1977, Woolfolk, 2005). Research shows that self-esteem and academic achievement are positively correlated (Hughes and Noppe, 1991; Bandura, 1977, 1989; Bolognini, 1996; Miller, 1998; Rosenberg, 1985; Woolfolk, 2005). Students with high self-esteem tend to feel comfortable about themselves, and interact confidently with their peers, other people and their academic environment. Strong self-esteem fosters in students high expectations and the desire to set and accomplish challenging goals (Bandura, 1989, Coopersmith, 1981). Students with high self-esteem tend to participate in class and college activities confidently and enthusiastically. They generally have a positive mental health, accept academic challenges, and demonstrate healthy cultural/ethnic identity and constructive social relationships (Bolognini, 1996; Craig, 1996; Reasoner, 1994; Rosenberg, 1985).

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Students with high self-esteem generally persist and perform better academically than their peers with low self-esteem (Bolognini, 1996; Miller, 1998; Rosenberg, 1985).
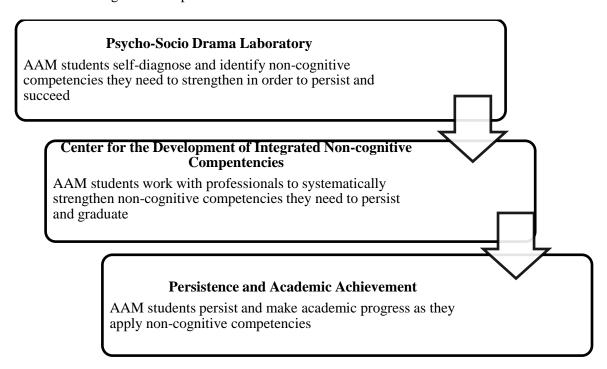
Similarly, if as a result of his self-awareness an AAM student, for instance, realizes that low self-efficacy may have been a source of his academic problems, the student self-refers or is referred to the center with responsibility for helping students strengthen their non-cognitive competencies. Self-efficacy is a crucial non-cognitive competence. Bandura (1977, 1982) defines self-efficacy as the belief that one has the ability, power or capacity to perform or complete a task. Bandura (1977) underscores the relationship between self-efficacy and student performance. Students with strong self-efficacy tend to see difficulties in their academic experience as challenges to be met rather than threats to be avoided. They demonstrate an ability to recover quickly from setback and disappointments, and tend to persist until tasks are successfully completed (Bandura, 1977). High self-efficacy students participate actively in class and out-of-class activities. They readily show a propensity to lead group discussions, debates, and projects. Such students "make greater use of effective cognitive strategies in learning, and manage their time and learning environments more effectively, and are better at monitoring and regulating their own effort" (Chemers, et al., 2001, p. 2).

As in the case of self-esteem and self-efficacy, an AAM student would also avail himself of the services of the center on campus that works with students to strengthen their non-cognitive competencies if, for instance, his self-diagnosis indicates inadequate self-management competence. Self-management is critically necessary for student persistence and academic success. Studies show that self-management has a strong impact on academic success (CASEL, 2015; Crede & Kuncel, 2008; Dembo & Seli, 2007; Farrington, et al., 2012; Miller, 1998; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Robbin et al., 2004; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986). Self-management is defined as one's ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations (CASEL, 2015). It entails managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting realistic goals and working toward achieving them. Students who self-manage or self-regulate their learning are better able to negotiate the factors that influence their learning. They "establish optimum conditions for learning and remove obstacles that interfere with their learning" (Dembo & Seli, 2007, p. 4). Studies indicate that students who are competent in self-management typically tend to be more focused, disciplined, tenacious, and effective in deploying study strategies to achieve academic success (Crede & Kuncel, 2008; Dembo & Seli, 2007; Farrington, et al., 2012; Miller, 1998; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Robbin et al., 2004; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986).

As AAM students apply their strengthened non-cognitive competencies, the prospects for their persisting and graduating would be significantly enhanced given that non-cognitive competencies are positively correlated with academic success.

Figure 1 below is a schematic of using psychosocio drama to guide AAM students to self-diagnose and identify non-cognitive competencies they need to develop or strengthen. The schematic shows psychosocio drama laboratory working in tandem with a center that has express responsibility to guide students develop or strengthen non-cognitive competencies. Any college considering institutionalizing the use of psychosocio drama should also consider establishing a center designed, equipped and staffed to systematically guide students to develop or strengthen non-cognitive competencies they need to persist and graduate.

Figure 1: A schematic of psychosocio drama laboratory working in tandem with a center to strengthen AAM students' non-cognitive competencies

Psycho-Socio Drama Laboratory

AAM students self-diagnose and identify non-cognitive competencies they need to strengthen in order to persist and succeed

Center for the Development of Integrated Non-cognitive Compentencies

AAM students work with professionals to systematically strengthen non-cognitive competencies they need to persist and graduate

Persistence and Academic Achievement

AAM students persist and make academic progress as they apply non-cognitive competencies

Conclusion

Non-cognitive competencies enable academic persistence and success. If colleges are to significantly and sustainably improve retention and graduation rates of AAM, they will have to institutionalize strategies for validly determining non-cognitive competencies the students need and systematically guide them to develop and strengthen the competencies. Given what is known about the communities and K-12 schools from where many AAM and other under prepared students come to college (Greenwald, 2012; Neely, n.d; Palmer, Davis, Moore and Hilton, 2010; Strayhorn, 2008), it would be unrealistic to take it for granted that the students would come ready with the non-cognitive competencies required to persist and successfully complete college.

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