



Rethinking Learning Communities and Best Practices for Educating Black Students

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Abstract: Institutions of higher education were historically organized to educate white students from privileged positions in society. This academic power structure supports a Eurocentric curriculum that discriminates against minority students and minority faculty. Institutions of higher education devalue the contributions of people of color, and this historical reality maintains social inequality and serves to make the educational process unequal and oppressive for students of color. Despite the growing opportunities for Black students to go to college and retaining them to the completion of their baccalaureate degrees is a challenge embedded in the oppressive educational process and philosophies embedded in predominately white institutions.

Keywords: Learning Communities, Black Students, Eurocentric Curriculum.

1. Introduction

Institutions of higher education were historically organized to educate white students from privileged positions in society. This academic power structure supports a Eurocentric curriculum that discriminates against minority students and minority faculty. Institutions of higher education devalue the contributions of people of color, and this historical reality maintains social inequality and serves to make the educational process unequal and oppressive for students of color. Despite the growing opportunities for Black students to go to college and retaining them to the completion of their baccalaureate degrees is a challenge embedded in the oppressive educational process and philosophies embedded in predominately white institutions.

The historical U.S. Census offers insight and highlights the reality of low college graduation for Black Students in American colleges and Universities. Black students are less likely to graduate from college than their white counterparts and this has been a reality despite the Civil Rights legislation of the 60's. According to the U.S. Historical Census in 1965 the percentage of Blacks who graduated from college was 4.7 percent compared to 12.7 percent for White males. The disparity in educational attainment still exists as evidenced by the Census, in 2019 the higher college attainment rates was 26 percent for Blacks as compared to the national average of 36%.ⁱ The graduation rates are even lower for Black students at community colleges, and these students are less likely than their white counterparts to transfer to four-year institutions. This reality means Black students do not enjoy the benefits of higher education in the same way as white students and this has to be interrogated and challenged as an inherent problem in institutions of higher education.

The impetus to increase the graduation rates of minority students is a shared goal among many institutions of higher education but this goal has been largely unrealized, especially for Black men whose rates continue to plummet. While many colleges offer different high impact practices; first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences and learning communities (Fink and Inkelaas, 2015, Goodsell-Love, 1999) these practices alone have not been sufficient for retaining students of color. The idea that certain programs could be structured in a way to meet the needs of Black students irrespective of the ways in which discrimination still persists in academia and the impact of race, gender and class and sexuality on students of color is not a factor in the structure. More importantly these practices have not garnered the same success as it relates to Black students because they ignore

the models of Black success that have been historically proven and identified as having positive results for black students.

Audrey Lorde (1984) discussed the way in which difference is embraced and used to empower and challenge the status quo. Race, culture and the history of African People in America is paramount to the educational experience and Black students can never learn how to “Dismantle the Masters House” (Lorde, 1984) without purposeful actions to recover and reconstruct the histories of Black people and an opportunity to challenge the prevailing social order and the construction of educational philosophies through revolutionary educational practices. In this project we use Africana based philosophy to transform the structure of the traditional learning community model. While Learning Communities are a common high impact practice for student retention, we depart from the way in which learning communities have been championed as a model of academic success because this model in its current structure does not identify the impact of race, class and gender and or the impact this has on their educational experiences or the way in which these groups are disadvantaged. Also, the learning community structure is reliant on structural factors of the university and does not consider the effects of embedded racism on students of color. Although learning communities may inform the overall picture for student retention, retaining Black students requires more and is beyond the current structure of educational practices. The purpose of this chapter is to rethink the current learning community model and to introduce race-based learning communities as a viable alternative to improve academic outcomes for Black students.

This project was birthed from our identity and location as friends and our desire to create spaces which would disrupt the pattern of low graduation rates of Black students. This is also the story of how we like our students were able to create meaning, and a method of survival for us as Black women in academia. While the Race Based Learning community model discussed in this chapter was designed to provide an intentional environment for our student’s social and academic integration this project also created a space for us as Black women to navigate oppressive power structures in the academy. This project introduces and defines our energy and our pedagogy to challenge the current structure of learning communities and practices for educating Black students.

