CREATIVE PROGRAM DESIGN
for the
AFRICAN-AMERICAN MILLENNIAL STUDENT

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Alexander Lucius Twilight, the first African-American to graduate from an American higher education institution, may not have understood the total impact of his successful completion of baccalaureate work at Middlebury College in 1823. Today, almost two centuries later, about 13% of the nation's campuses are impacted by his lead (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2005).

Every semester, student affairs professionals are challenged by African-American students with regard to providing substantial programming that supports their unique needs. This population of students can be generally characterized as the fruition of an unrelenting struggle of the African-American race. Because of such a characterization, the hopes and dreams of many family members and friends often rest on the shoulders of the students we see on our college campuses.

For these reasons and many more, at the 2008 NACA National Convention, I took the opportunity to share information with cohorts about creatively designing programs for these special Millennial students that support their academic and social success. Here, I share some of those thoughts and ideas.

Defining Needs

“They know we don’t do the woods” … “When are we going to get some for us to do?” … “Ughhh! These people get on my nerves with this stuff!”

We all may have heard these complaints before throughout our careers. Some of the problems for this sub-population lie within their frustration to cope with the type of environment that we, as administrators, surround them with. Other factors include those such as once enrolled, students of color in predominantly white institutions contend with additional factors such as low institutional expectations, lack of informal faculty contact and support, and often-inhospitable social environments (Stage, Carter, Hossler, St. John, & Edward, 2003).

This type of research supports theories such as Tinto’s student departure theory, which states that because of a student’s poor integration socially and academically into the university environment, they decide to leave college.

These types of barriers, both visible and invisible, present additional challenges for students of color. When working with issues such as these, professionals often use theoretical guiding principles to help them discern the context of the situation and design an amiable solution. However, it can be said that guiding principles, such as the Cross Model of Psychological Nigrescence, does not necessarily purport the intrinsic values and thoughts of Millennial African-American students.

At the Convention, I shared with other campus-based professionals thoughts on changing the face of programming in relation to our African-American Millennial students. I simply offered thoughts as a pre-cursor to what I hope will be a bigger movement of change that needs to come to fruition in the bigger scheme of higher education in the next few years. Every year, every semester and, more importantly, every day is different in the life of a student affairs professional. Through programming and personal interactions, we assist in affecting the lives of our students. However, that work cannot be fully accomplished by fitting students into a standardized programming scheme that lacks the consciousness of thought for all students who will be participating in the program.

By 2016, it is projected that the rate of enrollment for African-American students will increase by 29 percent (NCES, 2008). Furthermore, if current trends of graduation persist with this enrollment, only 9% will actually graduate. I do not propose that student affairs can provide the complete answer to the complex puzzle of African-American student achievement in college; that task truly belongs to the entire college or university. However, student affairs plays an integral role in the holistic development of our students.

Impact of “Invisible” Qualities

Historically, institutions of higher education, both historically black and predominantly white institutions, are based on Eurocentric values. This, inherently, affects many ways in which our institutions operate, such as:

• How students are viewed.
• How education is approached.
• What students are taught.
• How student behavior is evaluated.
• The direction in which educators attempt to move students.

Additionally, research has proven that African-American students often anticipate a world that is closed to them with regard to opportunities. This is a concept that is socialized within them throughout their youth and is even more pertinent among students of low socio-economic status (Stage et al., 2003). The history of social and political trials of African-Americans and the overall educational status of the race today sends them to the frontlines of need for services and programs by university professionals. Sometimes, we professionals may overlook these “invisible” qualities that affect our
African-American students. However, these aspects are definitives when it comes to developing creative programming for this ever-growing sub-population.

Building a Creative Tomorrow

For years, we have used the guidance of theories such as the Multi-dimensional Model of Racial Identity and Cross Psychological Nigrescence to understand African-American students. I purport that Millennial students have transcended the concept of using one particular model for their development. Instead, through the use of several theories in synthesis, campus-based professionals may be able to more appropriately discern the values of students, their innate qualities and interests, and more creatively design programs that support their talent development outside of the classroom.

