

ONE INITIATIVE AT A TIME: A LOOK AT EMERGING AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE PROGRAMS IN THE CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

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OVERVIEW

The authors draw upon the African proverb: "How Do You Eat an Elephant?" One Bite at a Time to couch emerging practices and programs connected to and within California community colleges that are specifically designed to counter historical and topical institutional neglect and exclusion one initiative at a time. To this end, we discuss the Umoja Community, Men of Ujima Manhood Development Program, and the African American Male Educational Network and Development (A²MEND) organization.

The authors maintain that the study of Black men in general is in need of its own theoretical framework that can articulate their position and trajectory in the world drawing on and accounting for their pre- and post-enslavement experiences while capturing their spiritual, psychological, social, educational

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development and station. Thus, we first build upon critical race theory (CRT) and African-centered theory to construct an emergent conceptual approach that more accurately articulates the experiences of African American men in community colleges and that both explains the existence of the aforementioned independent educational programs and organizations and provides the framework to produce and maintain additional self-determined spaces. Beyond theory and research, however, the authors call community college educators to a personal accountability and action to create spaces, initiatives, programs, organizations, and institutions based on the conceptual framework outlined in this current chapter.

The authors are well aware of the critical and perhaps more axiomatic points along the educational pipeline for African American males with respect to the challenges they face in attending and graduating from 4-year institutions. For example, there is the *fourth grade slump*, which describes the phenomenon where African American boys tend to be fully engaged in the schooling process and doing well academically up until the fourth grade; there, we find a significant drop off in engagement and academic performance (Chall & Jacobs, 2003; Kunjufu, 1985; Sweet & Snow, 2003). Also there is the Algebra course conundrum, which is increasingly a requirement in middle school and is known as the gatekeeper course in determining who gets funneled to a college preparatory tract in high school (Moses & Cobb, 2002). Last, there is the high school *dropout/push-out rate* that is consistently near 50% in most urban areas for African American boys (Berliner, Barrat, Fong, & Shirk, 2008; Orfield, 2004). Though a long way from a solution, each of these vital challenges along the educational trajectory of African American males have received some noteworthy attention from both scholars and practitioners.

Notwithstanding the significance of the aforementioned challenges, we contend that a very important juncture of the pipeline – the position of African American men in community colleges – has been understudied and under theorized by scholars and overlooked and ignored by those educators, reformers, and policy makers working in and near the community college system. The data showing the disproportional number of African American men attending community colleges compared to other ethnic and racial groups, particularly in California, and their underachievement (Foster, 2008) has been persistent and in plain view (California Postsecondary Education Commission of 2002, 2006). Chiefly because of racism and a lack of institutional accountability (Bush & Bush, 2004, 2005), this issue is likened by the authors to a large elephant in an infinitesimal room that no one appears to see or has the wherewithal to engage.

The situation facing African American males at any segment on the educational pipeline, in addition to a host of social challenges that they are confronted with, which have been well-documented in the body of literature since the mid-1980s (Akbar, 1991; Bush, 1999; Holland, 1991; Gibbs, 1984, 1988; Kunjufu, 1985, 2001; Madhubuti, 1991), may be best described as *elephantine*. In the face of such a daunting perspective, the authors draw upon the African proverb: “How Do You Eat an Elephant? One Bite at a Time” to couch emerging practices and programs connected to and within California community colleges that are specifically designed to counter institutional neglect one initiative at a time. To this end, the authors will discuss the following initiatives, programs, and organizations: the Umoja Community, Men of Ujima Manhood Development Program, and The A²MEND. However, we will first situate and frame their existence and approach conceptually and theoretically.

CONCEPTUAL APPROACH AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Nora and Cabrera (1996) opined that upon review of extensive research, there were no theoretically based studies focusing on African American male community college students. On the surface their position speaks to the paucity of studies concerning African American men enrolled in community colleges (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2001; Hood, 1990). However, we view their statement from a broader perspective and suggest that the study of Black men in general is in need of its own theoretical framework that can articulate their position and trajectory in the world drawing on and accounting for their pre- and post-enslavement experiences while capturing their spiritual, psychological, social, educational development and station. In light of this, like many studies concerning African American boys and men (Donnor, 2005; Duncan, 2002; Lynn, 2006; Singer, 2005; Stinson, 2008) we employ CRT but maintained that it is concomitantly necessary and insufficient. Thus, CRT and the forthcoming programs/initiatives/organizations to be discussed must be situated on a historical continuum and within an African-centered paradigm.

