

## BEING BLACK AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE UNIVERSITY

David L. Wallace and Annissa Bell

*Iowa State University is racism . . . the White community is racism to me, simply because the system is not designed for me . . . [I deal with] institutionalized racism definitely . . . that's almost daily.*

Calvin

*Nothing big [but] well, I mean you're out and you know, you're walking down the street with some brothers and a truck drives by, 'hey, niggers' and stuff like that.*

Kenneth

*My roommate, I, and another friend of his, all Black males, were going to the library to study for the first time . . . when we walked on that floor, everybody, it had to be more than ten people, turned around and stared. And, okay, not racism but an uncomfortable feeling like, damn, what are you staring at? . . . I feel like there's a difference and so by that I feel that I've experienced, you know, racism.*

Ron

**T**hese African American students' stories surprised us, as did Calvin, Kenneth, and Ron's matter-of-fact demeanors as they sat in David's office calmly telling us stories about racism on campus. The shock was greater for David, a White English professor, than for Annissa, an African American honors student in education, but both of us were surprised to hear that the campus we found tranquil and rather friendly was rife with instances of racism for these African American men. For them, walking across campus risked calls of "nigger" from a passing truck. Waiting for an elevator might mean covert appraisal by a White woman—unsure whether she should risk riding up three floors alone with a Black man. Such things had simply never been a problem for David, and, although Annissa had experienced minor incidents of racism, she'd never been called a "nigger" or seen as a physical threat. Listening to these men's stories was a critical part of our attempts to

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learn what it meant to be Black—and in this case male—on our predominantly White campus.

What does it mean for African American men—the group of students identified in the retention literature as most at risk in higher education—to attend a predominantly White university? Of course what it means varies from setting to setting, so a few words about race on our campus may be helpful. The university at this time was trying to raise the 7.1 percent minority enrollment rate through a new minority recruitment program; there was a new Black Cultural Center; a Black Student Alliance had been organized; and speakers on campus regularly addressed issues of interest to minority students, staff, and faculty. There were very few publicized racial problems on our campus. The police blotter of the local paper would occasionally list drunk and disorderly arrests that those on the scene knew had started when drunken White frat boys got into it with a group of equally drunk brothers, but such incidents were rare, and race itself was not reported as an important factor. Nevertheless, we saw indications that race was more problematic than the university's recruiting materials let on. Anissa was disturbed that she rarely saw an African American man in her education classes. David was surprised (and pleased) to have four African American men in an entry-level college writing course but perplexed by their responses to higher education, which ranged from quiet passivity to an intense rage that surfaced unexpectedly in class discussions.

As a means of beginning to understand the problems faced by minority students, we read reports of large, multi-site, quantitative studies identifying factors that predict minority students' persistence in higher education. These studies showed certain factors as diminishing the likelihood that minority students would persist in higher education: being a first-generation student (Allen and Haniff), low socio-economic status (Edelman), experiencing a lack of comfortable social contexts in college (Davis; Jackson and Swann), as well as lack of prerequisite courses and difficulty with "weed-out" courses (Wilkerson; Mickey). Positive factors affecting retention included financial or social support from a church (Billingsley and Caldwell; Franklin and Boyd-Franklin), positive interactions with faculty or other campus staff (Walker), and experiencing alternative teaching styles (Haniff).

Although this research illuminates the general problem of retention of minority students and the need for affirmative action programs, it lays only the most rudimentary groundwork for addressing minority students' problems at predominantly White universities. For example, knowing that African American students who come from single-parent, female-headed households are statistically less likely to complete college is not very useful in dealing with a particular student. Admitting only minority students from two-parent families would obviously be discriminatory; further, even the apparently reasonable assumption that on average the educational experiences of minority students (particularly African American men) prepare them less well for the challenges of higher education than those of main-

stream students becomes an essentializing stereotype when applied to any individual. Those in higher education need to address the real difficulties that minority students as *groups* face on predominantly White campuses, yet we must also avoid essentializing *individuals*.

As a first step, we invited three African American men who were near completion of or had completed English or education majors at our university to use their experiences to speak back to the results of these large-scale survey studies of retention. We had two lengthy interviews with each participant. The first interview focused on the men's family situations and educational experiences before college, and the second on their experiences at our university. In both interviews we paid particular attention to the factors that had been identified in the previous research as affecting retention in higher education.

In several forums, we have narrated these men's experiences in counterpoint to the retention research results, hoping to raise consciousness about the problems faced by minority students on our campus; we have invited panels of current students to respond to their experiences. As we pored over the transcripts of their interviews, we saw these men challenging some of the fundamental ways in which minority students are commonly understood in higher education beyond our own campus. Those who teach first-year college writing courses in particular, as well as other writing and literature courses, are often in a special position to help minority students understand what it means for them to participate in higher education. We begin by examining our own portrayals of these men as "success stories."