Building Blocks Of Success

I have discerned the context and usage of four theoretical models: the Cross Model of Psychological Nigrescence (1962), the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity, Astin’s Student Involvement Theory and the concept of Nguzo Saba. I believe these theories, much like the idea of synergy, can be more effective when working in synthesis with each other, rather than individually. Let’s take a quick look at each of the theories:

Cross Model of Psychological Nigrescence

- Developed during the ’60s and ’70s.
- Examines the concept of resocialization from non-Afrocentrism to Afrocentrism to multiculturalism.
- Psychosocial theory in which students may move through five stages:
  - Pre-encounter: Individuals do not consider race important. Many of the individual’s actions are based on Eurocentric norms.
  - Encounter: Interaction(s) that cause an individual to challenge their current way of viewing the world.
  - Immersion-Emersion: This is the transitional stage into a state of blackness. First, the student immerses himself within the black culture, disregarding many of the old ideas. Second, the individual completely emerses himself within the new found identity.
  - Internalization: Self-efficacy about their newfound identity begins to set in.
  - Internalization-Commitment: The individual fully commits themselves to the ideals and beliefs of black culture (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement

- Students learn by becoming involved.
- The theory is not necessarily focused on the content, subject matter or technique, but the motivation and behavior of the student.

Multi-dimensional Model of Racial Identity

- Attempts to reconcile the inconsistencies of previous stage theory development models on race.
- This tool measures self-esteem of African-American college students and utilizes four dimensions:
  - Salience—how important being African-American is to overall self concept of an individual
  - Centrality—the extent to which African-Americans use their race to define themselves
  - Ideology—the individual’s personal belief regarding what behaviors are appropriate for African-Americans
  - Regard—the relative evaluation of one’s own race in positive and negative views (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton & Smith 1997).

Nguzo Saba

In combination with Kwanzaa, Nguzo Saba is used to “introduce and reinforce seven basic values of African culture which contribute to building and reinforcing family, community and culture among African-American people” (Karenga, 2006). Nguzo Saba is a kiswahilli term comprised of seven principles:

1. Umoja [the idea of unity]—encourages social experiences that allow students to learn from each other and encourage cohesiveness among themselves. These programs also incite the support of the family as part of the college educational experience.

2. Kujichagulia [self-determination]—programs that facilitate academic support, self-identity; organizations that address the needs of their community and motivational experiences.

3. Ujima [collective work and responsibility]—programs that call for servant leadership, service-learning opportunities, team-oriented projects and political and social awareness programs.

4. Ujamaa [cooperative economics]—programs that incite powerful collaborations on financial stability, fundraising for local charities (African-American emphasis), internship opportunities, and institutional and student partnerships before and after graduation.

5. Nia [purpose]—programs that emphasize African-American history, the benefits of education (curricular and co-curricular) and family.

6. Kuumba [creativity]—programs that support:
  - Talent development
    - Singing, writing, visually aesthetic means of expression
  - Academic development
    - African-American perspectives on topics discussed in class
Creative Design for African-American Millennial Students

_Learning Reconsidered_ defined the process of learning, in relation to student affairs, as a transformative wave. This wave “carries not just data, but also the energy of interpretation, application and reflection and reconstruction in much the same way that an ocean wave reshapes a shoreline and moves everything it carries. The shape of the wave and the patterns it leaves on the sand depend, to a certain degree, on the perspective of the observer” (Dungy et. al. 2004, p.12).

We, along with the programs we create, are the transformative wave of which this reference makes note. Nguzo Saba, as a use of theoretical programming, was first espoused by Vanessa Johnson. Her report called for creating programs that used Nuguzo Saba as a foundational method for programming. But, to bring more depth to this concept, I believe several theoretical ideas in combination can help us design more creative and substantial programming for this sub-population.

Ultimately, programs that are prime examples of this transformative wave will highlight a value(s) within the principles of Kwanzaa, use the models of racial identity to be sensitive to developmental needs, and fulfill the necessity of quality programming as espoused by Astin. Examples of these programs are, unfortunately, only slowly becoming affluent on campuses across the nation.

A variety of institutions have benchmark programs that set the tone for other campuses. Here are a few:

**Student African-American Brotherhood (SAAB)**
A national organization with strong local influences. This organization’s objective is to assist black males to be role models for each other, as well as for other black males in their communities. For more information, visit www.saab.net.

**National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)**
Formed in 1936, with more than 30,000 members to date, the NAACP collegiate sector has been a major driving force in the development of the next generation of leaders. The mission of the organization is to inform youth of the problems affecting African-Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities; to advance the economic, education, social and political status of African-Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities and their harmonious cooperation with other peoples; to stimulate an appreciation of the African Diaspora and other peoples of color’s contribution to civilization; and to develop an intelligent, militant effective youth leadership. Visit www.naacp.org.

**Faculty and Staff Mentoring Excellence Program (FASE)**
At Indiana University, the newly formed office of Mentoring Services & Leadership Development continuously provides services for students of color that link the faculty and staff inside and outside the classroom. As reported by the office, the result is a stronger campus community, students better prepared for life and work in a diverse and global society, and a common future founded in achievement and success for all. Visit www.indiana.edu/fase.

