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# The Time is Now!: Talking with Black Youth about College

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# The Time Is Now! Talking with African American Youth about College

Many scholars have written about the challenges that black students face gaining access to and succeeding in America's post-secondary educational system, and one of the widely discussed explanations centers on the challenges black students experience in negotiating disjunctions between their cultural identities and the expectations of mainstream educational institutions (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). (Note: We use the term *African American* to refer to youth discussed in this article who are Americans born of African descent while we use the term *black* to refer more broadly to people of the African Diaspora.)

As early as 1933, Carter G. Woodson, black educator and scholar, spoke to this challenge in his book *The Mis-education of the Negro,* stating, "So-called modern education, with all its defects, does others so much more good than it does the Negro" (p. xviii). Realizing the challenges that blacks would likely face reconciling school success with their cultural identities, Woodson established socially and culturally supportive spaces, such as *The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History* in 1915 and *Black History Week* in 1926, known today as *Black History Month* (Bennett, 1993). These efforts were part of his more comprehensive vision to ensure that all blacks understood the value of and received a high-quality education.

Educational opportunities for black middle school, high school, and college students have greatly improved since Woodson's time, yet more work needs to be done. For example, high school graduation rates for public school in the United States indicate that students from historically disadvantaged minority groups (American Indian, Latino, Black) have little more than a fifty-fifty chance of finishing high school with a diploma while graduation rates for White and Asian students are 75 and 77 percent (Swanson, 2004). We view this persistent problem as a call to action for us as middle school and secondary educators working with black students. We—Stephanie, an African American university professor and former high school English teacher; James, a European American university professor and former middle school teacher; and Kafi, an African American doctoral student and former high school English teacher and librarian—have come to realize the importance of providing black youth, especially middle school students, with opportunities to engage in serious conversations and investigations about postsecondary education and, more specifically, about how to succeed in college. Postponing these conversations to the latter stages of high school is too late. Put simply, the time is now.

This article explores our work with African American youth in an after-school community literacy program. We examine how a group of these students used a set of Internet-based technology tools to evaluate whether or not a group of colleges would affirm their cultural identity and help them succeed if they attended these institutions. What we learned from the students has caused us to rethink the relationships between college exploration, access, cultural identity, and students' potential academic success.

## Cultural (Dis)Connections and Perceptions of College

Hurtado & Carter (1997), in their study of first- and second-year Latino college students' transitions to college, contend that in order to understand the achievement of ethnically diverse students who have been historically excluded from education, it is essential to consider issues of school belonging. Booker (2006) amplifies this point in her review of school belonging with African American middle and high school students. Booker found that despite the varying operational definitions scholars have used for school belonging, "When belonging involves student perception of teacher support, encouragement, and warmth, achievement is directly and significantly related" (p. 2). In a study of black high school students' perceptions about attending college, Freeman (1998) found that the students emphasized the importance of social and cultural support systems and networks. The students suggested that having culturally sensitive and supportive teachers, counselors, and curricula were all factors that influenced whether they or their peers pursued higher education. Similarly, Galien & Peterson (2005) identified the "cultural dissonance," including feelings of isolation and being misunderstood, that black college students experience because curricula, communication styles, and classroom environments do not reflect their culture.

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This research indicates that high school and college students of color recognize the strong relationship between culturally sensitive learning contexts in college and their academic success. It also sets the stage for us to consider what happened when we provided black youth with opportunities to discuss ways in which prospective colleges and universities may or may not affirm their cultural knowledge and experiences and provide them with a sense of belonging. What we found reminds us that at its center, educational advancement must be about affirming and mobilizing the cultural identities, resources, and knowledge of students (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2002).

## Community Literacy Intervention Program (CLIP)

The Community Literacy Intervention Program (CLIP) is an after-school pre-college program that Stephanie designed to provide academic support for black youth while affirming their cultural and linguistic resources and knowledge. Begun in fall 2005, CLIP is an intensive reading and writing program in which 10–15 black middle and high school students meet twice a week for 1–2 hours. Because one main goal of CLIP is to nurture the literacy resources (e.g., rap, poetry, journaling, etc.) of black youth in the community as a way of helping them improve their academic achievement and preparation for college, the program includes tutoring and SAT coaching and practice. Kafi joined CLIP in January 2006 to help facilitate program goals. During spring 2006, the youth involved in CLIP also created a literary magazine, *The Voice*, which was inspired by their own experiences growing up in the community. They also sponsored a community reading of their original writings at the public library.