### SUCCESS STORIES?

We explained to our case study participants that we wanted to interview them because they were success stories: they had beaten the considerable odds against African American men finishing bachelors' degrees in education or English at our university. We deliberately chose this positive term because of all the negative portrayals of Black men we saw in the national press. Although Ron, Kenneth, and Calvin (not their real names) were eager to tell us their stories, none of them would apply the term "success" to himself. Ron's refusal to own the term made sense in terms of the academic history he had explained to us—dropping his pre-med degree for a physical education degree with the option of becoming a physical trainer. His new dream was to be a trainer for the Chicago Bulls, but realistically he guessed that he would return to Chicago and get a master's degree and then go on to teach "and maybe be a role model for some young Black children." Similarly, Kenneth said, "Nobody would make, a, you know, made-for-TV movie about me. I don't think of myself as significant." To be a real success, he said that he would need to "make a very profound impact on people." Calvin said, "No, I'll never be a success because I'll never be satisfied I did the things that I think was entitled to me . . . So, no, I'll never be a

success.” When we pressed him, Calvin admitted that some people in his community might see him as a success “simply because I’ve had the opportunities to step out of the community and be exposed to different things.” But, in his view, that still isn’t success:

I don’t think that I’d be successful even if I had a million dollars because I’ll never be satisfied, I’ll never stop striving. I don’t think I could ever lay back on my couch or yacht and say “I’m successful” because, I mean, as being Black you never made it.

In retrospect, we have to admit that Ron, Kenneth, and Calvin are right in the sense that most people wouldn’t consider simply hanging on to get a bachelor’s degree a basis for declaring a person a success—even if he or she had to face racism to do it. Also, we applaud Ron, Kenneth, and Calvin for setting higher standards for judging their own accomplishments, and, upon reflection, we are not surprised that each resisted the shape that we tried to impose on their stories. Indeed, their denials of our simplistic beginning point forced us to think again about how to tell their stories. We recognized that the details they shared with us in their interviews were only fragments of their life experiences prompted by the questions that we asked. Further, our attempts to tell their stories are even more reductive versions of their lives, and the ways we choose to represent these three African American men are not only products of culture but also contribute, at least in a small way, to the reproduction of culture. Yet how we tell these stories is important. The terms of our narratives have real consequences for what we choose to focus on in their experiences and for the ways in which their stories might be used to inform theory, public policy, and writing instruction. Given these concerns, we focus in the remainder of this article on three critical issues that we have drawn from the literature about minority students in higher education: ways in which the educational system reproduces inequality; the potential trap of perceiving oneself as a victim; and assimilation and resistance to dominant culture.

#### AN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM THAT REPRODUCES INEQUALITY

Calvin suggests that racism need not be overt—burning crosses or explicitly discriminating in hiring. Rather, looking back on his educational experiences, he could see a more subtle racism in a system that seemed stacked against him:

The [educational] system was designed for what they call the majority to excel . . . it’s not blatantly against [minorities], but it doesn’t facilitate the advancement of minorities.

Indeed, all three men clearly saw their previous education as not having prepared them well for the demands of higher education. Each seemed surprised to discover this fact. All three men attended predominantly Black high schools in the Chicago public school system, and their school experiences and the neighborhoods

that they grew up in largely sheltered them from overt racism because they had little contact with Whites. Ron explains:

In high school there was, there wasn't much racism. There was just one particular guy that everybody always talked about. And he was a sheet metalist, and ah, the job of teaching everyone sheet metal . . . he was White and a very old man . . . The rumor was that he hated Blacks.

The ways in which they saw their academic preparation as affected by subtle racism are complex. The students' primary and secondary school experiences must be seen as successful in the sense that each left those experiences convinced that he could make it in higher education. All three received significant encouragement during their high school years to continue their education. None was tracked into general or vocational education classes. Indeed, in each case, someone seems to have recognized and encouraged the student's academic potential. Ron and Calvin both cited guidance counselors or teachers who recognized and fanned their potential. Kenneth clearly had the highest academic profile of the three. He reported taking nearly all honors classes during his high school years and seems to have met success in almost everything he attempted. After recounting a long list of academic successes, contests won, and sports participated in, Kenneth says:

Once I got a #1 [academic] ranking, I cannot miss school. You know, I just could not miss school. Like and then I found out that people were getting four-year perfect attendance awards, I said, well I'm getting one too. And so, you know, I can't miss school if I'm going to do that. So any absence, if I went on a school trip, I made sure all my teachers signed my slip to excuse [me] to go on a field trip and it's not an absence. And some kids would, they would just blow it off and just go, but everybody signed my slip; I was here today. I was at a field trip. It was it was fun, it was the best time of my life. High school was great.

Their school experiences raised their expectations of success in college. Ron and Kenneth planned challenging college majors (pre-med and computer science), and Calvin was inspired by one of his teachers to follow in his footsteps.

Ironically, in retrospect, each of these men was clear that his high school experiences did not prepare him well academically for higher education. Each had difficulty with the first math class he encountered in college; Ron reported great trouble getting through his first-year English classes, and both Calvin and Kenneth reported trouble with basic study skills. In fact, because of low and failing grades during their first years of college, all three ended up on academic probation. Strikingly, each seemed genuinely surprised to find that other students had much better preparation for college than he did. Ron explained that in high school math was one of his best subjects: "My teacher thought I was a whiz." But in his first college math class he discovered that his math preparation was a problem. He said:

It was not a requirement [in his high school] to take trigonometry, but that was the highest level of math that we could obtain. Now I would talk to ah, or maybe people

would express what background they had in math . . . and some of them would say up to two years of calculus, and I would flip and go, “How did you get up to two years of calculus?”

