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Daemen College

Finding Common Ground: Understanding Issues Pertaining  
to Racial Perspectives, Student Relationships, and Instructional  
Support through a College Minority Student Panel Discussion

by

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with

Panel Participation by Daemen College Students

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Many institutions of higher education have instituted recruitment programs that encourage and entice prospective students with attractive financial packages, innovative programs, and attractive geographic locations to attend their schools. Indeed, the attainment of a college degree represents one way to achieve economic empowerment. It also represents a major step towards the preparation for adult life. Some of the students who have been wooed to these colleges and universities are students from various ethnic groups. The increase in college attendance of ethnic groups of color is also a reflection of the general increase in the population of the United States and the in the ethnic population as well. Davis, et al. state that in the United States, 25% of the overall population is minority and that by the year 2015 one-third of the population will consist of individuals who are culturally and ethnically different from the white majority. The United States Census Bureau forecasts that by 2050, people who are culturally and ethnically different from whites would represent about half of the population.

The increase in the number of minority students in the United States will be reflected on college campuses across the country. Chiang, (2004) states that in the United States, African-Americans represent 11% and Latinos represent 9.3 % of all students in higher education. However, once these students have been enrolled in these schools, statistics indicate that few are able to stay and successfully graduate.

The literature has shown that African American students, in particular, who attend predominately white institutions, do not fare as well as White students in persistence, academic achievement, postgraduate studies, and psychological adjustments (Allen, Epps, Haniff, and Hannif, 1991; Astin, 1982; Fleming, 1984). Astin et.al. (1996) found that only 9% of African American students complete their 4-year college degree within a 4-year time frame. The rate of completion only increases to 32% within a 6-year time frame. Research states however, that these statistics are even further discouraging when the data also includes information from historically black colleges.

The question here becomes whether these trends are similar for smaller colleges and/or private ones. To that extent, a panel discussion was held at a small private,

predominately white college in Western New York State. The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of minority students at a small private, predominately white college on the following issues. How did these students learn about the college that they are currently attending? What encouraged them to remain at their chosen college? How have they have adjusted to college life? Finally, what supports have they have found or developed that have enabled them to persist and remain in college?

In December of 2005, Daemen College in Amherst, New York held its' 1<sup>st</sup> Annual minority student panel discussion in the Alumni Lounge in the Wick Social Center. The purpose of this panel discussion was to determine the minority student panel's perception of their experiences at Daemen College as well as to determine their views on the academic coursework, classroom climate, and campus life.

Daemen College is a private four-year institution servicing both undergraduate and graduate students from Western New York. Daemen College's mission is...

to prepare students for life and leadership in an increasingly complex world. Students will acquire the skill to solve problems creatively and think critically. They will be comfortable with diversity and will recognize the importance of a global perspective. They will be able to work with others and be invigorated by environments that present challenges and demand innovation. Daemen students are expected to be active participants in their own education and informed citizens who understand that learning is a life-long journey.

Daemen College's total student enrollment is 2315 including both undergraduate and graduate students. While African American students at Daemen College make up 15.1% of the entire student population, Latinos make up 2.2 % of the population and Asian Americans comprise 1.2% of the population.

The six minority students who participated on this panel were chosen by the researchers because they were members of the Multicultural Association at Daemen College. The Multicultural Association is an organization whose purpose is to stimulate awareness of cultural diversity for students on the Daemen College campus and in the surrounding community. Both researchers wanted the students who served on this panel to be articulate as well as honest in their feelings concerning the school climate at this four-year private college.

Each panel member was given approximately six to seven minutes to answer the following specific questions posed by Dr. Joanne Sadler, an assistant professor in the Education Department.

- What attracted you to initially come to Daemen College?
- What is the campus climate like in terms of faculty support?
- What is the campus climate like in terms of your own learning experiences either inside or outside of class?
- What encourages you to remain at the college?

One researcher videotaped the panel discussion as well as the audience dialogue that occurred when specific diversity topics were being discussed. Two undergraduate students were given the responsibility of transcribing the dialogue from the panel discussion as well as transcribing audience feedback that occurred after the panel had made their comments.

The themes that emerged from this panel revolved around several issues. They were: (a) adjustment to college life can be challenging; particularly when students are not prepared for the realities of college life both academically or in terms of the diversity encountered; (b) support that students receive from their professors strengthen their academic commitment; (c) support from other peers as well as meeting parental expectations also further strengthen student commitment; and (d) conflicts may arise with respect to perceptions of unfair treatment in dorms and may also occur in class discussions pertaining to differences with regards to cultural beliefs.

#### **Adjustment to College Life**

It should be noted that the majority of the members of this panel came from large metropolitan areas in Maryland or New York State. Many were attracted to Daemen College because of its' small campus size and suburban picturesque setting.