CRT has its genesis in the legal scholarship and discourse (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1995; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995); though, we see the works of such scholars like Woodson (1933/1990) and Du Bois (1903/1969) as having great impact on its theoretical origins. In short,

critical race theorists posit that race and racism are entrenched in every aspect, apparatus, foundation, structure, and function of society mediating both individual and institutional consciousness, policy, and practice. Positioning research, programs, policy, and institutions from this perspective allows one to:

- (a) foreground race and racism in the curriculum;
- (b) challenge the traditional paradigms, methods, texts, and separate discourse on race, gender, and class by showing how these social constructs intersect to affect communities of color;
- (c) focus on the racialized and gendered experiences of communities of color;
- (d) offer a liberatory and transformative method when examining racial, gender, and class discrimination; and
- (e) use the trans-disciplinary knowledge and methodological base of ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, and the law to better understand the various forms of discrimination (Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002, pp. 68–69).

The under achievement of African American males in community colleges as well as the justification for creating specialized and targeted programs to address the situation can be explained from a CRT perspective. However, racism and oppressive conditions only provide a partial explanation for the existence of such programs, initiatives, and organizations. Conceptually, these educational efforts to be discussed in this current paper and others like them must be placed on a historical continuum of efforts that sought viable educational opportunities for African Americans since their enslavement in the United States.

As early as 1790 Africans in America had created alternative and independent ways to school themselves creating initiatives, programs, organizations, schools, and institutions during a time when learning to read was a crime punishable by death (see Cornelius, 1991; Douglass, 1968). There were several reasons: lack of access to public schools, the threat of racism in the form of miseducation (i.e., CRT), and a belief that they were responsible for their own education (Anderson, 1988; Bush, 1997; Hoover, 1992; Woodson, 1933, 1990). Building on this independent schooling tradition and the Black Studies movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which was triggered on college campuses by the Black Power, Civil Rights, and Pan African movements (T'Shaka, 1989), there has been a recent emergence of public schools designed to focus on African American students: African-centered public schools, African American immersion schools, and Black

male academies, learning communities, cohorts, and programs in both K-12 and higher educational settings.

Currently, the predominate arguments in the body of literature used to explain the existence of such self-determined spaces and the African American zeal for education positions them as a quest for freedom (Anderson, 1988; Cecelski, 1994; Perry, 2003; Walker, 1996, 2000, 2001) and as a response to White cultural hegemony and racism (Bush, 2004; Mitchell, Bush, & Bush, 2002; T'Shaka, 1989). This critical race paradigm suggests that the existence of Black initiatives, programs, organizations, schools, and institutions in the America is dependent on oppression as the stimulus. We contend these explanations are plausible yet myopic.

Bush, Bush, and Causey-Bush (2006) asserted that African people, though enslaved, arrived in the Americas with a highly sophisticated and well-developed disposition, philosophy, and practice with respect to education. They point to their establishment of universities, age-grade system, apprenticeships, secret societies, and rites-of-passages for over a period of 10,000 years (see Barashango, 1991; deGraft-Johnson, 1966; Frankfurter, 1998; Van Sertima, 1989; Williams, 1987) as evidence to support their contention of a continuity of African values concerning the importance of education and their propensity to construct and maintain independent educational institutions and spaces irrespective of racism, oppression, and enslavement.