Of the three case study participants, only Calvin seemed to have chosen a realistic major (in education) given his high school preparation. Indeed, with the considerable benefit of hindsight, a case can be made that Ron and Kenneth suffered a lack of good guidance counseling. Ron left a vocational high school with a strong but not stellar academic record and with no math beyond geometry; yet he believed that pre-med was a reasonable major for him to pursue. Kenneth had the top academic ranking in the honors track of a Chicago public school; yet he scored only 14 on the ACT-general the first time he took the test and barely met the minimum for admission to Iowa State University (17) when he took the test a second time. Kenneth described his guidance counselors as “totally inept” and “worthless,” but this seems to be because they didn’t get him the academic recognition he felt he deserved:

I didn’t know what to do. My parents didn’t; they didn’t necessary know what to do. But the counselors didn’t—here I was graduating valedictorian, and I can’t get a scholarship to any school. I mean, they’re suppose to know how to seek out scholarships and contact schools, and they didn’t do anything for me.

It is impossible to say whether Kenneth’s guidance counselors understood that his success in high school was mediocre preparation for college or whether they were as puzzled as he was by the mismatch of his strong high school record and his low placement scores. In either case, Kenneth’s low college placement should have been a warning signal that difficulty might lie ahead.

For all three men, financial problems also complicated their initial experiences in college. For Ron and Calvin, who came to college from low-income, single-parent households, these problems greatly complicated those they had in adjusting to college life. Ron explains that because grants and loans “didn’t cover my whole tuition,” he always felt the burden of wondering “how am I going to pay this bill?” Further, he saw a direct link between this financial stress and his academic difficulties in his first year:

And then you get this letter [from the university] talking about, well if you don’t have this money by this certain day, we’re probably [going to] cut your meals off; we’re going to probably kick you out, you gotta come up with this. Then it would always be on my mind . . . that interfered with me thinking or concentrating on stuff.

The point that we draw from the experiences of these men is that the status quo in higher education favors those who fit its expectations. Indeed, a subtle stigma often attaches to students dubbed “remedial” or “underprepared,” and this stigma applies whether or not their primary or secondary education provided them with opportunities to prepare themselves for higher education. Even the financial requirements of higher education may pose a greater problem for minority students who come from low-income households or who are first-generation college students.

The possible racism here is of two different kinds. First, if the educational experiences offered to African American students in primary and secondary schools do not prepare them as well for the demands of higher education as do the educational experiences of other students (and the research we reviewed suggests that this is the case), then the school system itself might be seen as racist even though the individuals involved do not act with racist intent. Second, those of us involved in higher education may be guilty of unintentional racism if we fail to realize that many minority students do not start higher education on an equal footing with their White counterparts. Of course we cannot assume that any given minority individual will have been academically or financially disadvantaged, yet it is equally dangerous to assume that the removal of overtly discriminatory policies and actions automatically creates equal opportunity. Many of the faculty in Anne DiPardo's study of a basic writing adjunct program at a regional California university argued that they had done their part to advance the status of minorities simply by "treat[ing] all my students the same" (173). Like DiPardo, we disagree with this position. We contend that as educators we must consider that because schools are part of the general cultural milieu, schools themselves—and perhaps even our own teaching practices—are part of the problem of inequity.

#### OPPRESSION AND SELF-PERCEPTION: A PARADOX

Kenneth shows considerable impatience with young Black men who define themselves only as victims of racial discrimination:

You talk to the Black males that's coming up now, they blame their misfortunes and their failures on the White man. (Annis: This is true.) Everything that happens to them, they get a divorce, White man; he wouldn't give me a raise, me and my wife fought over money, we got divorced, it's the White man's fault . . . The White man, he controls it. Yeah, sure, cop out; take the easy way out.

In the case of some of their acquaintances, both Kenneth and Annissa agreed that this critique applied fairly. However, Kenneth's critique hints that defining minority students as victims or as educationally disadvantaged is a more complex issue that it initially appears. We contend that victim status for minority students in higher education is two-edged. On the one hand, it reflects the social and economic inequities still present in our society, and it is necessary to justify continued attempts to achieve equal opportunity. On the other hand (as Kenneth noted), victim status can become a dangerous excuse.

Historically, affirmative action has seen minorities as the victims of racial discrimination, as having been socially, politically, educationally, and economically disadvantaged in American society. According to Nicholas Lemann, such a presumption was tacit in the first use of the term "affirmative action" in 1961 by Hobart Taylor, Jr., in his draft of Executive Order 10925, which President Kennedy later signed to

urge federal contractors to hire more minorities. Throughout the history of affirmative action, the legality of attempts to make up for past and continuing discrimination and disadvantage for minorities and women has depended on clear demonstration of systematic unfairness that casts a group of people, at least tacitly, in the role of victims. The requirement that specific injustices be identified as rationales for affirmative action was stressed by a 1995 Supreme Court decision which found for the plaintiff, a White contractor who lost his lower bid for a federal construction contract to a Hispanic-owned company because of a federal policy that awarded a percentage of construction contracts to minority firms. As Linda Greenhouse reports, Sandra Day O'Connor—writing the majority opinion for the Supreme Court—argued that such affirmative action programs must be “narrowly tailored” to further a “compelling government interest” (A1).

