Chapter 9

Building Bridges: Using Life Lessons to Inform Our Work with Students

Mahauganee Dawn Shaw
Miami University, USA

Modinat A. Sanni
Miami University, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, research on the roles of mentoring and cultural nourishment within the institutional environment is used to contextualize the personal narratives of two Black women educators. The narratives come from the authors—women who were formally educated in predominantly White institutions and informally educated in a variety of African-centered community and family settings—and are used to highlight lessons gleaned from the authors’ experiences as women of color within predominantly White educational settings, both as students and employees. Examples are provided to reveal how those lessons now guide their current work interacting with and advocating for students of color in similar institutional settings.

Introduction

The builder lifted his old gray head;
“Good friend, in the path I have come,” he said,
“There followed after me to-day
A youth whose feet must pass this way.

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This chasm that has been as naught to me
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be;
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building this bridge for him!” (Dromgoole, 1900)

The excerpt above is from the poem *The Bridge Builder* written by William Allen Dromgoole. The full poem tells the story of a man who, after traversing a lonely, difficult path, begins to build a bridge that will make the pathway easier for those who come behind him. This chapter is about the process of building bridges to help students of color navigate their campuses and traverse the often confusing and difficult terrain of higher education.

Decades of research have found that students of color experience challenges while matriculating on the campuses of predominantly White institutions (e.g., Allen, 1992; Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002; Loo & Rolison, 1986). These challenges—whether academic, social, financial, personal, or otherwise—can often result in students stopping out of their collegiate pursuits, transferring institutions, or dropping out altogether. College student attrition has been previously linked to whether or not students feel as if they belong in the campus environment. A sense of belonging has been described as “the psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community” (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007, p. 804). Stated otherwise, if a student does not feel integrated into the campus community, or like their presence matters, that student is less likely to persist to graduation.

While a sense of belonging has been noted to be a basic human need, and thus important to all, it can play an integral role in the lives of college students and their decisions to participate, withdraw, persist, or drop out. In writing specifically about how the experience of belonging influences college students, Strayhorn (2012) writes:

*In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (i.e., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers). (Chapter 3, “Sense of Belonging Defined” Section, ¶ 4).*

The role that a sense of belonging plays in the lives of college students may be “particularly significant for students who are marginalized in college contexts such as women, racial and ethnic minorities, low-income students, first-generation students, and gay students, to name a few” (Strayhorn, 2012, Chapter 3, “Sense of Belonging Defined” Section, ¶ 4). In this chapter, we focus on the experiences of women of color on the campuses of predominantly White institutions (PWIs) of
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