The third prong of the emerging conceptual approach is African-centered theory and practice that provides the foundation, focal point, and direction for the current educational movement in the California community colleges. African-centered theory (Asante, 1980/2003, 1990, 1991, 1993; Asante & Mazama, 2005; Mazama, 2001; Sefa Dei, 1994, 2006) is not a reactionary response to European hegemony. Instead, it positions Africans as subjects rather than as objects of European experiences by utilizing an African-centered worldview. Organizations and individuals with an African-centered worldview, among other things, understand that what is spiritual is material and vice versa; everything is interrelated and interdependent, living in harmony with nature, the individual does not exist without a community including nature, spirit, and ancestors, and cooperation is valued over competition and control (Hilliard, 1998; Jackson & Sears, 1992; Karenga, 1980).

In summary, our conceptual approach is as follows:

- (a) mainstream educational institutions in the United States are inherently racist;

- (b) the overrepresentation and pervasive school underachievement of African American men in Community College may be understood by using CRT;
- (c) independent educational movements and spaces located in community colleges are a continuation of a fight for freedom as well as an extension of educational and schooling practices and institutions that began over 10,000 years ago; and
- (d) programs, initiatives, and organizations focusing on African American males in the community college system should be constructed and maintained by employing an African-centered worldview and paradigm.

THE UMOJA COMMUNITY

The Umoja Movement is a statewide grassroots organization in the state of California comprised of faculty, staff, and administrators. The Umoja Movement began in October 2006 at Diablo Valley College when concerned faculty members met to discuss how they can utilize their collective knowledge and experience in working with African American students to improve the academic success of African American students throughout the state. As result of this meeting, a statewide steering committee was formed, which set the groundwork for future Umoja conferences and activities. As of fall 2008 the Umoja Movement had 22 colleges/districts who are members of the Umoja Movement Consortium. The Umoja Movement is a groundbreaking organization in the California Community College System because it is the first organized statewide effort to address specifically the educational needs of African American students. What is also unique about the Umoja movement is that it is a self-empowered organization that is not beholden to any particular institution. The Umoja Movement operates under the courageous premise "that we don't need to ask permission to do what is best for African students." The mission of the Umoja moment is the following:

Umoja, (a Kiswahili word meaning unity) is a community and critical resource dedicated to enhancing the cultural and educational experiences of African American and other students. We believe that when the voices and histories of students are deliberately and intentionally recognized, the opportunity for self-efficacy emerges and a foundation is formed for academic success. Umoja actively serves and promotes student success for all students through a curriculum and pedagogy responsive to the legacy of the African and African American Diasporas. (Umoja Community, 2007, p. 1)

While the Umoja movement is not solely focused on the academic success of African American males, their mission, programs, and services have a

direct implication of the success of all African American students, particularly African American males. The Umoja Movement as elucidated in their mission looks at the education of the African American students holistically and seeks to address not only students individually, but also engages the institutions itself by examining systemic barriers that exist within the college. Toward this end, the Umoja Movement examined the best practices that existed in the California Community system in educating African American students and synthesized this information to create a model program that can be replicated by colleges who are interested in targeting the success of African American students. The Umoja Movement model consists of four components, which are:

Instructional Component:

- Learning Community/Learning Cohorts
- College Guidance Courses
- English Reading and Writing Courses
- Mathematics Courses
- Library Information Literacy Courses
- African/African American-Centered Courses

Support Services Component:

- Matriculation
- Financial Aid/Scholarships
- Academic Support
- Cultural Activities
- Mentoring
- Counseling Services
- Workshops
- Incentives
- Student Club/Organization

Organizational Component:

- Mission Statement
- Organizing Principles
- Promising Practices
- Core Beliefs, Values, Habits of Mind
- Educational Philosophy
- Pedagogical Practices
- Outreach/Recruitment Strategies
- Training – annual cycle

- Funding Strategies
- Educational Resource Management Strategy
- Steering Committee (Council of Elders) (statewide and local)
- Advisory Board (statewide and local)
- Mentor Council (statewide and local)
- Transfer Agreements with Historically Black CUs, CSUs, and UCs
- Central Office with Director and staff
- Umoja Day – student leadership conference

Administrative Component:

- Budget (based on formulas)
- Staffing (based on formulas)
- Coordination Duties
- Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with participating college
- Inquiry Model
- Research
- Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) and Assessment
- Cost per Full Time Equivalent Student (FTES)
- Mentor Guidelines

The Umoja Moment is guided by a profound philosophy that encapsulates the level of commitment to culture, education, and care that is paramount to any program designed to improve the academic and social success of African American male students. The following educational philosophy of the Umoja Moment can serve as the foundation for future organizations desiring to engage African American male students in higher education.