In higher education, the case is still actively made for affirmative action admission and retention programs. Indeed, such researchers as Valora Washington and Joanna Newman, as well as Daniel G. Solorzano, have found that minority students, particularly African American males, are not receiving undergraduate and graduate degrees in percentages proportional to their general population cohorts. In fact, James A. Vasquez and Nancy Wainstein describe a “pyramid effect” for minority students; that is, proportionally fewer minority students complete high school and progress to complete undergraduate degrees than White students (600). Further, they argue that too often minority students are seen through models of cognitive deficit or cultural difference: their cultural differences, which “should be viewed as strengths that contribute positively to the classroom” are seen as “deficiencies that must be corrected or, at best, disregarded” (601). Sabrina Hope King argues that one of the by-products of this pyramid effect is that minorities, particularly African American men, are underrepresented in the teaching profession. Because there are few minority teachers to serve as role models, few minority elementary and secondary school students aspire to become teachers.

Tacit in this line of argument is the implication that minority students are victims in the sense that they may face a set of problems (e.g., cultural differences, economic hardship, lack of positive role models in education, and intelligence and achievement tests that assume unfamiliar mainstream cultural knowledge) that White students do not face. However, the term *victim* rarely, if ever, appears in these discussions. Similarly, one of the most striking aspects of the interviews with our case study participants was their consistent refusal to see themselves as victims. Although all reported that racist incidents were a part of their daily lives on our predominantly White campus and in our community, each found ways to minimize the impact of such events on their lives.

The interviews' most disturbing aspect was the stories that participants told about these racist incidents. Calvin told us of two incidents that had happened the week of his interviews, one in which he was ignored and then patronized by the ser-

vice staff at a local bar/restaurant and one in which insensitive comments were made about how poorly a Black student from Chicago spoke. Ron told us of being shadowed by clerks in stores and stared at when he arrived at the library with African American friends. Kenneth mentioned being called a “nigger” from a passing truck as “nothing big,” the sort of thing that happens every day.

All three of the participants seemed to have found ways to minimize such events. Kenneth figured that when his Black friends get called names or get “jumped by White guys,” likely as not it is “because [his friends] had done something before.” Similarly, Calvin moved to minimize confrontation when one of the White women he was carpooling with reminded the others that Calvin was from Chicago and the woman who commented on the Chicago student’s speech began backtracking to cover herself. Calvin cut them all off. He explained, “I said, ‘Don’t worry about it; don’t even try to clean it up. I doesn’t even bother me’ . . . I just stopped everybody. ‘Don’t try to patronize me . . . it’s no problem.’” Ron explained that it’s very hard to tell if you’ve been discriminated against or not. He said, “I don’t always stick around to find out the results of something,” so he would not say that he had been discriminated against.

The picture these participants painted was so full of racism, or at least of potentially racist incidents, that the only reasonable response for our participants seemed to be to minimize the incidents. Their refusal to put themselves in the roles of victims parallels the attitudes expressed in the follow-up interviews in Denice Ward Hood’s large-scale survey on the retention of African American men at a predominantly White university. These interviews revealed that the “survivors” saw not allowing potentially problematic situations (such as being the only Black person in a class) “to get to them” as one of the reasons they were able finish their first year of college when others dropped out (21).

The irony of this situation is striking. Affirmative action programs in higher education are likely to depend on clear delineations of victimization or at least disadvantages for minority groups. Yet survival in such programs may depend, at least in part, on students’ refusal to see themselves as victims.

#### ASSIMILATION AND RESISTANCE TO DOMINANT CULTURE

While arriving at college may be a stressful experience for many first-year college students, Ron’s reaction hints that he, like many minority students on predominantly White campuses, faced an additional stress:

Arriving on the, in the front and just looking at so many White people . . . And I didn’t see one Black face until I saw my roommate. And I was like, what? Where are the Black people? . . . What did I do? Where am I at? I don’t believe this. And then, I um, had many bags so no one helped me up to my room . . . And I remember, “man, I gotta leave my bags down here; somebody’s gonna steal my stuff!”

For most of his life Ron had not felt like a minority; he'd grown up in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Chicago's South Side and attended predominantly Black schools. For the first time Ron would be living in a social setting where he was visually distinct from the majority of those around him. Ron's concern about his "stuff" being stolen is also telling. Unlike most of the students from Iowa, Ron had no support group to help him. He had no friends from high school to help him carry his boxes and suitcases to his room. There was no one to tell him that it was safe to leave his stuff sitting on the sidewalk in front of his dorm. His mother was at work in Chicago, not there to embarrass him with good-by hugs and tears like the parents of other first-year students who had driven their children in from Oskaloosa, Cresco, Ottumwa, and other Iowa towns.

