

## **Campus-Community Partnership with African American Churches The Summer Academy**

*Leticia M. Arellano, Associate Professor of Psychology, Teresa Robbins, Research Associate, Richard Rose, Associate Professor of Religion and Philosophy, and Derek Vergara, Executive Director, Institute for Multicultural Research and Campus Diversity*

In 1996, the University of La Verne received a grant from the James Irvine Foundation to develop a comprehensive support network and environment to ensure the educational success of our African American students. This project was known as the *Umoja Project*. Alongside the Umoja Project, the University engaged in two additional diversity initiatives that encouraged academic departments to improve our campus climate.

Despite existing efforts to create and support an environment that embraces diversity, our data suggested that African Americans were less likely to remain enrolled at the University of La Verne (ULV) than other students. The first component of the Umoja Project, which focused on African American student recruitment and retention, examined the academic supports and barriers experienced by our students. The results of our investigation suggested that religion and spirituality were important support structures for our African American students. These findings were supported by a review of the research literature.

Research suggests that African Americans are more spiritual and religiously involved than European Americans. This involvement with a religious community provides an important source of social support for African Americans as well as promoting psychological well-being, effective coping mechanisms, and positive social outcomes. According to the literature, African Americans often rely on culture-specific and spiritually based coping mechanisms such as support from family and religious communities to address their mental health needs. African American students may be less likely to utilize formal or traditional psychological services such as university counseling centers because such use may imply a lack of faith. In addition, there are educational benefits to spirituality. Spirituality is associated with increased cooperative educational attitudes and increased GPA and receipt of academic honors among African American students. (Please refer to the bibliography for the specific research we reviewed.)

We developed a second initiative to partner with local African American churches because it was clear to us that connecting our African American students with local churches would strengthen their support networks.

### **Program Design**

During the summers of 2001 and 2002, the University of La Verne established a Campus Community Partnership with African American Churches, partnering with 5 local churches to create the *Summer Academy* program. The *Summer Academy* is a six-week,

academic, recreational, and cultural enrichment program designed to provide services for youth of the community. Eight to nine ULV students were hired each year to serve as youth counselors. More than 60 junior high school youth participated in the Summer Academy during 2001 and 2002. ULV students lived on campus for eight weeks and received a \$2,500 scholarship for the subsequent academic year.

The Campus Community Partnership with African American Churches incorporates goals for both community youth participants and ULV student counselors. We believe that involving ULV students in developing and implementing this program provides a greater sense of belonging and ownership within the ULV community through the residential experience and leadership opportunities. The Summer Academy has other objectives including: a) providing opportunities for students to reflect on, and build a stronger awareness of, the common values that exist among the professional staff both at ULV and the churches, among the volunteers within the partnering agencies, and among the themselves through their work in the surrounding community; and b) providing scholarship support to ease the ULV African-American students' financial burden. All these strategies aim to increase the retention and graduation rates of African American students.

### **Assessment and Findings**

Assessment data were collected from the nine student counselors who participated in the 2002 Summer Academy. All of the counselors reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the program. Eight of the nine counselors (89%) indicated a desire to participate in the Summer Academy again, while two had already been counselors in the 2001 program.

The counselors responses about the components of the Summer Academy they least and most liked varied widely. For example, several reported the recreation activities or the curriculum activities as least liked, while 33% of the counselors identified the curriculum activities as their favorite part of the Summer Academy. Some counselors valued having a positive impact on the children and talking to the children.

These same themes were reflected in what counselors found most beneficial and most challenging about their involvement in the Academy. Seventy-eight percent of the counselors found working with children and being a positive role model to be the most beneficial and the most challenging aspect of their participation in the Summer Academy. Also, 44% of the counselors reported to have benefited greatly from the Christian environment and spiritual growth they achieved through their participation in the Summer Academy.

Counselors were able to forge relationships with the church community through their participation in the Summer Academy. Six of the nine counselors (67%) commented that their participation in the Summer Academy had influenced them to consider possibly attending services at one of the churches in the near future.

Most impressive was the level of comfort and security the counselors reportedly developed within the church community. Eight of the nine counselors (89%) indicated that they would be comfortable or very comfortable turning to a church member for personal, emotional, or spiritual help and support. Four counselors (44%) indicated that they either likely or very likely would turn to a church member for help with personal, emotional, or spiritual problems. While the same number indicated that they were somewhat likely to turn to a church member for such help, only one indicated that this was not at all likely.

One student's comments provide insight about the experience of other Summer Academy counselors:

I feel like I have grown in wisdom of how to react in certain situations whether they are with children or adults. I gained a lot from the workshops we did during youth empowerment [and] from our guest speakers—they clarified a lot of things for me that I thought I already knew. I have also grown spiritually, I think; I have a better sense of how and when to pray and what to pray for. I am a lot more thankful for my life and the opportunities I was granted during the summer program. I feel comfortable with who I am as a person and what kind of teacher I want to become.

## **Lessons Learned**

African American students who are religious or spiritual may view their church or spiritual communities as primary settings for their psychological support. We found that collaborating with African American churches was an essential component of these ULV students' success. We also learned that although establishing campus-community partnerships is a daunting task and requires commitment and dedication from all, the effort is worthwhile at two levels: 1) ULV African American students report personal satisfaction and growth from their interaction with the churches; and 2) these students have a higher retention rate than both non-participating African American students and the general student body. In addition, local African American youth, and many of their parents, were introduced to aspects of college life and the University of La Verne that may not have been available to them otherwise.

Our students, and our campus, were given an opportunity to receive increased social support from the local African American church community. While students served as role models to the local youth, campus practitioners also served as role models to students by exhibiting the confidence required to ask for and accept help from the community.

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