Umoja is a community of educators and learners committed to the academic success, personal growth, and self-actualization of African American and other students. The Umoja Community seeks to educate the whole student – body, mind, and spirit. Informed by an ethic of love and its vital power, the Umoja Community will deliberately engage students as full participants in the construction of knowledge and critical thought. The Umoja Community seeks to help students experience themselves as valuable and worthy of an education.

The Umoja Community gains meaning through its connection to Africa Diaspora. African and African American cultural and spiritual gifts inform Umoja Community values and practices. The Umoja Community seeks to nurture knowledge of and pride in this reality. The learning experience within the Umoja Community will provide each individual the opportunity to add their voice and their story to the collective voices and stories of the African Diaspora.

African American students are integrally and inextricably connected to global struggles for liberation throughout the African Diaspora. In light of this, the Umoja Community views education as a liberatory act designed to empower all students to critique, engage, and transform deleterious social and institutional practices locally and globally. The Umoja Community will practice and foster civic engagement so that all its participants integrate learning and service. Likewise, the Umoja Community will instill in our students the knowledge and skills necessary to enable them to make positive differences in their lives and the lives of others (Umoja Community, 2007, p. 2).

MEN OF UJIMA MANHOOD DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The Men of Ujima Manhood Development Program, on the campus of Riverside City College, was birthed as a result of the observed struggles, which threatened the success of the African American young men. The consequences of the previously discussed issues surrounding race, racism, and CRT manifested itself within the young men affecting their: (a) grades and retention; (b) belief in the possibility of success due to an academic environment that lacked congeniality; (c) identification with their culture (cultural confusion); and (d) self-concept. These conditions cause a *calcification of the spirit* within the young men on campus in many African peoples in general. The Men of Ujima Manhood Development Program began as a result of this observation.

Program Overview

The Men of Ujima (MOU) Manhood Development Program serves the purpose of preparing African American young men for leadership and success. Success is defined by the student and involves specific areas: spiritual development, mental capacity, cultural awareness, physical prowess, and academics. Spiritual development is recognition of the power of the Creator, ancestors, and how one can utilize these powers and abilities to develop habits that impact their daily lives. Mental capacity includes knowledge of African history, knowledge of self, and knowledge of the other young men involved in MOU. Cultural awareness connects the student to culturally based community organizations and leadership. Physical prowess unfolds in

the form of endurance, tolerance, and understanding the importance of the mind, body, soul connection. Last, as the young men develop in the other areas of the program, distractions decrease that allows them to focus academics.

The African tradition of passage into manhood serves as the framework in which initiation into MOU is based. However, passage into this fraternity of brotherhood and manhood does not automatically happen as a result of a young man simply entering the program. All candidates are expected to adhere to a new way of living which includes being accountable to elders and to the other young men in the program, exercise, letting go of vices, and regular communication. The participants are not given just one mentor to interact with on a monthly basis; rather, they are mentored by the entire council of elders. This creates a dynamic and awareness of entering into a bond, which has proven extremely successful in connecting at a deeper level with the young men. The MOU participants have made the following comments:

I have never been around a group of men of this caliber. It's motivating! It's unbelievable that I can pick up the phone and just call an elder to talk. This connection to older, more mature men, has given me something I have never had.

In addition to the regular meetings, BBQ's and other activities, MOU candidates are required to read Dr. Chancellor Williams' book entitled *The Destruction of Black Civilization*, and Dr. Na'im Akbar's two books entitled, *Visions of Black Manhood* and *Know Thyself*. These books were selected to raise the cultural, political, and historical consciousness of the young men by challenging their concept of what it means to Black, male, and a student. The required reading of the texts also measures their commitment to the program and to fellow participants.