Ron's reaction to arriving at Iowa State illustrates a problem faced by all minority students on predominantly White college and university campuses: dealing with their minority status. For some minority students, like Ron, enrolling in a predominantly White university means facing the considerable adjustment of dealing with dominant White culture on a daily basis for the first time in their lives. For minority students from integrated or predominantly White communities, the initial shock may not be as great. Retention researchers A. Wade Boykin and Forrest D. Toms have identified two critical issues in understanding how minority students make these adjustments. First, a student may choose to engage actively in the activities of mainstream culture—in this case, trying to do well in school. Or a student may become passive, doing just enough to get by or dropping out. Second, a student may be active or passive in resistance to the pressure to assimilate to mainstream culture. An active response is likely one of trying to change the system. A passive response is usually one of seeming to go along with the system but may involve covert attempts to change it.

When we presented these two issues to the case study participants, each identified himself as actively engaged in the mainstream culture of the university. Indeed, by choosing "success stories" we had practically guaranteed such attitudes. (The experiences of those who respond passively—which usually means dropping out of college—are equally important.) However, none of the three identified himself as active in trying to change mainstream culture. When we asked Calvin whether he saw himself assimilating to mainstream culture, he said, "I do the minimum . . . I don't see myself as assimilating because I don't think that I can." He was clear that this ambivalence toward participating in mainstream culture did not mean that he was passive, particularly not in his classes:

I've tried laid back and being passive and felt miserable, and I know that I can be active to get what I would like to get from the university. So I kind of satisfy myself personally; that's how I react. You know, when I go in a class, you know, I keep my confidence because I do have confidence, and that's the way I try to portray myself, but as far as assimilating, I don't think I can. I mean I know I can't.

Ron expressed the same sort of ambivalence; he said, "I, I can fit into anything. And I will, but if I see the chance to get out, oh, I'll do it." He spoke about fitting in at a

predominantly White university with a sense of resignation, “I’ll, I’ll I deviate away from it quickly, but if I have no choice . . . I know how to fit in and be comfortable.”

Calvin and Ron’s ambivalence can be seen as an extension of a more general ambivalence often displayed by academically promising Black males. Researchers such as Signithia Fordham (“Racelessness” and “Peer-Proofing”) and Bertha Garrett Holliday have discovered that because of the conflict between school and peers’ values, smart African American boys are often forced into a careful dance that allows them attenuated success in school without risking total ostracism by peers. For example, Calvin explained:

The group that I hung with were mostly the guys that I’d grown up with. They did nothing in high school, and all I did was just a little bit . . . So I never wanted to rise above my friends. And I’ve never admitted to them as long as I live that I wanted to be a teacher, never . . . I mean that wasn’t the thing to do . . . I, I was embarrassed to say that I wanted to teach.

Undoubtedly, the tension between academic excellence and peer pressure to resist the culture of education is much less in college because the peer groups change (that is, nearly all college students have chosen to attend college and thus have a vested interest in academic success). However, this lessening of the tension does not mean that minority students will automatically want to join the dominant culture; clearly Calvin and Ron found full participation in the dominant peer culture of our campus and community problematic despite the change in their peer groups. We must expect some minority students on predominantly White campuses to struggle with mainstream culture. However, it is equally important to note that not all minority students will feel this tension. In contrast to Calvin and Ron, Kenneth expressed what we thought was considerable enthusiasm about fitting into mainstream culture. Indeed, he told us that he hadn’t considered going to a historically Black college or university because he wanted to

learn how to interact with different types of people . . . I see a lot of students, the only people they can relate to and interact with are other Blacks because that’s the way they grew up so that’s the only thing they know. And I think that’s a social, intellectual, and professional handicap.

Kenneth told us stories from his first semester at Iowa State that made it clear that he had lots of White friends and didn’t mind being seen as an oddity. For example, on a visit with White friends in rural Iowa, Kenneth went to barn parties and met people who “had never seen a Black person in person, it was only like on TV or in a movie or something. (David: Really?) Yeah, right here, in Iowa and they’d never seen a Black person in the flesh.”

Kenneth’s perspective was perhaps affected somewhat by life experiences wider than Ron’s or Calvin’s. When we interviewed him, Kenneth was twenty-nine; he had dropped out of school for several years and returned after getting married. He had graduated with an English degree the semester before we interviewed him and was

currently an assistant manager at a national chain restaurant. Kenneth spoke at length about stereotypes of African Americans and the need for African American men to learn to speak, dress, and act in ways that corporate America finds acceptable:

It comes from like groups from Kriss Kross (Annis: Oh, yeah) and people see that and it's a trend and so they attribute that to a Black thing. And they say, oh, Black rap, rappers wear their pants down. Blacks wear their pants down, so that's a Black thing. And it's it becomes a stereotype. It's like ah, those braids that those guys wear. You don't see any White guys with braids, those dreadlock braids sticking all up. (Annis: Yeah, I know one.) It becomes a stereotype and then you start to wonder, well when they do graduate from Iowa State, if you see them here, what are they going to do with themselves? Are they going try to get conformed to get a job? 'Cause you're not going to walk into anybody's office with dreadlocks on your head and a suit on. I mean seriously. Somebody's going to be, just looking at you and say, well, thanks for coming, you know, Mr. Jones, or something. You you can't really do that. Not to White America. You know, because they have stereotypes and prejudices, so you can't really do that. And so what are these people going to do when they get out of school?

