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EXCHANGE

The role of community college counselors as validating agents on men of color student success

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of counselors in providing validation for men of color in community colleges. Through protocol writing, 13 counselors from seven community colleges responded to open-ended questions asking them to reflect and describe strategies they employed when advising and counseling men of color. Thematic analysis using a combination of detailed, selective, and wholistic reading approaches, as described by van Manen (1990), was employed to identify themes reflecting different forms of validation. Findings from this study demonstrate the critical role of community college counselors as validating agents in affirming men of color as being capable of college success, helping them build confidence, affirming them as individuals, and providing opportunities for academic and personal development. Implications for practice are discussed.

Advancing student success among men of color in postsecondary education has continued to be a growing concern for scholars, researchers, and practitioners. Recently, several national reports underscored the importance of prioritizing efforts to enhance student success outcomes for men of color in community colleges (Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, Martin, & Castro, 2010; Harris & Wood, 2014; The Seven Centers Report, 2014; Wood & Harris, 2014a; Wood, Harris, & Mazyck, 2015). This increased attention stems from the disparate outcomes experienced by male students of color in community colleges (Harris & Wood, 2013; Wood, Palmer, & Harris, 2015). Although men of color are more likely to begin their postsecondary education in community colleges (Bush & Bush, 2010; Palacios, Wood, & Harris, 2015; Sáenz, Bukoski, Lu, & Rodriguez, 2013), they are less likely to persist towards completion of their educational goals (Harris & Wood, 2014; Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2014; Vasquez Urias, 2012). Only 17% of Latino and 15% of Black men will complete their educational goals (e.g., certificate, associate degree, or transfer to a 4-year university) within three years, while 27% of their White male counterparts will have completed their educational goals in the same timeframe (Wood, Harris, & Xiong, 2014). As such, these disparate outcomes have spawned scholarly inquiries focused on factors that influence successful outcomes for men of color in community colleges.

Prior research has noted the important role of validation from college faculty and staff (e.g., academic advisors, counselors) in facilitating student success for men of color (Wood et al., 2015). For example, Bauer (2014) examined the effect of faculty validation on faculty-student engagement among 289 Black male students attending community colleges. She found that students reported higher levels of engagement with faculty who communicated belief in their ability to complete college level coursework, and that they belong in college and can be successful there. In particular, these instances of validation

created conditions in which students felt comfortable in seeking help from faculty. This research highlights the critical role of faculty validation on faculty-student engagement, which has a direct influence on student success outcomes (e.g., persistence, degree attainment, transfer) for men of color in community colleges (Bush & Bush, 2010; Harris & Wood, 2013; Wood & Harris, 2014b). While some research on men of color has focused on the role of faculty as validating agents (Bauer, 2014; Wood & Turner, 2010; Wood, Harris, & White, 2015), few have specifically examined the role of college counselors as validating agents. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the role of counselors in providing validation for men of color in community colleges.

Theoretical framework

This study was guided by Rendón's (1994) Theory of Validation, which suggested that validation by in-class (e.g., faculty, teaching assistants) and out-of-class agents (e.g., counselors, advisors) can shape students' college experiences and influence successful academic outcomes. As noted by Rendón (1994), there are two forms of validation, academic and interpersonal validation, which occurs when in- and out-of-class agents provide support for students to build confidence in their ability to learn and opportunities for personal development and social adjustment. Rendón suggested that validation is a developmental process that should begin early in the collegiate experience and place the responsibility on the in-class and out-of-class agents to initiate and maintain contact with students. Thus, Rendón's (1994) Theory of Validation provides an appropriate framework to explore the different forms of validation provided by college counselors to foster student success among men of color in community colleges.

Methodology

Guided by a phenomenological research design, this study gathered insights from the perspectives of community college counselors who have provided advising and counseling to men of color (Crotty, 1998; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Criterion and snowball sampling techniques were employed to identify community college counselors who had more than five years of counseling experience, worked extensively with male students of color, and a successful track record of serving men of color (Patton, 2002). The sample included 13 counselors, seven males and six females, from seven community colleges throughout the state of California. Through a protocol writing process (Van Manen, 1990), participants responded to open-ended questions asking them to reflect and describe strategies they employed when advising and counseling men of color. Written responses were collected via a web-based survey. Thematic analysis using a combination of detailed, selective, and wholistic reading approaches, as described by Van Manen (1990), was employed to identify themes reflecting different forms of validation. To ensure trustworthiness of the study, the researchers engaged in peer debriefing with a faculty member who had expertise on men of color in community colleges. The researchers also triangulated data by cross-checking emergent themes among the researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Findings

Eight themes delineating elements of academic and interpersonal validation emerged from the analysis. The first five themes unpacked the elements of academic validation, which included: (a) affirming students' capability of academic success, (b) affirming students' voices, (c) validating students as equal contributors to the counseling experience, (d) providing proactive academic support, and (e) providing positive reinforcement of academic successes. The last three main themes unpacked the elements of interpersonal validation, which included: (a) affirming men of color as individuals, (b) establishing a caring counselor-student relationship, and (c) providing students with opportunities to connect with other validating agents.

Academic validation

Elements of academic validation emphasized the importance of affirming men of color as capable learners and assisting them to build confidence in themselves. Participants affirmed the importance of college, communicated their belief in the students' ability to excel in college, and demonstrated a strong commitment to their success. Participants also acknowledged students' voices and personal experiences as valuable and important to understanding the academic journey of their students and impact on the decision-making process of their educational goals. This was demonstrated by providing students with opportunities to share their experiences, listening to their stories, and validating students' experiences. Additionally, participants were proactive in providing academic support by reinforcing students' knowledge of available campus resources and benefits of their services, assigning homework (e.g., research majors and careers of interest, academic progress reports) that required follow-up counseling meetings, and initiated dialogue to clarify and ensure comprehension of items discussed. Furthermore, participants actively praised students for their academic successes (e.g., passing a difficult course, receiving an award) and reaffirmed students' capability of college success when they faced academic difficulties by providing encouragement, support, and appropriate counseling interventions.

Interpersonal validation

Elements of interpersonal validation emphasized affirming men of color as individuals and providing opportunities for them to develop personally and socially. Prior to engaging in any academic advising and counseling, initial efforts were dedicated to learning about the student as a person and understanding their background. During this process, participants underscored the importance of being genuine by appropriately disclosing their own personal academic journey of college challenges and successes. Participants also strived to make sure students felt welcomed, that they mattered, and that their presence on campus was valued. Participants noted that these efforts were important to develop rapport, gain trust and respect, establish credibility, communicate interest, and demonstrate care for the student as an individual. Additionally, participants often referred—and personally introduced—their male students of color to faculty and staff members who successfully navigated the higher education system, shared similar backgrounds to the students, and could relate to students' experiences. Participants shared that this exposure and level of engagement helped communicate to their male students of color the potential and possibility of being successful in college and obtaining professional careers.

Implications for practice

Findings from this study demonstrate the critical role of community college counselors as validating agents in affirming men of color as being capable of college success, helping them build confidence, affirming them as individuals, and providing opportunities for academic and personal development. These findings have important implications that may help all community college counselors in validating their male students of color. Counselors should be proactive in reaching out to male students of color, invest time to develop the counselor-student relationship, and maintain contact with them throughout their time at the college. Additionally, counselors should routinely and authentically communicate positive messages that affirm students' ability to do well academically, value their voices and experiences, and inform students that they are equal contributors to the mutual partnership of the counselor-student relationship. In doing so, these efforts can communicate to men of color that they matter, are valued, can be successful, and that counselors are committed to their development and success.

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