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Michael J. Cuyjet and Associates: African American Men in College (Josey Bass 2006)

Reviewed by Jacqueline Rhodes

Since the doors of Harvard open in 1636 to the recent passing of Michigan's Proposal 2, the state's version of California's prop 209, the institution of higher education has been informed and reformed by society's tension surrounding race and gender. With the exception of Oberlin and Antioch, African Americans were denied access to higher education in the United States before the Civil War. Historians of Black education estimate that during the first 230 years of American higher education (1636-1866), the nations' colleges and universities graduated a total of from fifteen to twenty eight African American students (Sollors, Titcomb, and Underwood 1993) And while we know the unanimous Supreme Court decision of *Brown v Board of Education* in 1954 ended de jour school segregation the country continues to struggle in 2006 to build an educational system that works for all citizens. Indeed, the very questions posed by the founding fathers of educational philosophy; access to education, curriculum and pedagogy, continue to plague us today.

What is the purpose of college and more importantly, for which citizens is it designed? While there may be some debate on what college is for, it is clear, that higher education was not designed with the African American in mind. After the Civil War, many progressive southern Whites supported the notion of education but proposed a special form and content of "Negro Education," a curriculum designed to meet their perception of the peculiar aptitudes and needs of a "race" of manual laborers. If African American, like Whites, were to be educated at public expense, southern White public officials all but universally held that education for African Americans be separate and subordinate (Anderson, 1988, 79-109). African American religious organizations and White, northern missionary societies persevered to create educational opportunities for African American men and women, Significant gains in college admission and graduation were enjoyed due to the protest and sacrifice of students in the sixties.

Decades after the educational gains of the Civil Rights Movement, African American men seem to be losing ground in the battle to attain a college degree. African American women outnumber African American men two to one on college and university campuses. Clarence Page of the *Chicago Tribune*, wrote, "There are now more black men behind bars in America than in its colleges and universities." (*Chicago Tribune* 2002). *African American Men in College* does not aim to support Page's conclusion but does present an analysis of the most current data on the declining number of African American male students in higher education. The contributing authors of *African American Men in College* focus their attention on the crisis in higher education as it relates to the male student's social, cultural and academic adjustment to campus life.

However, the book is careful not to take the Bill Cosby approach to discussing the plight of African American men. According to Hrabowski, Maton, and Greif (1998), “Almost everything we read and hear about young Black males focuses on the problems and not the promises” (pg 24). *African American Men in College* focuses on the institution and its responsibility to consider the unique needs of African American men.

This book, a lengthy read at 345 pages, is written with the Student Development practitioner in mind. It is divided into two main sections, containing twenty one chapters total. The first section, Part One: Issues and Ideas, addresses some of the most pressing issues facing colleges and universities. Cuyjet and Associates tackle the Academic Climate, Campus Activities, Spirituality and Religion, Sexuality, Athletic, Fraternities and Matriculation. Part Two: Profiles of Some Successful Programs, highlights nine programs deemed successful by the contributing authors. These programs are easily adaptable and can be replicate at institutions of all sizes. The editor wisely provides a thorough synopsis of each chapter in the preface of the book and an extensive subject index at the conclusion.

What I found most refreshing about the text book – and yes, I think it should be used in our graduate programs - is its inclusion of the African American male student voice. Imagine, actual students talking about issues pertaining to students. Encouraging! At predominantly white Christian institutions we must be careful to consider the student perspectives as we shape programs and policies aimed to function on their behalf, lest we fall into a familiar pattern of paternalism. Notice I say “consider “their voice, not rely upon it to the point of over taxation. This book is not written by a group of scholars tucked away in a think tank waxing eloquently on matters only researched. The advice is given by college student personnel professionals and faculty on the frontline with student everyday. Equally impressive is the breathed of professional expertise represented by the contributors. The volume represents a spirit of collaboration which breaks down the traditional tension between faculty and administration. There is a sense from this book that the success of students – all student- occurs when education is seamless. The contributing writers who serve as faculty confirm the notion that there are some on the “in classroom” side of the educational enterprise who value the contribution of those who teach outside of the classroom.

Cuyjet looks at three institutional types, historically Black colleges and universities, predominately white institutions and community colleges. Although he considers the matter of spirituality and religion, the Christian college experience is not included in the dialogue. Interestingly, many African American male students site their faith as their primary source of motivation. It seems to reason that faith-based institutions would attract Black men of faith at a higher percentage. Armed with this knowledge CCCU institutions should find renewed vigor for connecting and recruiting male students. But do not expect to find recruitment strategies in *African American Men*. The book is solely dedicated to helping institutions retain current students.

The text is replete with current statistics on attrition and matriculation. It does an excellent job painting the current picture of male students; their struggles, their strength, their successes. A comparison of the Institutional Environment on HBCUs and PWI found in chapter two is numbing. In my opinion, the environmental conditions experienced on a PWI campus are intensified when the campus is PWI and Christian. Add to the feelings of social isolation, low academic expectations and minimal faculty of color mentors, a different denominational world view, unfamiliar worship music and students who have never interacted with people outside of their homogenous community. Now you have a sense of life as a student of color at your campus.

To gain a broader, more in-depth perspective I suggest coupling this book with the *Racial Crisis in American Higher Education: Continuing Challenges for the Twenty-first Century*, Smith, Altbach, Lomotey. The *Racial Crisis* provides an analysis of the political and social underpinnings which have shaped educational policy and practices. While *African American Men* deal with the student's current predicament, the *Racial Crisis* helps uncover the institutional racism which has plagued the educational system since its inception. After reading *African American Men in College* I realized that the concepts and strategies introduced are standard practice for most colleges and universities. It is par for the course to offer mentorship programs, student organizations and leadership opportunities for students. The main benefit of reading this book is to add a new dimension, a different perspective to the quality campus programs being rendered. If we seek to improve the campus climate for African American male students on campus, we must strive to remove the institutional racism and individual prejudice that impede their success. By doing so, we improve the campus climate for *all* students.