Kenneth seemed to have an easier time than Calvin or Ron adjusting to life at a predominantly White university because he embraced the opportunity to interact with people whose backgrounds were different from his own. For example, Kenneth described life in the dorms during his first year on campus as an opportunity to “learn how to interact with different types of people.” He said:

The guys on the floor, man, they come from, you know, Hoochey, Iowa, and they never heard some good R and B music . . . I would just crank up my box up to, just all the way up, and I had these big huge speakers and the White guys they would have their like rock, rock 'n' roll and they would crank their stereo and be blasting you know, like a Friday afternoon FAC time you can do that . . . And it was just fun. Nobody really cared. You know, it was okay, but a lot of different things like that you get used to. You make fun of people, people make fun of you, you know.

In contrast, for Ron and Calvin, dorm life seemed part of a larger pattern of difficulty adjusting to life on a predominantly White campus set in a small predominantly White town. In the dorms, Ron learned to distinguish between real White friends and those who were overtly chummy around him but talked about him and his roommate as “niggers” behind their backs. Calvin saw living in the dorms as a significant part of “my whole freshman year destruction.” He explains how the social difficulties interacted with his academic problems:

I mean my grades was from hell . . . And it wasn't because I couldn't do the work or I wasn't putting in the hours, I just could not focus on my books, due to the transition from a Black community to a White one. I mean, I had, you know, my grammar school and high school was integrated for the most part, but direct contact [with White people], I just didn't have . . . and then the transition from leaving home and being on my own, the two killed me. And ah, it completely distracted me.

Ron explains that eventually he learned that he couldn't expect to find social outlets that he felt comfortable in and that African American students often had to create their own social functions. He said:

Ames is not socialized for Black people. And so . . . being that Black people to us—that's an important part of our lives—having a, a social life and wanting to party and things like that, and not having the opportunity to do that . . . I feel I have to work extra hard, and then wanting to have a break and wanting to relax and have some fun and then going, I can't have no fun, I gotta, I can't have no fun, it's frustrating, it's aggravating.

Similarly, Calvin explains how the difficulties he had adjusting to his new social setting fed his academic difficulties, and he lost his minority scholarship when he went on academic probation. He explained:

As a freshman, . . . I felt uncomfortable in the dorms, . . . I felt uncomfortable being in Ames anywhere. Everywhere I went I, I felt uncomfortable being at a party with all Blacks simply because I was on [academic probation]. I shouldn't have even been; why am I having a good time knowing that I have problems? I just felt unhappy with myself my entire first year. I mean, you know I laugh about it now, I can talk and reach out to the younger students and just try to encourage them—try to tell them.

Certainly social adjustment is a problem faced by first-year college students of all races and genders, and it would be dangerously essentialist to assume that any given student of color will face such problems when matriculating to a predominantly White campus. Also, it seems clear that the particular set of problems will depend on the local setting. Kenneth, Ron, and Calvin would likely have had very different experiences if they had attended college in an urban setting where African Americans made up a much larger percentage of the general population. Yet, despite the need to avoid overgeneralization, we believe that Kenneth, Ron, and Calvin's experiences illustrate two very important points. First, as a group, minority students—particularly African American men—are likely to face social adjustment problems on predominantly White college campuses that are more extreme than the problems faced by White students. Calvin, Ron, and Kenneth's experiences suggest that minority students may face these problems in such an aggregate form that it threatens their existence as students. Indeed, Walter R. Allen and Nesha Z. Haniff argue that the problems related to social adjustment may be so difficult for African American students that they rival in importance the considerable academic problems that many also face.

Second, Kenneth's, Ron's, and Calvin's experiences help us to understand that, regardless of social, economic, or academic background, minority students face a problem unknown to White students on predominantly White campuses: redefining themselves as African Americans, as Latinos or Latinas, as Asians, or as Native Americans. Each of our case study participants realized the inequities of the situation that he faced, and each had resigned himself to coping. Ron explained, "it's just difficult;

you just have to go ahead and adjust yourself to what is different.” As we have already seen, Kenneth most adamantly stressed the need to assimilate to the system, yet this did not mean that he saw the situation as fair. Indeed, he also proclaimed most stridently that racism existed at Iowa State, squarely blaming the state government and university administration for the lack of Black faculty: “Blacks don’t want to stay in Iowa because they don’t think that they can get a fair chance to succeed . . . You aren’t going to see any Blacks on the Board of Regents.”

### WHAT FACULTY CAN DO

Given the complexity of the social situation faced by minority students on predominantly White campuses and the range of possible responses, the question for the English professor becomes “what can I do?” Certainly it is beyond the scope of any individual faculty member to solve all of the problems, but studies conducted by Peter Kobrack and by Elaine Patterson Walker have identified positive contact with faculty as a factor that predicts whether or not minority students persevere in higher education. Further, those who teach writing or literature courses with relatively small class sizes have important opportunities to connect with minority students. The difficulty, particularly for those who have never experienced what it’s like to be a minority, is in knowing what to do. The experiences of these three men suggest three general principles to guide professors’ interactions with minority students as individuals.

First, avoid essentialist assumptions. Kenneth’s, Calvin’s, and Ron’s experiences reflect the general trend of minority students facing the difficult issue of working out their own minority status while attending predominantly White colleges and universities. However, Kenneth’s case serves as a reminder that the response of individual minority students to this pressure cannot be predicted.