The Real Revolution in Education, Rethinking Africana scholarship

The idea that education is necessary and vital to reconstructing the social order was a primary feature in the educational theories by W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, whom were amongst the first to challenge American education in the 19th century. While their recommendations were different, they both spoke to the inherent racism in the structure of education and its relationship to Black people (Dunn, 1993). If we consider the relationship between social structure and agency, both of these scholars introduced the ideas that Black people had a role in their own liberation and education was keys to this process. While Paul Freire (1970), is commonly recognized for defining pedagogy for oppressed persons and linking education to social change, both Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois concluded that education was a method of social justice for oppressed people. If we consider educational reform and who should be given credit for thinking about the best way to educate Black people, then Dubois and Washington first began this discussion decades before John Dewey or Paulo Freire.

Booker T. Washington was a frontier in education and his prominences was during the peak of industrialization. The rise of business and industry in the early 1800s began to change the nature of education as factories and small businesses began to dominate the American frontier (Moore p. 20; 2003). Industrial education, rather than abstract learning defined the changes in education and the outcome of the Civil War sparked questions concerning the newly freedmen and their ability to operate in American society. Booker Washington, a leader for Black people. In this era, he founded Tuskegee one of the most famous institutions of higher education for Black people and by 1890 Tuskegee University was a leading employer of Black college graduates. (Moore, 2003). Despite the criticisms of Booker T. Washington for his accommodationist views on civil rights he also engaged in the discussion that supported education as central to the plight of Black people (Dunn, 1993). Washington’s focus on economic self-help through agriculture and industrial training was a perspective which placed Black people at the center of their own freedom and destiny. Washington challenged the notion that Black people were not capable of constructing their own destiny and

through the development of Tuskegee University created an avenue to promote self-help and agency for Black people W.E.B Dubois a critical figure in Africana scholarship spent his entire life surveying and responding to the questions of how to help Black people in America. Several scholars use Dubois work to discuss the way in which his published works communicated an Africana scholarship of education (Rabaka, 2003, Dunn, 1993; Alridge, 1999). Using primary sources Rabaka (2003), explores Dubois African philosophy of education and concludes that culture, history and the experiences of Blacks across the diaspora are critical to educating Black people, and this philosophy has to be grounded in the work done by Black people for Black people. Dubois early works completed during the same era as Booker T. Washington also concludes that the only way to effectively educate Black people is for Blacks to educate from a lens of race solidarity and unity. In a paper Dubois wrote to the American Negro Academy in Dubois wrote,

“...as a race we must strive by race organization, by race solidarity, by race unity to the realization of that broader humanity.....For the accomplishment of these ends we need race organizations: Negro colleges, Negro newspapers, Negro business organizations, a Negro school of literature and art, and an intellectual clearing house, for all these products of the Negro mind, which we may call a Negro Academy. Not only is all this necessary for positive advance, it is absolutely imperative for negative defense” (Dubois, 1897:12).

As society continued this discussion of the “Negro Problem” many others also participated in the freedom of Black people through education and the Black Clubwomen’s movement were critical to perpetuating the historical traditions of self- help, community development and racial uplift (Shaw, 1995) which also can be interpreted as a African philosophy for education. This Philosophy confirmed the benefits of Blacks learning and flourishing within their own institutions, which taught about the history and experiences of Black people. If we consider the way in which famous educationally philosophies have gained public attention and renowned acclaim most of the research has failed to include the works by Black Scholars whom have given a blueprint for Black success but have been ignored and left out of this discussion.

The Civil Rights era was a critical time which allowed for major changes in higher education to challenge the inherent Eurocentrism embedded in educational institutions? The development of Ethnic Studies programs across the Nation began as a grassroots movement where minority students demanded fundamental changes in education in 1968 to include the perceptive of minority groups in the curriculum and the organization of institutions of higher education. (Hu-DeHart, 1993). As a result of this protest there are more than 700 Ethnic studies program or departments which offer students the opportunity to take courses which reflect the histories and experiences of minority groups in America and considers their contributions to society (Hu-DeHart,1993). While it is important to include the creation of Ethnic Studies in higher education this important addition alone is not enough to combat the inherent inequalities in educational institutions and the ways in which Black students are marginalized in higher education.

