

# Personal Perspective

## Leave No College Student Behind

By Buffy Smith

The recent U.S. Supreme Court decision regarding race-conscious admission policies at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor has reignited heated conversations about affirmative action policies in higher education. Many college and university administrators, faculty, students, and policymakers who support affirmative action argue that such policies create a diverse learning community, which provides educational benefits to both white and non-white students.

I agree with educators who support affirmative action that having a diverse student body could produce desirable long-term educational and social outcomes (e.g., students would develop culturally relevant critical thinking and analytical skills, which could make them more globally competitive). However, educators who emphasize recruitment objectives at the expense of retention goals dominate the dialogue on diversity. This is problematic because the sustainable growth of diversity in higher education depends on both strong recruitment and retention policies.

According to the *Minorities in Higher Education 2001-2002* study by the American Council on Education, there has been a steady increase (double-digit gains) in the percentage of non-white students admitted to colleges and universities. However, this study also reports that 59% of white students graduate within six years of enrolling in college, whereas the graduation rates are 38% for African American and Native American students, and 46% for Hispanic students. The disproportionate gap in the graduation rates highlights the need for the higher education community to rethink our strategies for improving the retention of students of color.

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One approach to increasing the graduation rates of students of color would be to address the issue of the hidden curriculum. The concept of the hidden curriculum can be traced back to sociologist Emile Durkheim's *Education and Sociology*, but the term became more widely used within educational research as a result of Michael Apple's *Ideology and Curriculum*. It refers to the unwritten and unspoken values, dispositions, and social and behavioral expectations that govern the interactions between teachers and students within schools.

More concretely, the hidden curriculum is the unwritten and unspoken rules of how to successfully navigate through the nebulous academic culture of higher education, which is essential to academic success. For example, there is an appropriate way students should interact with faculty when discussing grades, which might not be transparent to all college students.

Many faculty and administrators do not acknowledge that a hidden curriculum exists because they perceive the academic culture of higher education as normative and transparent to everyone. However, the hidden curriculum, unlike the written curriculum (e.g., the academic content knowledge and course requirements needed to complete a degree program), is not explicitly and equally accessible to all students.

For instance, the educational, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds of some students of color and first-generation college students have not adequately prepared them for successful navigation through the academic cultural minefields of higher education. But it is important to emphasize that just because students are unfamiliar with the academic culture of postsecondary institutions one should not infer that they lack the intellectual capacity to learn the hidden curriculum.

Unfortunately, the current programs that focus on how to reduce the attrition rates among students of color and first-generation college students continue to

operate from a cultural deficiency model. For instance, many retention programs work under the assumption that these students need help only with academic skills such as critical reading, analytical, and writing skills. As a result, most retention programs provide students with services such as tutoring, mentoring, remedial courses, freshmen seminars, and college survival skill courses (e.g., time management, note-taking, and test-taking strategies).

These services are invaluable. However, access to the hidden curriculum is also crucial to students' academic success. As a teacher and advisor, I have had many students confide in me that they were totally confused about the higher education process. These students could not understand how they went from being an "A" student in high school to being a "C" student in college.

It was apparent from my interactions with these students that they had attained a level of competency in the skills and academic content knowledge that are required to succeed in college. But what was also clear and disturbing to me was that these students did not have access to the "institutional academic cultural knowledge," that is, the rules of how to navigate through the academic culture of higher education. In order to achieve academic success it is crucial that one attains a level of competency not only in the formal curriculum but also the hidden curriculum.

In order to resolve the hidden curriculum problem, retention programs should not focus on refining college students' "embodied cultural capital," that is, the students' dispositions and behaviors formed during the early socialization process, which influence how they perceive and interact with teachers. Instead, they should concentrate on how to teach students the academic cultural knowledge of the institution (e.g., the most appropriate way to engage in classroom discussions), regardless of what type of embodied cultural capital they bring with them to school. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's

*Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction* critiques schools for reproducing a classed social hierarchy by showing a preference for and rewarding students who possess and display middle-class cultural capital attributes.

I concur with Bourdieu that schools have a preference for and reward students who possess certain embodied cultural capital attributes. However, I argue further that schools should not systematically exclude any student from having access to the academic cultural knowledge of the institution.

Colleges and universities could minimize the number of students who are systematically excluded from having access to the academic cultural knowledge of the institution if they would restructure their existing retention programs, especially mentor programs. There are two major problems with current mentor programs. First, the problem with most mentor programs is that they do not include a plan that would explicitly and systematically teach students how to recognize and interpret the unwritten and unspoken rules of the higher education system. In fact, the objectives of most mentor programs are to primarily help students with specific academic and social skills, and connect them with resources and people on campus that could assist them in becoming academically and socially integrated within the school.

The second problem with many existing mentor programs is that they try to achieve their objectives primarily through one-on-one mentoring relationships, that is pairing one student mentee with one faculty mentor. But one-on-one mentoring relationships are problematic because they do not provide mechanisms or quality controls over what type and how much academic knowledge and skills are transmitted between mentors and mentees. Moreover, mentor programs that emphasize one-on-one mentoring relationships provide students within the same mentor program differential access to the academic knowledge, skills, and resources of the institution.

In order to resolve these problems mentor programs would have to be restructured to teach students explicitly and sys-

tematically the unwritten and unspoken rules of how to navigate through the academic culture of higher education. Also, mentor programs would have to shift from a one-on-one mentoring model to a network-mentoring model. Whereas one-on-one mentoring focuses primarily on the transmission of *embodied* academic cultural capital between mentors and mentees, network-mentoring would concentrate on the transmission of *institutional* academic cultural knowledge between mentors and mentees. For instance, in a network-mentoring model, students would learn the academic cultural knowledge of the institution from networks of faculty, administrators, and advanced students.

Restructuring mentor programs would require networks of all invested stakeholders (e.g., faculty, administrators, and advanced students) of higher education to seriously examine and identify the norms, values, expectations, and practices embedded within the culture of academia. Once these attributes have been identified, the networks of mentors would create an explicit, efficient, and systematic plan for teaching these attributes to incoming students of color and first-generation college students.

These networks of mentors could employ various pedagogic strategies to unveil the hidden curriculum to students such as role playing activities, seminars, interactive workshops, and supplemental manuals about the academic culture. It is important to be mindful that the hidden curriculum is specific to institutions and subject to be changed by gatekeepers who consciously or unconsciously mystify the academic culture of higher education.

As a result, the rules and teaching strategies for successfully navigating through the academic culture would also have to be tailored to the specific needs of colleges and universities, and undergo continuous revisions in order to ensure that the academic culture remains transparent and accessible to everyone.

Therefore, I challenge higher education administrators, faculty, researchers, and policymakers to develop and implement

policies that would provide all students equal access to the academic cultural knowledge of postsecondary institutions. Providing such access would assist many colleges and universities in achieving their long-term educational and diversity missions. As we remain vigilant in our fight to maintain affirmative action as a cornerstone of our recruitment process in higher education, we should also simultaneously develop new approaches for improving the retention of students of color and first-generation college students.

My proposal to restructure mentor programs, which is based on my research on academic cultural capital, social capital, and the academic mentoring process, would offer innovative strategies for systematically unveiling the hidden curriculum to all students. It is not necessary to create new and expensive programs. Rather we should restructure our existing programs and make them more efficient and effective by developing policies that encourage, reward, and hold faculty and administrators accountable for sharing institutional academic cultural knowledge with students. Implementing such policies would expose and decode the hidden curriculum for all students, thus critically transforming colleges and universities in the United States and creating a more equal and just higher education system.

## References

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