Second, be available. All three of these men reported that more advanced African American students had counseled them to get to know their teachers, to show up for office hours and, as Calvin put it, “I bug them to death. I stay on my professors; I mean, I, I show them that I’m interested in doing the best.” Of course, most English professors are not qualified counselors and should not attempt to help students with serious emotional problems, but they may provide helpful advice about succeeding in a given course or in college in general (particularly for minority students who are likely to be first-generation college students).

Third, show interest in minority students as individuals rather as representatives of their race. Ron’s stories of interaction with faculty were informative in this regard. He had known teachers who were so uncomfortable with his presence (usually he was the only African American student in his classes) that they could not even say the word “black” without obvious embarrassment. Ron spoke more positively of teachers who established a personal relationship with him and seemed to respect his opinion as an individual. He told of one White teacher who made him so comfort-

able that he was not embarrassed when she asked him (jokingly) to come to the front of the class and explain his painted jeans (a fashion statement popular in Ron's Chicago neighborhood but that had not yet appeared in Iowa). Perhaps Calvin provided the best explanation of how teachers can recognize difference without overtly making a student's race the primary issue:

I think the best college teachers that I've had kind of looked in me instead of at me—whether it be Black or White. And those are the ones that, that I developed relationships with, and I have done well.

At the institutional level, we see two specific problems for literacy instruction in higher education that English faculty have considerable power to address. English faculty are the natural group to consider whether or not students should be singled out in placement testing as “remedial” in terms of their language abilities. Of course this issue potentially affects all students, but given the research that we've reviewed, it is a particularly important issue for minority students. Peter Elbow has argued that identifying students as remedial is counterproductive and that instead of spending money on placement testing, English departments should investigate “heterogeneous writing classes” in which students of all abilities are mixed, augmented with supplementary help for students who need it (588). In response, Glynda Hull, Mike Rose, Kay M. Losey, and Marisa Castellano have argued that despite the possible stigmatizing effects, placement systems that identify some students as basic writers may be an institutional necessity if writing programs are to justify the resources necessary to provide help for these students. The paradox here is that it may be pragmatically necessary to risk stigmatizing students in order to help them make the transition to academic literacy.

Supplementary help for those identified as underprepared is essential. For example, our placement system identified Ron as “basic skills deficient” (a term we abhor), but because our university had dropped the English Department's basic writing program for budgetary reasons, Ron was placed in a section of the same entry-level writing course that Calvin and Kenneth took. Ron reported that his high school English courses had not prepared him adequately for this course: “Actually I had to take English over. I barely, I got a C— which wasn't really good enough [his proposed major required a C+] so I had to take English again.” Ron also reported that he made it through his first college writing course only because he got intensive help from the English Department's Writing Center, and eventually he developed a support group of strong writers who helped him so that he did not have to rely on the Writing Center as much. It is impossible to know from our data whether Ron would have fared better in a traditional basic writing program or how many students identified as “basic skills deficient” at our university fail their writing courses because they do not seek out the kinds of supplemental help that Ron found essential. What is clear from these men's experiences and from the research that we reviewed is that first-year

college writing courses will likely be problematic for many minority students and that if universities do identify students as “underprepared” then they must stand ready to provide supplementary help.

A second problem is the overwhelming presumption that academic and business discourse must be conducted in what passes for “standard” English. Despite the deluge of multicultural readers for composition courses and the growing use of multicultural literature in English curricula at all levels, grammar and style handbooks remain a ubiquitous presence in college writing courses and presume that all students should learn to speak like Peter Jennings and aspire to write *New Yorker* essays. Indeed, for two decades, the presumption has been a version of Mina Shaughnessy’s position that those who don’t control standard English must learn to do so:

a person who does not control the dominant code of literacy in a society that generates more writing than any society in history is likely to be pitched against more obstacles than are apparent to those who have already mastered that code. (13)

Twenty years later, in a recent *College English* article, Lynn Bloom reaffirms Shaughnessy’s basic point:

Like it or not, despite the critiques of academic Marxists, we are a nation of Standard English. Indeed, students themselves want and expect their work to be conducted in Standard English; their own concept of the language they should use reflects the linguistic standards of the communities in which they expect to live and work after earning their degrees. (670)

Bloom updates Shaughnessy’s arguments with nods to the postmodern dicta that knowledge must be seen as culturally constructed rather than as ontologically true, and she questions the usefulness of literacy success stories that imply that gaining academic literacy will lead to empowerment. However, at its root, her argument is the same as Shaughnessy’s: “freshman composition is an unabashedly middle-class enterprise” (655).

Kenneth, who had several years of work experience, agreed that standard English was essential:

If I’m with my boys, yeah, I can jive, I can talk all crazy and act stupid, but . . . if I’m going for a job interview, I don’t need to worry about saying the wrong verbs and if I’m writing a letter, I know how to write. I know how to edit.