Another critical component of the program only materialized after the sessions started. We preface the disclosure with a reminder of the vast mission and function of the community college as an open enrollment institution, which does not exclude on the basis of high school preparation, test scores, and in many cases, criminal record. Any random sampling of the student body of community colleges may reveal a significant number of students with involvement with the justice system. With this in mind, all community colleges must look seriously at creating a branch or office of legal services on their campuses that works to expunge records or reduce felonies to misdemeanors.

Many African American juveniles who are accused of committing offenses are given public defenders and they are encouraged to take plea

deals in place of jail time not realizing the impact it may have on their career aspirations. Statistics suggest that one in four young African American males has some involvement with the juvenile justice system. This phenomenon, though it can be explained by our theoretical framework as a natural byproduct of systematic racism, has to be addressed. Thus, the access to legal services is now available to participants in the program.

The Campus Environment

To accomplish the goal of preparing young men for leadership and success there needed to be a place on campus where the young men could be themselves while also providing the academic services that they may require. The campus was open to this idea and allowed the program to move into an oversized classroom, which was converted into a study/living room for the students. This has allowed the program to better serve the educational needs of the students including financial aid, academic support, and professional and career development. Although this is a new program, it has touched the lives of many young men. Individuals who entered the institution without direction are now preparing to transfer into Historical Black Colleges and Universities. Bonds have become so knitted that program participants have become not only good friends but family. The young men who are about to graduate have insisted on the formation of an MOU Alumnus so they can help other young men in their transition into manhood.

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE EDUCATIONAL NETWORK AND DEVELOPMENT

The A²MEND organization is comprised of African American male administrators who utilize their scholarly and professional expertise to foster institutional change within the community college system. This organization aims to create an affirming academic and professional environment for African Americans with a particular focus on African American male students, faculty, staff, and administrators. The organization's vision is to promote research and discovery in the area of African American male academic achievement in the community colleges. The overarching goal of the A²MEND organization is to improve the academic and professional success of African American males in the community system by working to create systemic change.

The premise of "changing institutions" and "touching students" serve as the philosophical underpinning that guides the organization. A²MEND members believe that in order to improve the academic success of African American males within the community colleges that institutions must be held accountable. Institutions have the responsibility to examine their policies and practices that have an adverse impact on the success of African American males. A²MEND engages institutional stakeholders to examine these adverse practices and policies and also seeks to build capacity within these institutions to create policies and programs that are conducive to the success of African American male students. It has been our experience as community college educators that many programs have not been successful in improving the overall success rate of African American students because the aim of many of these programs has been squarely focused on providing direct services to students; thusly ignoring the institutional deficiencies that created the problem.

As stated in the aforementioned paragraph, A²MEND's approach is guided by the philosophy of changing institutions and touching students. While the organizational members clearly understand the primacy of institutional change it further recognized the need to touch students directly in order to build resiliency; thusly, arming students with the information needed navigate a system not designed for their success. With this mind, A²MEND created several programs that are intended to touch African American male students in the community colleges.

Student Mentor Program Overview

It is a requirement for all members of A²MEND to mentor at least two African American male students at their respective colleges. As of fall 2008, there were 30 African American male students in 15 different community colleges in the mentor program. The mentor program started in Spring 2008 and the number of student mentors will increase in relation to the growth of A²MEND membership. A²MEND leadership anticipates a 100% increase in the number of mentees served in the program for each year over the next 5 years. A²MEND Mentor Program provides support, guidance, professional development, and networking opportunities to its mentees. A²MEND mentees are assigned to an administrator who has demonstrated expertise, leadership, and scholarship within the California Community College system, and are committed to the personal development, professional growth, and academic success of African American males.

Goals and objectives of the A2MEND Mentor Program are to:

- Support the professional and educational development of African American students within the California Community College system
- Create and maintain positive, professional relationships to increase the retention and persistence of African American male administrators and students in community colleges
- Establish a resource and referral network between and among mentors and mentees within the program

Responsibility of A²MEND Student Mentees:

- Make a 2-year commitment as Student mentees
- Meet with mentors at least three times per term
- Successfully complete academic progress reports
- Actively participate in the A²MEND Mentor Program by communicating regularly with mentor, attend all programs/activities, and successfully fulfill program requirements.