Blacks in Higher Education

The Historical U.S. Census highlights the differences between Black and white students and confirms the disparities in education by Race. The rate of Black males whom completed a college degree was 4.9 percent in 1970 and 20 percent by 2015, compared to 15 percent and 32.6 percent in the same period for white males. Scholars identify a few factors which inform the persistence rates of Black students. Lack of Academic preparation (Levin and Levin, 1991), the impact of perceived racism (Guiffrida and Douthit,2010), low levels of academic and social integration into the campus community is associated with positive educational outcomes when students are able to make meaningful connections with faculty and peers. However, Black students experience more difficulty integrating with faculty. African American students are less likely to get acclimated to the college environment, have relationships with their peers or faculty and are more likely to feel isolated within the institutional setting. This reality makes it difficult to transition to life in the academy and the lack of social capital held by minority students is also used to explain low retention rates. (Strayhorn, T.L., 2010).

Education and Learning Communities in Higher Education

The building block of learning communities in higher education is centered on the idea that undergraduate education should help students become democratic citizens by engaging them in the education process in an active and collaborative way. Educational Philosophers, John Dewey and Meiklejohn engaged in this discussion and developed the foundation of the contemporary learning community model as early as 1927. (Fink and Inkelas, 2015, Goodsell-Love, 1999). In their view education should involve shared inquiry between teachers and students and involve collaborative learning. (Fink and Inkelas, 2015, Goodsell-Love, 1999) Concerns about higher education and educational quality and a changing and diverse student body further fueled the contemporary learning community movement and educational innovations after World War II.

The University of California, LaGuardia Community College and Evergreen State College were among the few institutions credited for beginning the modern learning community movement and by the 1960s and 70s Evergreen State University lead the charge of learning communities. By this time, the structure of learning communities included a team taught program of study which provided collaborative interdisciplinary education and the model was expanded in structure to include a variety topics and themes. (Fink and Inkelas, 2015). By the 20th century higher education reform included greater emphasis on integrative curriculum and faculty and student interaction.

While contemporary learning communities continued to flourish during the massive social changes in the 60s there was no real consideration for thinking about how to best educate Black students. While learning communities may have been a change from the structure of education before school desegregation, the implementation of this practice were still Eurocentric by design. The modern learning community movement completely excluded the needs of Black students from the discussion of best practices and it ignored the level of discrimination students of color face in institutions of higher education and the consequences this continues to have for Black students. During the same era, Paulo Freire engaged in a formal critique of higher education and his primary claim was that education was a central feature of building movements for social change. Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), maintained that education is an inherently political process that reproduces the social order, stratifies the workforce and maintains social inequality. Thus in his view, education should be organized to allow oppressed groups to exercise agency in their own education and only this makes this process democratic (Freire, 1970). For the next few decades, Freire's work dominated educational reform.

While Freire theorized about social change an inherent fallacy in his work is that he states only in solidarity with "friends of the oppressor" "can they both engage in this praxis of revolutionary educational reform. (Gottesman, 2010). This clear example of racist paternalism is one of the problems inherent in our American education system. The idea that the only way to make real change in educational practices is for oppressed groups to include white folks is the very racism which has characterized higher education since school desegregation. This racism highlights the real need to highlight the educational methods created for Black people by Black people because it is impossible to realize educational reform without placing the oppressed at the center and in control of this process.

Currently colleges and universities of all sizes implement learning communities. These structured communities are structured to improve student learning, student outcomes, student experiences in and outside of the classroom and to provide integration of ideas and disciplines. (Love, 2012). In practice, the learning community is structured to create a 'community of learners', which often consists of intentional curricula structure with a strong interdisciplinary focus, motivated and engaged faculty, and campus professionals all connected with the students' academic and social plan. (Tinto, 1997, Gabelnick et al. 1990). Learning communities have emerged in the academy as a source of collaborative learning within an organized structure which allows diverse groups to find a sense of belonging and an avenue to help faculty members build tangible connections with students. (Goodsell-Love, 1999, Gabelnick et al. 1990).