Calvin and Ron seemed less enthusiastic about this kind of acculturation. Neither of them spoke as directly to this issue as Kenneth, and this is not surprising given that neither of them had the kind of work experience that Kenneth had. However, both seemed to see participation in White middle-class culture as more of a strain than Kenneth did. Both spoke of the importance of escaping to groups in which they could relax without worrying about how they talked or acted. Indeed, when we have presented these men’s stories to students on our campus, other African American men have confirmed the need to escape, to take a break from predominantly White culture. Of course, language is just one part of the cultural differences that cause these

difficulties, but given how much talk and writing goes on in academic and workplace settings it is an issue that cannot be overlooked.

Though many teachers of composition believe that it is their responsibility to teach students standard English (a position articulately argued by Donald Lazere, among others), in recent years, a growing number of composition theorists have begun to question this article of faith. As early as 1991, John Clifford argued that we must “think hard about the plausibility of the charge that in educational institutions writing is, in quite subtle ways, a servant to the dominant ideology” (39). More recently, Rebecca Moore Howard has argued that requiring minority students to engage in “code switching” is not an adequate solution to the problem of dialect differences faced by students and teachers in college writing courses. She contends that composition teachers have no right to make such language choices for minority students and that the argument that “linguistic assimilation will facilitate social success” doesn’t hold up because “for the minority American, linguistic accommodation is insufficient for social advancement” (277).

What then are English professors to do in writing or literature courses? Answers to this question are not easy. Although English professors have direct control over the curriculum of our courses, we cannot simply or immediately change the culture at large. Yet simply respecting students’ home cultures and requiring them to learn new discourse practices is also not a sufficient answer. We believe that literacy education at any level must begin at the intersection of teachers’ understandings of academic literacy practices and students’ literacy experiences. Further, the learning involved in such interactions must be at least two-way, with teachers learning about the literacy practices valued in students’ communities. As Howard argues, teachers must fully embrace multiplicity and “recognize that European culture does not equal American culture” (279). Similarly Kermit D. Campbell suggests that composition teachers might expand their own understandings of acceptable discourse practices by learning about discourse practices such as “signifying” that are used by minority students.

Such a position means that teachers must give more than lip service to the idea that learning begins at the intersection of students’ knowledge and what is accepted as disciplinary knowledge. Teachers must stand ready to learn from students; we must be willing to consider that students may find ways to address the constraints of rhetorical situations that would not have occurred to us. Such a position, however, does not mean that teachers have nothing to offer students. As Jeff Smith has argued, it is our job “to intervene in students’ intellectual lives” (201). What must be avoided is the too easy assumption that the inevitable mismatches that should be the beginning point of learning for both students and teachers are simply the results of students being “underprepared.” As Glynda Hull and Mike Rose have argued, *differences* too easily get cast as *cognitive deficits*.

At this point we must also note that this kind of dialogic approach to teaching academic literacy must be applied to mainstream as well as minority students. For

example, as we revised this article, one of David's White male students from rural Iowa questioned David's advice that the student use "panhandler" rather than "beggar" in an account of the student's first encounter with homeless people. The student reasoned that "beggar" is the term that he, his family, and his friends back home would actually use and that he didn't much care if using the term might undermine his credibility with academic audiences. Ron, Calvin, and Kenneth's experiences suggest that the social, cultural, academic, and linguistic adjustments faced by minority students will likely be more obvious and perhaps more problematic than issues of word choice. However, we are certain that we could find similar complex stories of persistence against difficulties among the White students at our university, and we have come to realize through this study that students from rural Iowa farm towns (some of whom have never seen a person of color before arriving at our university) also face an acculturation problem when they enroll at our university. Thus, seeing all students as experiencing some assimilation or resistance to cultural values in higher education may be critical in understanding the more extreme challenges faced by some minority students.

In short, we contend that English professors, and indeed the whole community of higher education, should not encourage assimilation or resistance *per se*; rather our responsibility is to provide opportunities for students to explore the consequences of assimilation or resistance and to make those choices for themselves. Such a position has real consequences in many areas of university curricula, particularly for those who teach first-year college writing courses. We must help students whose communities value language practices not valued in academia or corporate America to understand the consequences of choosing not to learn the practices that are valued in these arenas. Yet we cannot require them to learn those practices if they understand those consequences and still reject the cultural assimilation involved. In such a situation, we must be prepared to consider changes in our own values, willing to become forces for cultural change in the very institutions that we serve.

In conclusion, we argue that the English professoriate has a unique responsibility to serve as advocates for educational equity in higher education. The contact we have with minority students in the relatively intimate settings of first-year composition, literature, English education, and business and technical writing courses provides us with important opportunities to begin understanding the difficulties that minority students face on our various campuses. Again, all students—regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity—likely face some acculturation problems. However, as Ron, Calvin, and Kenneth's experiences illustrate, minority students face a problem that mainstream students never have to face: understanding their minority status and dealing with racially motivated incidents because of their visible difference from the majority of people on the campus and in the community. Teachers can play a critical role in representing the experiences of students like Ron, Calvin, and Kenneth in policy debates. In our experience, administrators are often

too distant from the experiences of students to understand the varied range of responses that minority students will have to the situations they face on college and university campuses. The minority students themselves usually don't have the status or the longevity to see policy changes through top-heavy administrative structures. Faculty, however, have both opportunities to interact with individual students and the staying power to see policy changes through.

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