Following the release of the literary magazine and community reading performance, the rest of the program shifted to an intensive focus on the challenges for students of color of matriculating into and succeeding in college. The majority of the youth (roughly 85%) in the program would be first-generation college students, and although all expressed an intention to attend college, they did not have a full context for how they might make it there and be successful. This led us to two guiding questions: *What is college? And how do I get there?* The students were assigned to complete a "college portfolio," which included creating a plan for college, completing SAT preparation exercises, and participating in technology sessions using an

Internet-based tool called the *Critical Web Reader*. The successful completion of the portfolio would then serve as their "ticket" for a bus tour of several historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the southeastern United States. Our emphasis in this article lies with one component of the portfolio—the evaluation of college websites with the *Critical Web Reader*, an innovative curricular extension to CLIP.

## Critical Web Reader (CWR)

The Critical Web Reader is a set of Web-based literacy and technology tools that guide teachers and students to engage strategically with Web-based texts (cwr.indiana.edu). Designed by James Damico and several of his colleagues, the CWR is part of a collaborative project between classroom teachers and university faculty, and includes four primary lenses that guide readers in examining different websites and varied texts within a website (Damico & Baildon, 2007; Damico, Baildon, & Campano, 2005). Each lens takes a website and places it within a frame. Alongside this framed website are guiding questions, models, and suggestions that readers can use as scaffolds as they engage with the website. Drawing upon Bill Green's "three dimensions" model of literacy (Durrant & Green, 2001; Green, 1988), the four primary lenses are:

- a *descriptive lens* that guides readers to discern the reliability and relevance of a site;
- an *academic lens* that guides readers to examine claims and evidence on a site;
- a *critical lens* that guides readers to evaluate how the authors/creators of a site attempt to influence them;
- a *reflexive lens* that guides readers to examine how their own beliefs, values, and experiences affect their reading.

The CWR also includes a writing tool where students record and save all their work with each website (i.e., their analyses, interpretations, and questions).

When the three of us met to discuss how these four lenses could be used to help the CLIP students investigate college websites, we realized that these lenses provided a frame for Web reading in general, and that we needed to modify them to align more directly with a primary goal of CLIP—for students to develop further as critical readers and writers of color by evaluating how a set of colleges support (or do not support) them to succeed in higher education. More specifically, we wanted to modify the CWR to help structure a conversation where black students could insert their own cultural knowledge and resources into the conversation, using their experiences as a filter for examining various college websites.

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Because we believed the students needed to become more aware of entrance requirements, one lens addressed questions about admissions requirements (e.g., What SAT scores, high school transcripts, and entrance essays are required as part of the application?) and financial support (How much does the school cost? What scholarships, grants, loans, work-study programs are available?). A second lens emphasized issues of academic support (e.g., Are there tutoring programs and mentoring for students of color?) and community resources (e.g., Is there a black cultural center, cultural events/programs, fraternities and sororities, and religious communities?). A third lens asked students to investigate the claims the college makes about supporting students of color and to evaluate the evidence used to support these claims (e.g., How are facts, statistics, images, quotes, and testimonials used?). A fourth lens focused on identifying included and omitted perspectives as well as techniques the college uses to influence them, such as images and slogans (e.g., Indiana University's "IU Is Red Hot"). A culminating lens asked students to make a preliminary decision about attending

the college. This involved considering how their own experiences, opinions, and feelings, along with their background and culture, influenced the decision.

Equipped with these five lenses, we chose ten college websites for the students to investigate. We started by surveying students about schools they were interested in, and then added to the list as needed to encompass historically black colleges/universities, large public universities located in geographically diverse areas in the United States, an Ivy institution, and a community college. The students used the Critical Web Reader in a computer lab at the university during six sessions of 40–60 minutes. Scheduling challenges whittled attendance during each session to 6–10 students. Students worked individually on the computers, but we encouraged them to share and discuss ideas. This occurred in organic ways, which reflected the collaborative design of the project. For example, they would lean over to a neighboring student and often share ideas like, "This site doesn't have any real information about financial aid" or "I just found the GPA we would need to get into this school. Let me show you where it is [on the website]."