**The Kumba Singers of Harvard College**
“Celebrating Black Creativity & Spirituality Since 1970” is the motto of this talented group of singers at prestigious Harvard University (MA). The basic mission of the organization is in the name of the group, meaning to use one’s creativity in leaving a space better than you found it. Visit www.kuumbasingers.org/.

**National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) Affiliates**
Walter Kimbrough stated that students of color who were members of NPHC organization were found to be more successful in academic and social integration within university systems. Since 1906, these organizations have sustained their mission of uplifting the African-American race through a plethora of programs surrounding fraternal bonds, education and social action. Visit www.nphchq.org/.

**University of Memphis Prayer Breakfast**
Memphis, TN, has long been a focal point of faith and civil rights. For years, the city has been known as “The City of Churches,” being noted for the numerous churches that can be found in nearly every corner of the city. The University of Memphis has reflected on this aspect of the city’s heritage and takes into account the importance of faith and religion within the African-American community. Each year, the school holds a prayer breakfast, during which ministers of faith share experiences with students. Visit http://saweb.memphis.edu/minorityaffairs/.

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7. **Imani (Faith)**—programs that encompass various spiritual aspects of life, weekly gatherings of like minds.
- African-American clergy from the surrounding community participating in on campus religious events (Johnson, 2001).

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African-American families, generally, have very strong faith in the students they send to college. Many of these students are first-generation college students and setting foot on campus can be an even more bewildering experience for them than for most other college students.
Opportunities Abound

What I’ve shared here only scratches the surface into the possible programming opportunities and areas of need for this sub-population. Professionals should understand that opportunity areas exist for even the most seasoned professional. Here are just a few suggestions:

Take advantage of periodic stages of “un-learning.”

Advisors should always remember to take a step back when approaching program design opportunities. Even programs that have been in existence for years should be re-evaluated to ensure that program goals are truly being achieved. One of the most practical ways of gaining understanding about the students for whom we program is to move from a managing to supporting role in the lives of students. In this capacity, we may be able to break down stereotypes about administration and have the opportunity to understand the various issues that surround our students.

Use community minority resources to attain department and university goals of retention and academic success.

Our communities are teeming with valuable resources that are tangible examples of the students we serve. Advisors should remember that colleges and universities are profound members of the community and should embrace the diversity of services the community can provide.

Be active within the commitment to achievement.

As professionals, we are excellent programmers. However, we must also remember to continue the excitement of planning past the implementation phase. Active involvement, incorporating both physical and mental efforts, tends to ignite the excitement within others.

Establish partnerships between faculty of color and student affairs practitioners.

For African-American students, the development of partnerships such as these helps to create enclaves of support. This support helps them to emotionally break down the institution into more manageable and supportable networks. These networks, ultimately, allow them to navigate situations more appropriately.

Balance the use of all available theories to provide programming that empowers, informs and creates a sense of responsibility.

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Future research should be conducted into the innate values and psychological development of African-American Millennial students. This information, in combination with current research, should be balanced to create emphatic programming concepts that aggressively seek to close current gaps in educational attainment.

Help faculty understand racial identity theories and the concept of transformative learning.

Faculty members may well be experts in their respective fields, but those fields may not necessarily include student development and factors that affect retention. Helping faculty members to understand development theories such as the ones mentioned in this article can help to create a better campus community. Ideally, this would be a community in which faculty members understand that their roles are just as important outside the classroom as inside.

Shifts in Perspective

In the 1800s, the idea of student development outside of the classroom did not exist as it does today. Fortunately, technology and a strong commitment to developing the whole person have helped create ideas and opportunities for many students on campuses today.

African-American families, generally, have very strong faith in the students they send to college. Many of these students are first-generation college students and setting foot on campus can be an even more bewildering experience for them than for most other college students. Additionally, parents of these students may not necessarily understand or be able to appropriately assist their students with the entire spectrum of problems they may face.

As Julian Bond noted, “Our future as a nation depends on our willingness to continue to reach into the racial cleavage that defines American society and to change the racial contours of our world” (Ellis Smith, 2007, p. 239).

It is this type of strong belief that encourages the persistence of African-American Millennial students. Their persistence at our institutions must be met with creative, exciting and challenging programs that renew their vigor in becoming positive citizens who are representative of the institutional missions and the societal communities from which they have come. This is the concept of creative design for Millennial African-American students, one that embraces challenges and authors solutions for everyone.
References


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About the Author

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