Professional Book Review

Rovai, A. P., Gallien, L. B., Jr., & Stiff-Williams, H. R. (Eds.). (2007). *Closing the African American achievement gap in higher education.* New York: Teachers College Press. 212 pp., ISBN: 9780807747780 (hc). $49.00

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This edited volume addresses the African American achievement gap in higher education from every angle imaginable. Chapters 1 through 3 provide the theoretical, historical, and philosophical foundations for understanding the issue fully. Specifically, chapter 1 offers the data and definitions necessary to explore the reasons for the gap's existence. Chapter 2 explores the influences of a younger African American culture and hip-hop upon college students. Chapter 3 contrasts school culture at HBCUs (historically Black colleges and universities) with culture at PWIs (predominantly White institutions) and discusses the implications of these contrasts. Both chapters 2 and 3 also provide data about the learning style preferences of African American students that arise from their cultural influences. Chapter 4 synthesizes the current literature on adult learning and multiculturalism on college campuses and then describes several current programs at various institutions that are highly successful in closing the achievement gap.

Chapters 5 through 9 (nearly half of the volume) speak directly to individual faculty members who wish to change their own pedagogical approaches in order to provide a quality education for all of their students. Chapters 5 and 6 explore the challenges of the traditional classroom and then make specific and practical suggestions for addressing these challenges. In a similar fashion, chapters 7 and 8 do the same for the virtual classroom. Chapter 9 addresses the issue of assessment and offers practical ways to assess students authentically in order to determine accurately if learning is occurring. Chapter 10 focuses on the administration of higher education institutions, addressing ways in which sweeping changes can and must be made in the organizational structure and priorities in order for the achievement gap to be closed. The final chapter of the volume summarizes the content of the previous chapters and offers a succinct yet thorough conclusion.

The book's primary strength is that it provides an opportunity for various experts in their fields to apply solid theoretical and research-based findings to the issue of the African American achievement gap in higher education. For example, Alfred Rovai, author of the chapter on challenges in the virtual classroom, has long been known as a premier scholar on distance education (e.g., Rovai et al., 2003, 2005, 2007). Likewise, Louis B. Gallien, Jr. has written widely on issues of school culture and its impact on African American students (e.g., Gallien & Peterson, 2004). Emery Petchauer is an emerging scholar on the important but previously unexplored topic of hip-hop as a worldview and how it can impact educational perspectives (e.g., Petchauer, 2007). These are just a few examples; each author is equally qualified to address the issue from his or

her unique field of interest and scholarship. The fact that each chapter is so thoroughly saturated with the current literature provides the reader with the assurance that the suggestions that are offered for change will likely prove successful.

Additionally, the book seamlessly moves from theory to practice. It provides numerous suggestions for changes on a small scale in the classroom (e.g., building on students' prior experiences) and on a large scale in the institution as a whole (e.g., providing mentoring and/or counseling services for Black students who are struggling in a potentially unfavorable campus environment). All readers, no matter what their position in higher education, can take immediate action based on the practical advice offered in these chapters.

Furthermore, the format of the book allows the reader to use it as a handbook. One can pick and choose areas or chapters for focus. For example, if a professor is teaching primarily online courses, he or she can refer directly to chapters 7 and 8. Although the volume weaves the theme's thread throughout every chapter, sections can easily be utilized separately as well, particularly for those who would like to share pertinent information with colleagues. In this way, in fact, faculty members and/or administrators can use this book in numerous contexts. Even committees that have been given the task of addressing issues of admission, retention, diversity or multiculturalism on their campuses will find this volume an invaluable resource.

Closing the African American achievement gap in higher education (2007) answers dozens of questions, both theoretical and practical. However, there are two questions that remain. First, is it fair to apply adult learning theories, such as those of Malcolm Knowles, 1970, 1988, 1990) to incoming freshmen, who in many respects still act and respond as adolescents? Certainly, the theories apply unequivocally to graduate students and older undergraduates since they have been out in the work force and therefore bring rich life experiences into the classroom. Perhaps examining theories of *undergraduate* learning and development, such as William Perry's theory of the intellectual and ethical development of college students (1970), would have been more appropriate when discussing attempts to retain incoming African American undergraduates. Second, an assumption is made on the part of the contributors and editors (and perhaps rightly so) that anyone reading the book is both aware of the achievement gap and desirous of closing it. Although an individual faculty member who is passionate about the issue can apply the pedagogical strategies personally, she also needs suggestions on how to approach the uphill battle of convincing administrators at PWIs that institutional changes are necessary. While some of the data provided in this volume can be used as support for making the case for change, one more chapter that would focus explicitly on this somewhat controversial but very real problem would have been helpful. Admittedly, however, this was not the primary focus of this volume. What its authors do provide for their readers is thorough, theoretical, and pragmatic.

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