**We, as educators, also brought our own values and a corresponding set of assumptions to this Web reading activity. While the students focused on college social life, we zeroed in on academics.**

The inaugural session with the CWR included a brief orientation to the technology tools and a description of how the students' work with the CWR was an integral part of constructing their college portfolio, as Stephanie shared at the beginning of this session:

> What we are about to do is really important. This summer we are going to participate in a tour of some black colleges, and I want you to use this time and this technology tool to investigate what HBCUs and other colleges have to offer you. In CLIP, we have been focusing on our futures, our education, and possible careers, and here's another important opportunity for you to be informed, critical thinkers and consumers about college.

We invited the students to begin evaluating the colleges by selecting one from the list. Without any prompting from us, all six students selected the same HBCU to begin their investigations. After two sessions with this school, we asked all students to use the next two sessions to examine a different HBCU school that we selected—one they would be visiting on their summer college bus tour. During the last two sessions, we asked students to investigate non-HBCU colleges of their own choosing. As the students worked throughout the project, they recorded their ideas with the CWR's "reader notes" tool. The project concluded when Stephanie led a whole-group debriefing discussion on the last day of the project.

## Social Life Matters Most

As the students investigated the first HBCU website during our first session, they commented on how the website highlighted images of students in academic situations, but it had very few images of students participating in social and/or cultural endeavors (e.g., bands, choirs, sororities and fraternities, athletic teams). For example, Hannah noted about one college, "They don't have what I want and it seems boring. It shows that there is no other activity outside the classroom." This general pattern of student responses continued as they investigated the next college website, another HBCU. Although students found this second site easier to navigate, they remained surprised and frustrated about the low visibility of social and cultural events, offering comments like: "All they show is students in classrooms. What about the band? What about singing groups?" It seemed to be clear to us that what the students most valued about a college was its social life. Another student, Shay, pointed out in a written response: "They really didn't have nothing on the fraternities/sororities and cultural events/programs or the religious community stuff. I looked and didn't find anything."

We, as educators, also brought our own values and a corresponding set of assumptions to this Web reading activity. While the students focused on college social life, we zeroed in on academics. Consider this example: As Shay explored the sec-

ond HBCU website for information about sorority life, Stephanie interrupted her and said, "Okay, that's enough about sororities. Now it's time to get back on task. Come on, Shay. Time to look at the website." Vocalizing what the three of us were thinking, Stephanie communicated clearly a view that being concerned with sorority life was unhelpful and inappropriate "off-task" behavior. She made it clear that for us, a focus on sororities and social life was, at best, subordinate to and, at worst, irrelevant to more "important" matters—i.e., academic issues and concerns, such as investigating what SAT scores, high school coursework, and GPA the college required for prospective students. We were working from two related assumptions as instructors: 1) middle and high school kids needed to be most concerned about their future academic performance, and 2) being preoccupied with social life issues could endanger their potential academic success. Thus, it seemed that we and the students were positioned at opposing ends of a continuum—the students' emphasis on the social, our emphasis on traditional academic concerns. But did we really have conflicting values and views about attending and succeeding in college?

This became a central question for us as the students forged ahead with the websites. And, as students continued stressing the social aspects of the colleges, it became clearer to us that their interpretations and readings of the HBCU websites were informed by knowledge garnered from their family members and friends as well as from popular culture artifacts. For example, it is likely that our students came to us having watched films like *Higher Learning* (1995), which centers around issues of race on the college campus, and *Drumline* (2002), which features the black college band experience (reviews of these movies can be found at http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0113305/ and http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0303933/). Consequently, many of the students assumed that black cultural and social events would be highly visible on these websites; they had deduced that cultural activities (e.g., the band, choral ensembles, Greek organizations, etc.) were central to the historically black college experience. Shay, for example, described how she wanted to be a "Delta" (member of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority) just like her mother and sister. Shay went on to talk about the marching band at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU), an HBCU. With comments like "they have a sweet band," she spoke excitedly about FAMU and the social events it had to offer her as an African American student. Shay also added that she did not want to attend a predominately white institution because "they don't have majorettes in their band."