Interestingly enough, for many of the students on this panel, coming to Daemen College was in a sense a "culture shock". The majority of them were raised in larger cities where cultural diversity was the "norm" and not the "exception". All of the students on this panel have greatly enjoyed the time they have spent at Daemen College. However, some students wanted to also address ways to make this private four-year-college more amenable to students from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Members from this panel audience also discussed their surprise at the lack of cultural “intermingling” in the dorms. This troubled one student who felt that the dorm suites appeared to be culturally segregated.

Another issue pertained to the academic preparation for college. At least two of the panel participants discussed adjusting to the realities of living in a college climate with all of its freedom and having the ability to get assignments completed on time. Other students discussed the difficulty of their assigned work and how they needed out-of-class assistance from their professors. Some of the problems experienced in the latter case could also be an indicator of the quality of their high school preparation.

### **Support by Professors**

Students who are new to the college experience often vary in terms of how much assistance they may request from a classroom professor. Some students may seek help immediately before a major problem arises. Other students may only make contact with a professor when they are performing poorly and are in danger of receiving a failing grade for the course. The members of this minority student panel and the audience agreed that professors who were not flexible sometimes created an atmosphere that was less conducive to student learning.

### **Support by other Students and Expectations of Parents**

Some of the panel participants discussed support they received from other students. These were people that they had met on campus or in some cases the students were friends who decided to attend school together so as not to be alone.

Several students on this panel mentioned the need to be successful in the eyes of their families. Students also found support provided by the campus faculty. This may be a function of the small size of the college, where it is hard to be “just another number.” Friends also appeared to be a factor in students’ decision to persist in college. One of the student panel members had left the college, but had decided to return. This was in large part because of the support in terms of friends, but also in her own words, “being fearful of the unknown.”

### **Class Discussions focusing on Culture Can Sometimes Lead to Conflicts**

Classroom dialogue that takes place in the college setting may not always be viewed as “politically correct” or “culturally sensitive” Certain classes that are based on history,

law, government policies, or philosophical thinking may generate a class discussion that may unintentionally offend a group based upon race, age, gender, or sexual preference. College students come from various cultures as well as specific backgrounds. Thus, they often have different experiences from which to draw upon during a class discussion. A discussion on the topic of “affirmative action” led some African American students to feel that their non-minority peers were insensitive in relation to issues pertaining to “fairness” in hiring practices.

### **Student Opinions Concerning Diversity are not Always “Black and White”**

Members of the audience listening to this minority panel discussion were able to express their own feelings with regard to issues relating to student relationships. An African-American student discussed the fact that she felt uncomfortable with other African-American students who were not “middle-class”. She came from West Chester, which was a suburb of New York City. West Chester did not have a substantial minority population. She came to Daemen College because thought she would be in a college environment that had a small percentage of minorities. This student articulated that she was still trying to find a comfort level with a “larger than expected” percentage of African-American students on campus. Conversely, a white female audience member said that the reason she was attracted to Daemen College was the chance to be exposed to the diversity that this private college had to offer.

### **Conclusion**

As can be seen from the comments of the members of this panel, several came to college not fully prepared for college life and the academic demands being placed upon them. In addition, culture specific issues were more problematic for some of the students than others. On the other hand, some students were able to see the “bigger picture” and thus were able to attribute these conflicts to learning experiences that would allow them to grow and further develop.

Support also plays major part in overcoming some expressed feelings of marginality. Out-of-classroom support from professors was an important factor. In addition, support from other classroom peers and family members were also vital ingredients for student success at the college level.

The results of the panel study demonstrate that the issue of “minority student persistence” is indeed an important issue at small private, predominately White colleges that needs to be further explored. What is even more important is to determine how to effectively address this issue in a concrete and measurable way. The following suggestions can be made that may further assist minority students from other colleges who are wrestling with these very same issues.

More research on how to translate these factors into strategies which enhance the performance of these students could be beneficial. Additional student panels or discussion forums which involve faculty members might help to shed some light on the issue of persistence for minority college students. From these discussions, mentoring programs for new minority college students could be developed and facilitated by other successful minority college students. Hall (1999) suggests that a way to address the problem of persistence is to look at the coping strategies of minority students who “stay the course” and graduate from college. Some of these coping strategies for minority college students involved parental support, faculty, and peer encouragement as well as involvement in cultural organizations. Finally, another suggestion might be to develop a college outreach program that would familiarize high school students with college life and academic requirements. Future research is a way to determine what factors are more likely to create personal, social, and academic success for minority students who are entering small private, predominately White colleges. However, this research then needs to be utilized by colleges in reconceptualizing their current programs in order to assist minority students in staying and successfully graduating.

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