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Fostering success for men of color

By J. Luke Wood and Frank Harris III

In 2013, President Obama launched the My Brother's Keeper initiative to improve outcomes for boys and young men of color in society. This initiative sought to galvanize efforts by educational institutions, and non-profit and philanthropic organizations to collectively remedy challenges faced in education and criminal justice.

Even before the announcement of this initiative, community college leaders had become increasingly attentive to outcome disparities between black and Latino men and their peers. For the past decade, campuses have established Minority Male Initiatives (MMIs) to provide additive support to these men. MMIs often employ mentoring programs, professional skills development workshops and specialized learning communities to create micro-climates of support for men of color.

Too often, these programs benefit a small number of men of color, leaving the majority of this population unreached and undersupported. While these programs are critical to demonstrat-

ing an institutional commitment to the success of men of color, too often, intervention efforts are focused on remediating students rather than better preparing educators and the institutions they serve to work with men of color. This is a critical lapse, as extensive research has shown that factors related to faculty are the stronger determinants of student success.

Here are three ways college leaders can improve outcomes for men of color:

1. CAMPUS-LEVEL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The vast majority of college and university faculty are subject matter experts and are excellent academicians in their respective fields. However, few educators have any training in teaching historically underrepresented and underserved students. As a result, campuses must provide professional development opportunities that prepare educators to effectively work with men of color. The Center for Organizational Responsibility and Advancement offers an intensive, online profes-

sional development program on teaching community college men of color. This program, and similar trainings, should be made available to all full- and part-time faculty to ensure that they have the foundational knowledge necessary for educating all students.

2. HIRING THE 'RIGHT' FACULTY

Equally important to professional development for current faculty are efforts to hire new faculty who are most prepared to work with underserved students. It is critical that college leaders revisit hiring to ensure that new hires have a proven track record of success and training in teaching underrepresented and underserved populations. Typically, campus interviews consist of asking faculty about their experiences in working with diverse students. Such questioning does not elicit responses necessary for determining faculty fit. Rather, prospective faculty should be asked to discuss examples of how they have advocated for and revised their teaching practice to support the needs of diverse student learners. A strong, predetermined follow-up question can then require faculty to provide an example that is specific to black or Latino men.



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3. IMPLEMENTING AN EARLY ALERT SYSTEM

Students leave college for a variety of reasons (e.g., new job, transportation concerns, lack of tutoring support), many of which could be averted if known about early on. Many campuses have responded by implementing early alert systems which identify students demonstrating known signs of dropping a course. These signs include arriving to class late, leaving class early, not turning in assignments, receiving a few poor grades in a row. In an optimal structure, such concerning patterns would generate an automatic alert that is received by counseling and advising staff who can then intervene with the student. Early alert systems work well when they are effectively structured. However, too often, alerts are not generated until halfway through the semester or term.

This is not an early alert system but an early drop system. Instead, alerts should occur early and often, beginning in the third week of the semester and occurring routinely thereafter. And when an intervention occurs, faculty should be kept in the loop so that they know a student referred for assistance actually received support. Otherwise, faculty will be less likely to use the system, as they will be unsure about the utility of their efforts. ■

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