

Man Up! African American Male Professors’ Program to Enhance the Success and Retention of African American Male Students

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Introduction and Background

National attention has focused on the low participation and retention rates of African American males in higher education. Student affairs administrators have launched creative initiatives throughout the nation to address this problem. Nevertheless, it has become clear that faculty and administrators in academic affairs must also “own” this problem. Man Up! is an innovative, academic response to promote the success and retention of African American male students at Prairie State College. Prairie State is a majority-minority college deeply defined by diversity. Fifty percent of our students are African American and 14% are Hispanic. Our campus and classrooms are a microcosm of the world in which our students live and work, and we try hard to teach students the multicultural competence they will need.

In many ways, we believe we “do diversity right.” Nevertheless, we are still experiencing the national phenomenon of high failure and dropout rates among African American male students. In recent years, our colleagues in student affairs have tried a number of strategies to enhance the success of black male students. Among those is our Protégé Program, which provides them with mentoring from our own staff and professionals in the community. Yet this lack of success is so pervasive that student affairs professionals cannot solve it alone, nor can White administrators turn this problem over to their minority colleagues to “fix.” The Vice President of Academic Affairs at Prairie State, self-described as an “old white lady,” decided something else needed to be done to address this issue. Reflecting back on what had improved the status of women in the last thirty years, she concluded that it was women themselves who had mobilized to open the doors to higher education and provide the support they needed to succeed. So how could this model be replicated for African American men?

Initiative Design and Purpose

In September 2007, the Vice President of Academic Affairs called together four African American male professors from different disciplines and presented them with the following challenges: 1) become the campus experts on the problems plaguing African American male students and on the best practices for their success and retention; and 2) design and teach a college success seminar to begin the college acculturation process for Black males. With the promise of support from the vice president, the four professors (one each in English, communication, psychology, and sociology) eagerly accepted the challenge.

To jump start the project, the college sent the four professors to the “Black, Brown and College Bound” conference, hosted by Hillsborough Community College. There they began their research, attending as many sessions as they could to learn what was being done at other community colleges to address this problem. At the All-College Convocation in January 2008, the new “African American Male Team” presented a panel discussion on what they had learned at the conference. Viewed as our campus experts, other faculty and staff now engage them with both their problems and their suggestions on this topic.

In spring 2008, the professors were each released from one course to form their own Faculty Learning Community (FLC), a vehicle often used to bring