There are other examples of Learning Communities or structured learning environments that were successful in educating Black students but were not given credit for their accomplishments. The 1964 Mississippi Freedom Schools established over forty schools throughout Mississippi and educated over 3,000 school aged children and adults with a curriculum focused on the philosophy of the Civil Rights movement and the foundations of Black history(Clemons, 2014). These schools challenged Jim Crow and combined education with political action and social justice and created new

pedagogical focus for Black students. These schools and their practice helped to change the discourse in educating Black Students. The current structure of educational institutions values certain cultural capital and disregards those whose culture are outside of the norm and Freedom schools disrupted these assumptions. While Freedom schools are discussed as part of the Civil Rights Era, it is left out of the national conversation of educational practices. In another example, Scherer(1991) documents an elementary school which created a learning community environment referred to as a “school family” which consisted of school administration, parents and extended family members. This school functioned like a learning community for elementary students and highlighted Black culture. Both of these studies found a positive relationship between culture and Black students and these examples are a few of the many examples of communities structured around culture but have been left out of the discourse in higher education.

The premise that culture is central to education has challenged educators and institutions of higher education to find alternative methods to educate students from diverse backgrounds. This theory has contributed to further development and various forms of it has been defined as culturally-compatible (Jordan, 1985), culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1990), culturally congruent (Au& Kawakami, 1994) and culturally responsive education (Cazden & Leyett, 1981, Erikson & Mohat, 1982). Thus culturally responsive education defines a framework that connects the teaching philosophy with the learning environment and creates a structure for instructors can offer a culturally compatible environment. (Ford, et al.). This framework requires the teaching philosophy, the learning environment, the curriculum and assessment all be culturally responsive, promote critical thinking, acknowledge the legitimacy of cultural heritage, promote a sense of belonging and promote student engagement. (Kea, Trent, & Davis, 2002). The idea that culture matters is the way Black institutions of higher education organized their curriculum and the structure of education in the 19th century.

In this study we take a Afrocentric view of the world to design and implement a Race centered learning community to deconstruct the idea that traditional educational practices are equally beneficial for Black students and to give credence to the many ways in which similar educational practices which highlight Black culture have been transformative for addressing the educational needs of Black students but have been ignored and left out of the dialogue for learning communities research. In this framework we wanted the class environment to reflect to the history and culture of Black Americans and the attributes and assumptions of Afrocentricity. While the learning community research represents a national model for responding to the challenges in retaining first-year students there are many examples of communities of learning based on Race and culture and this omission in the literature represents the Eurocentric ways in which educational practices systematically ignores the contributions of Black educators and our research builds on the practices of Educators which use Race and culture to offer different educational experiences for Black students.

Content, Structure and Pedagogy

The inception of our first RCLC was a unique and innovative strategy at this university designed to address the needs of at-risk Black students at a predominately white, large, Midwestern, urban public institution in a large metropolitan area. Race Centered Learning Communities (RCLC) is a pedagogical approach that recognizes the legitimacy of difference. While Black Students may have some of the same needs of other first time college students, the impact of race is paramount but is treated as cultural capital. Rather than being marginalized, Black students are given the opportunity to use their experiences to facilitate social change. Thus the RCLC model redefines the curriculum to include the experiences of people of African Descent and challenges the way the traditional learning community is structured. The premise of the RCLC is based on the idea that understanding the world from the perspective of disenfranchised groups can empower and equip students with the skills to persist through college. Thus social justice, history, culture and other aspects of African American history and culture are taught as a necessary and vital part of the curriculum and are used to promote student awareness and self-efficacy.

In the development of this learning community we used an Afrocentric view of the world to design and implement a Race centered learning community to deconstruct the idea that traditional educational practices are equally beneficial for Black students and to give credence to the many ways in which similar educational practices which highlight Black culture have been transformative for

addressing the educational needs of Black students but have been ignored and left out of the dialogue for learning communities research. While the learning community research represents a national model for responding to the challenges in retaining first-year students there are many examples of communities of learning based on Race and culture and this omission in the literature represents the Eurocentric ways in which educational practices systematically ignores the contributions of Black educators. Therefore this research builds on the practices of Educators which use Race and culture to offer different educational experiences for Black students.