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While the students accessing their knowledge and understandings about an HBCU were significant, even more important was the link the students began to make between an active social life and academic success in college. More specifically, the students discussed social events as opportunities and spaces that affirmed their cultural identities as black students. For example, they described, how bands, choral groups, and Greek organizations existed as social networks—indispensable support systems to ensure that they would succeed in college. For them, campus social life was entwined with academic experiences. Theresa, another student in the program, illustrated this link by noting that for her to succeed in college, she needed to be in a place that valued and affirmed her identity as a young black woman. She stated, "If I don't see a place that is going to support me socially, I'm not going there because I won't do well in my classes." Theresa also noted that she was not worried about the academic expectations of a college because she believed that she could do well with courses and grades, etc., as long as she had a social support system—as long as she felt part of a black community. The prospect of not having a support system left Theresa thinking that her academic success as well as her cultural identity would be in jeopardy.

As their work progressed with the Critical Web Reader activity, students (led by Shay and Theresa) continued to discuss their needs as potential black college students, citing goals to find a college with a significant number of black teachers and well-developed social groups and networks (e.g., fraternities and sororities). When Sandra, for example, examined a large predominately white university, she noted: "There really isn't anything about people of color that jumps out at you. You have to go and play detective." For some of the students, this necessitated attending an HBCU; for others, like Theresa, it meant being confident that they could find that support at a predominately White institution.

It also bears noting that the students' discussions about the social aspects of college also included more traditional academic concerns. They were eager to know what SAT scores and high school grades were needed to matriculate into a college, and some students used their own career aspirations to be doctors, nurses, or lawyers as lenses to view the sites. For example, with ambitions to be a nurse, Theresa evaluated the nursing programs of each website. This helped us realize that the students' values and views about attending college were not so distinct from ours. The students were invested in their academic performance, and we wanted them to be affirmed and supported culturally and socially. What was different was how we each entered into the conversation. Instead of discussing academics first as we (their instructors) did, the students entered the conversation about college searching for social spaces (e.g., black Greek organizations, choral ensembles, bands, etc.) that might affirm their black cultural identities.

## Concluding Thoughts

There are at least two sets of implications from this work: one set deals with technology, while another deals with how teachers might create spaces within their curriculum to help students make connections to college. With technology, we found that Web-based tools in particular can guide both teachers and students to thoughtfully examine what it takes to matriculate into and succeed in college. This includes guidance in grappling with practical issues (e.g., GPA requirements, SAT score expectations, financial aid opportunities, etc.) and more conceptual concerns (e.g., considering how a website uses slogans, cliches, images, etc. as techniques to influence visitors). Tools like the Critical Web Reader also afford opportunities for historically underserved and underrepresented groups of students, such as the group of African American youth in CLIP, to investigate the ways a college or university might affirm their cultural knowledge and experiences and support them to succeed. Through this process, students can cultivate Web reading skills as they become more critical consumers about colleges' differing expectations, opportunities, and experiences.

Another set of implications deals with the ways teachers might find or create curricular spaces to support students in thinking about college. For example, when students study other people's lives (e.g., while reading biographies, studying history, discussing current events, etc.), invite them to include an emphasis on educational background—where the person went to college, what kind of academic institution it was or is, what she or he studied, etc.; if the person did not attend college, students could speculate what the person would have studied in a university setting. Adopting an inquiry approach with these issues could also promote comparative analyses across time and place about the relationship between educational attainment (i.e., college and advanced degrees) and lifelong earning potential.

Our work with middle school students on this project began to show us the significant role that educators can play in providing opportunities for youth, especially historically underserved youth of color, to think critically about college as early as possible in their academic careers. Although more serious conversations about college typically begin in high school, we believe providing structured opportunities for youth to talk about college needs to begin in middle school, if not earlier. These opportunities must also build from the understanding that affirming and mobilizing students'

cultural resources and knowledge is central to how youth can enter this conversation and how they perceive their own educational success and advancement in college. We also learned that if we as educators are to affirm and mobilize students' cultural resources and engage them in critical conversations about college, it is necessary for us to reflect on and critique our own assumptions about *how* we think students should engage in these conversations. This includes the need to view academic and social life in college as integrated and mutually reinforcing, rather than as segmented and opposing; we must also embrace and create pathways with our students for meaningful inquiry and dialogue about college.

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