Responsibility of A²MEND Mentors:

- Student mentees must be currently enrolled in credit courses at a California

Community College

- Student mentees are assigned to a mentor from their institution
- Encourages face-to-face mentor/mentee meetings at least three times per term
- Requires that mentees complete an academic progress report at least twice a semester to enhance their mentorship experience and ensures that the program effectively assists students in making academic progress toward their educational goals
- Provides mentees with a student and professional network for supporting their educational experience in achieving their academic and career goals
- Offers leadership and educational training for mentees to further enhance their academic success, career exploration, and personal development
- Participation in this program is FREE (no cost)

A²MEND Student Mentee Receives:

- Someone who can assist you with clarifying your professional and educational goals

- Someone who can help you develop personal and academic skills that lead to your professional and educational success
- The Development of a meaningful relationship with a community college administrator
- Confidence knowing that there is someone who is committed to your professional and educational achievement and success

A²MEND African American Male Summit

In March 2008, A²MEND hosted its first annual African American male summit, which was a conference designed to bring together a cross section of community college stakeholders to discuss the implementation of strategies to increase the academic and social success of African American male students. What was particularly innovative about the African American male summit that differed from other professional educational conference was the incorporation of African American male community college students as full participants in the conference. There were a total of 350 people who attended the conference with approximately half of the attendees being African American male students. The conscious decision of A²MEND to engage African American male students in this type of setting was critical for the students because it allowed them to tell their stories and experiences in their own voice. The conference allowed the men to view themselves as vested in their own educational success and allowed them to interact with peers who were also committed to educational success.

African American male students attending the conference participated in workshops that talked about the continued excellence of African people throughout the ages and they were able to discuss the current perceptions of African American males held by society and how they view themselves. The students also had a forum to talk to institutional stakeholders concerning the barriers they face in trying to navigate the community system and offered solutions on how to remove these barriers. Last, students interacted with African American male administrators, faculty, and staff members.

There was one unscripted event worth recalling that crystallizes the importance of the conference. There was a group of African American male professionals just standing around during a break. They noticed a student standing in front of them reading their name tags, but not saying a word. The men quickly engaged the student when they noticed his stare and asked him what is going on is everything okay? The student replied "I am just

standing here because I am amazed." The student said he was amazed because he had never been around Black men with doctorates and around so many Black men that were about something. While the student mentor program is designed to build an on-going relationship with the African American students the annual African American Male Summit is a critical program component of A²MEND services for students for nothing more than allowing students the chance to see what is possible.

CONCLUSION: A CALL TO ACTION

Though there is a paucity of studies concerning African American men in community colleges, most educators, albeit in various degrees, are aware of the challenges African American males face at points on the educational pipeline. Therefore, the underachievement and disenfranchisement of African American males at this juncture should not be a surprise to anyone particularly those who are concerned with equity and justice. However, while more research in this area is paramount, sometimes educators become paralyzed by or numb to the elephant-sized and pejorative statistics facing African American boys and men and the system that perpetuates their underachievement. Therefore beyond research, we call community college educators to a personal accountability and action to create spaces, initiatives, programs, organizations, and institutions based on the conceptual framework outlined in this current chapter keeping in mind that the initiative, program, and organization presented here were unsanctioned and grassroots efforts carved out despite institutional support.

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POWER OF MENTORING AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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ABSTRACT

Community college African American male student enrollment and academic success is diminishing. The authors explore the importance and wisdom of mentoring programs for African American males attending community colleges. The chapter considers issues of student persistence and retention and how they relate to effective community college mentoring programs. Specifically, the authors discuss how community college mentoring programs can counteract inherent obstacles for African American students attending commuter style campuses. A description of how some community colleges successfully engage African American male students in order to achieve Kuh's four attributes of a supportive college environment and to overcome the issues of college departure – being first-generation college students, lacking academic self-concept, no or minimal institutional engagement with students, and no or minimal student involvement student involvement on campus – is provided. The authors highlight successful community college programs which include the national "Students African American Brotherhood" program, Santa Fe

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