Our learning community consisted of three academic courses; a Speech or English Composition course, the Introduction to Sociology course with a focus on social inequality, and the learning community course, which further addressed topics, related to the Black experience. While this learning community had the traditional structure of the learning community model, its theme was radically different from traditional learning communities. Afrocentricity is the philosophical framework which represents our vision of this structured learning community. The belief that Black students share a common history, a collective identity and an interconnected future is the basis of Afrocentricity (Schiele, 1994) and the impetus for our curricula and pedagogic focus and it guided our ideas about educating Black students. Race and the way Black American's experience the reality of race was the building block for structuring the linked courses and content, the selection of faculty and the additional course activities and requirements. The themes of social identity, agency and community guided the curriculum and allowed the faculty members to better integrate assignments, activities and readings across the curriculum of all of the required courses. Culturally relevant pedagogy was also important in the overall design and implementation of this learning community because it also identifies the idea that culture matters and has to be included in any model which is committed to educating historically marginalized groups. (VanDeWeghe and Scherff, 2005;Ladson-Billings, 1990). This model is important for understanding how to educate students of color and builds upon the research of other Black scholars which have been ignored in the national conversation about communities of learning.

Results and Implications

Overall students believed the RCLC contributed to their learning and they believed this opportunity was invaluable to their first year transition into college. I used pseudonyms to highlight a few of the responses of the students whom participated in the RCLC.

"The thing that I liked best about my Themed Learning Community was the relaxed learning environment. With this TLC, it provided me with guidance that you can't get from other places. Not to mention that this was a theme towards African American Perspectives, which gave me an in-depth, look at the lives, cultures and triumphs of the African American community. I love the idea of knowing that my teachers don't want to see me fail. I love that fact that they are willing to go the extra mile with me so that I can make my dreams come true." (Cherry, fall 2008)

Students were able to recognize the importance of the African American theme as being a source of strength and they were able to understand social hierarchy in American society.

"The themed learning community was a little nerve racking at first, but in the end I really enjoyed it. It made a huge impact on me. Coming from a racist society into a completely different society was a big step for me. It really helped me to realize the social problems today with African Americans and it definitely made me a better person." (Tim, Fall 2007)

The 'the African American experience' theme was empowering and for most students in this project was the first opportunity they had to learn about their own history and contributions . While the African American theme was the best part of the RCLC it was a factor in the transition into college life.

"I always felt I didn't know much about African American history, especially from my learning in grade school. This makes me wonder if a lot of it was left out for the sake of time... or to keep the world in the dark about all the events that made our people what we are today . This why I am glad that in my learning community I finally feel that I can get knowledge about our history that really shows what we have been through as a people and also gives insight to where our race is going. (Tracey, Fall 2009)

A common student response was the opportunity to learn about diverse perspectives. This is insightful because for black students diverse perspectives meant the opportunity to learn about African Americans. This is not a common occurrence in the curriculum in higher education and this course represents the exception not the norm;

"The study of African Americans is important; this course made that true. The learning of other cultures and understanding cultures in our society and the United States were most valuable. The context was all Black; that was healthy for me." (Derek, Fall 2008)

"OCOL is an African American Perspectives Learning community class. We learned importance of African American life and every aspect of African American life. I love this class because we're like a family in this class and gain so much knowledge about African Americans that we would have never known before if we never took the class. I've learned many things about myself being in this class and about black people as a whole. "(Sean, fall 2008)

Students were immersed in themes of identity, history, community and agency and this helped them to consider the material in the context of their own experiences.

"The TLC made me understand how Blacks were different from other communities—it taught me how to operate and use my advantage." (Rana, Fall 2009)

"I learned a lot about society as well as critical thinking skills. It made me think of certain matters through a broader perspective and not just from a personal perspective" (Kevin, Fall 2009)

"I liked learning about African American culture and how everything was about aspects that related to us" (Tasha, Fall 2007)

Institutional Fit/College Transition

The relationships students formed from this experience were a safety net for students and it propelled them to do their best.

"My first semester at this university has been the most amazing, upsetting, and wonderful experience in my life so far. The transition here was not easy, but it was not very difficult either. This course helped me more with my transition because it gave me something to look forward to throughout the semester. If not for this course I do not know where I would have found a better encouragement to do my best. This learning community was the best part of my introduction in to college life. I believe this was one of the best choices I made when I scheduled for my fall classes." (Meka, 2008)

The connections students made with faculty members gave students a sense of connection and a feeling of belonging.

