GIFTS: Fostering Racial Identity Development, Self-Efficacy, and Institutional Integration to Promote the Success of African American Male First Year Students

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Introduction

African American males attending four-year colleges and universities graduate at lower rates than most other demographic [1]. However, Black males and other students who perceive high levels of institutional integration (i.e., faculty contact, peer cohesion and congruence with the mainstream of campus life) are more likely to graduate [2], [3], [4].

In-college perceptions and experiences [6] may interact with perceived self-efficacy [7] and racial identity attitudes [8] to idiosyncratically moderate African American males' integration into the institutional milieu. Indeed, Black males who maintain positive racial identity and academic self-efficacy, and who are academically and socially integrated on campus also have high cumulative GPAs, as depicted in Figure 1 below [5].

Figure 1: A Multidimensional Achievement Model (Reid, 2013)
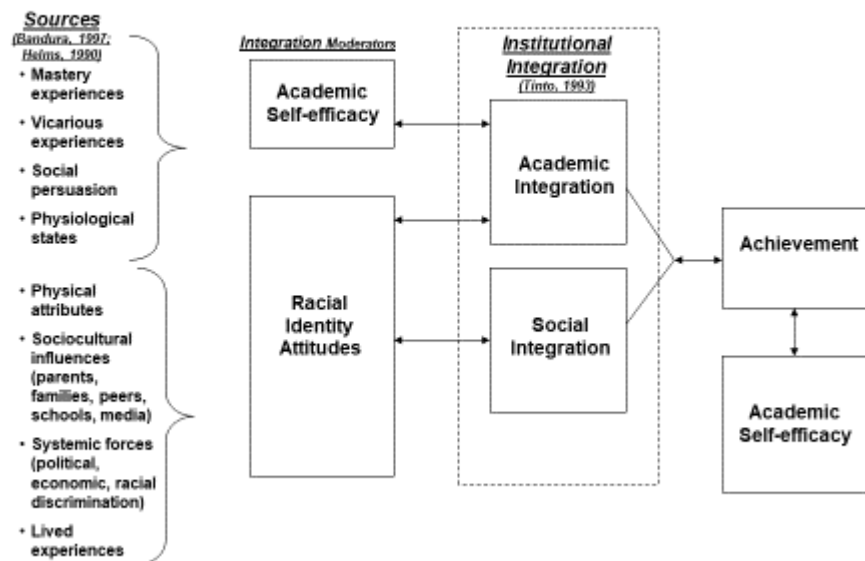
A residence-based freshman seminar was created at MIT in the fall of 2003 to test this model by providing a home space [9] and learning community [10] for African American males. In addition to fostering peer cohesion and connections with faculty and the administration, the seminar offered "identity safety" [11].

Seminar Description

The participants were automatically assigned to the seminar once they voluntarily selected an ethnically-themed living group located within a large residence hall on campus. The classroom meetings—held weekly in the fall and biweekly during the spring semester—were facilitated by a freshman advisor; a male university administrator with ties to the living group as a former resident. No more than 10 students were assigned the seminar in any one year.

Class Format

Each 90-minute class began with a review of the participant's goals, academic assignments, commitments, and outcomes from the previous week. Often, the ensuing discussion centered on

one participant's challenges, concluding with a collaboratively-generated solution to overcome the academic challenge. An activity based on the readings or other assignments followed. The session ended with participants discussing their academic commitments and goals for the following week.

Curriculum

The curriculum featured discussions and activities based on readings that identified and critically analyzed environmental and psychosocial hindrances to academic performance, and co-constructed methods to overcome these obstacles. Topics were aligned with the Multidimensional Achievement Model [5,12], including academic self-efficacy; racial identity theory; mindsets about intelligence [13]; essential academic skills and work habits comprising techniques for using time efficiently and leveraging study groups; career interests; learning styles; integrity; and institutional connections with senior administration, key faculty and the relevant history of the university. The students set individual and collective goals at the beginning of each semester and reviewed their status at the semester close. The students designed and executed a capstone project during the spring semester that operationalized their learning.

Results

Approximately 35 male freshmen participated in the seminar, graduating one cohort over the 4-year period of this analysis. Participants persisted 15 percentage points higher than the average for all underrepresented minority students on campus. They also assumed campus leadership positions, suggesting high levels of institutional integration. However, there was no difference in cumulative GPA among those who participated in the seminar compared with all other enrolled African American males who lived outside of the dormitory. On the other hand, among the small sample in the first cohort who graduated, their average grades were higher than the campus average.

These results suggest that predominantly White research universities can improve the outcomes of their Black male students by developing their academic self-efficacy beliefs and racial identity, specifically by establishing seminars, facilitated discussion groups, and/or learning communities, as indicated below by one participant.

> *This advising seminar has allowed me to focus on African-American successes and failures in education, which will help [me] to gain better knowledge of what I need to succeed here [in college] and in life. Also, I have had tremendous growth in time management skills and goal prioritizing, which I honestly lacked previously. Overall, this advising seminar has been a great resource for me during my first semester. (Participant)*

References

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