"Coming to this university was one of the best decisions I have ever made. I know that due to the Themed Learned Community I was in I found out a lot of things about myself. The themed Learning Community was probably the best thing that has ever happened to me. Mostly everyone in my TLC have majors that have nothing to do with African American Perspectives. Little did I know how much I would learn about only about African Americans, but about myself as well. I think of these people and my professors as family." (Errol, Fall 2008)

Although the structure of the learning community facilitates faculty connections, the RCLC was different, in that the faculty members were also. Taking courses from Black faculty is not a common experience, so this was an identity building and motivating experience.

"These programs made me realize that I have the privilege and opportunity to do whatever it is that I want and I don't have to do it alone. This TLC has been one of the most outstanding experiences of my lifetime. All of my professors in this TLC were dedicated to making sure that I and my fellow classmates understood the material being taught. Not only did they teach us, helped us, motivated us and prepared us, but they showed each of us who we are, where we come from and the many places we could go. After learning that there is so much history that was not taught to me in high school makes me angry...I feel that this TLC saved me from wanting to give up on myself, my life and my family" (Lauren, 2006)

The Learning community was invaluable for retention.

"The themed learning community that focuses on the culture of African Americans I think was one of the best choices this University made.... I think that if not for this learning community, that over half my classmates and I would not have made it through the semester and will not be returning to attend school for the spring." (Lucas Fall 2008)

"If I had to advise a student from my previous high school, I would tell them, if you have an opportunity to be a part of a learning community that focus on your culture. Be part of it. It most definitely and certainly will help you out in the long run. I became a better student after being part of this learning community and it will do the same for you and anybody else who becomes a part of this community." (Eric, fall 2009)

This space helped students find themselves and find meaning. The university can be Isolating but the RCLC helped student make real connections;

"I wouldn't have made it without this course—I know this for a fact. It helped me to adapt to the whole college transformation from high school. This course gave me ownership in the university, It made me feel we belonged in this space." (Chantel, Fall 2008)

This learning community helped cultivate a sense of belonging and an appreciation for learning about Black history.

"I am thankful for University College to offer a learning community that focused on the culture and history of AA. If the learning community was not established I do not think I would be able to see my direction in college and life as clear. I believe having an African American learning community helps the AA race as a whole. Learning about their history helps students gain the knowledge to discover where they are going. If African Americans do not learn about their history, I believe it can be a crucial factor. It may hold back us from their true identity and from becoming successful in their education. Having taken the African American learning community course I have realize how I have to make a better life for my family." (Ben, Fall 2009)

Faculty Connections

Again, faculty are an important part of the transition to college. If students feel disconnected to their professors they are less likely to ask questions and more likely to feel disconnected from the learning environment.

"As an incoming freshman I was introduced to an African American learning community called Pathways to Power. In this learning community you are surrounded with others when this learning community who come from backgrounds similar to yours. We learned to listen to each other's point of views and give our own our own. Even though you may have different views on a subject you are not looked down upon. I can honestly say that I enjoy the teaching and discussions. The teachers, advisors and mentors...do their best to make you feel at home. They lift you up and give you a reason to want to stretch out to others. The course is very encouraging. It motivates you to change and do something good in life. I learned so much about the African American culture and how much we have achieved and accomplish...our class was like a family." (Candace, Fall 2008)

"The faculty had high expectations. It helped that the instructors focus more on me as an individual, I didn't feel like just another number in a classroom The TLC helped me to come out of my shell. The professors helped me to grow and learn more about college life. (Eva Fall. 2009)

Pedagogy of Learning

The Pedagogy of learning represents teaching the pedagogy of difference. Students were not only excited about the actual lessons; they valued the way the information was communicated. Making the transition to college is difficult and understanding the way minority students are able to navigate this transition is an essential part of retention.

"The class has taught me to stand up for things I believe in and what I think is right. I have learned to spot out racism and handle it in the correct way. I have learned a lot about the injustices made in the past towards AAs and what they have done to overcome those unfortunate circumstances. I learned how not to be a follower and more of a leader, so other African Americans can look up to me.

How to set an example of other AA women that there is more to life than living off welfare, having children out of wedlock and violence. The learning community also taught me how to communicate with other of different races more effectively. I am beginning to see how pretty on the inside and outside. I am beginning to really realize that my black is beautiful or in other words how my skin complexion and everything about my heritage is gorgeous. I believe this course is excellent for the soul and they will see the true beauty of themselves and see how American really works." (Tia, Fall 2005)

Transitional Factors
Faculty interactions
Student interactions
Structural Factors
School administrators
Safe Space for communication Advisors
Program and Activities
Pedagogy
Classroom Topics
Discussions Projects
Topics

Table 3: Themes from Questionnaires

2. Conclusion

As Black women we face multiple challenges in the academy and in society and it is important for us to recognize those differences and how we are able to use our experiences to create a supportive environment for student success. The reality that our location as Black women is different than others is a shared experience. As Black women, we understand our role is different than men and our gender, our race; our class completely informs our perspective and our vision of our role and responsibility to Black students. We understand the challenges faced by Black students and this creates a bridge of understanding.

The development of this project and the RCLC was a gift of love for us because it was an opportunity to create an innovative outlet for our pedagogy, for our students and a sense of community that we also needed. This project gave us deeper connections and solidified our commitment to giving students what had been given to us in a different era. Creating the Race Centered learning community was a unique space to introduce innovative practices to support Black student success. Although this structure is a practice we developed for Black students within the traditional learning communities' model this practice has not been discussed as a viable option for enhancing the traditional learning community model for Black students.

Overall we found that highlighting difference and putting Race at the center of the learning has a positive effect on student learning and retention. In this RCLC theme of social inequality and the impact of race, income, social class and gender resonated in the RCLC structure and gave students a real perspective to understand, critique, and participate in social change. The RCLC represented safe spaces for helping students understand the trials of a diverse society and it equipped them with tools to understand the impact of society on their lives and offered opportunities to encourage social change and give students a framework to understand activism and civic responsibility. Our pedagogy was focused on helping students understand the history of African Americans and more importantly how to understand the way marginalized communities have changed their own destiny and contributed to the American story. As a result of these students most valued the theme of the learning community and the way this experience helped to shape their first-year experience.

The idea that one program could be structured in a way to meet the needs of all students irrespective of the ways in which discrimination still persists in academia and the impact of race, gender and class on Black students is not considered in the traditional learning community curriculum. The traditional learning community is set up to include linked courses, and thematic and collaborative learning with a concentration on academic and social integration. However, this structure typically does not include a focus on Race and Culture. Black students are challenged in ways, which may go beyond traditional high impact retention strategies. Race is a salient factor in the status of minority groups in American society and this cannot be ignored. Minority students need programs that consider their race, gender and class and RCLC has the potential to challenge the structure of educational programs designed to impact student retention. An RCLC community offers an alternative to the structure of the traditional learning community and is centered on the perspective that Race Matters.

This model is important to our understanding of learning communities because it suggests that Black students may need more than traditional as a way of informing student retention. Students need

experiences that will motivate and give them real opportunities for self-esteem and the curriculum needs to reflect the real contributions of people of color. Black students have the right to learn about their own culture in higher education and this should be part of the general education curriculum in the same way other European focused courses are considered standard curriculum. The RCLC addresses this omission and offers a viable alternative to the curriculum. In the RCLC students were engulfed in a web of relationships with caring faculty and staff all connected to the theme of the African Experience as a source of strength.

This model supports the idea that difference matters and is a pertinent part of any conversation in teaching Black students. While academic preparedness and the access to vital resources of the college are important in this model there is an emphasis placed on the individual experiences of students and the impact the learning has on student success. Students have to be engaged and challenged in the classroom and believe the information is valuable. Therefore, we are convinced that the pedagogy is paramount to educational outcomes. We have to reconstruct the dynamic, which drives students' persistence and the multiple ways pedagogy can drive student retention.

This RCLC is an example of "All Black Everything" and represents what students valued the most from this experience. This experience while not common is a revolutionary way to reconsider the way difference can contribute to the learning experience, retention and the self-esteem of the participants. As Black women our pedagogy-included intersectionality at the crux of the way we structured and delivered this experience to students. The finding of this research suggests that learning community structure should consider the Race of the participants when designing opportunities for student success. The history of segregation in American society and the important contributions of people of color to educating Black students cannot be ignored in this dialogue of best practices.

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