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The African American Male Initiative at the University of Louisville

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The University of Louisville has a mandate to become Kentucky's premier metropolitan research university (University of Louisville, n.d.). Implicit in this mandate, is an emphasis on serving unique populations of the state that either attend, or are likely to attend, the University of Louisville. The University is the most racially and ethnically diverse campus out of all of the public four-year institutions in the Commonwealth. The largest population of traditionally under-represented students is African Americans. These students make up approximately 11% of the student population. Of these students, approximately 37% are male and approximately 63% are female.

Despite the large number of African American students attending the University, the persistence and graduation rates of African American males

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continue to fall behind their female counterparts and White students. The University of Louisville has an opportunity to be a leader within higher education in creating strategies that work within urban contexts for African American male students. This can only be achieved through a sustained, visible commitment to recruiting, retaining, and graduating this specific group of students. A commitment to African American males not only meets the needs of these students, but also meets the institution's goals of increasing retention and graduation rates. The old adage *a rising tide raises all ships* holds true in the case of graduation rates within a university.

The University of Louisville Cultural Center serves the needs of several under-represented groups on campus, many of whom are African American students. The Center serves as a hub of involvement, research, and programming for the entire campus population, and strives to increase the multi-cultural competence of university faculty, staff, and students. The Cultural Center currently oversees the African American Male Initiative. This practitioner's brief outlines the initiative's goals and outcomes, the theoretical and programmatic framework, and program focus areas.

African American Male Initiative (AAMI)

Objective and Goals

The African American Male Initiative is charged with researching, creating, and implementing strategies to support the retention and graduation of

African American undergraduate males attending the University of Louisville. The primary goal of AAMI is to achieve year-to-year increases in first-year African American undergraduate male retention, and to increase the four, five, and six-year graduation rates of African American male undergraduates.

Student Learning Outcomes

Participants in the program should be able to (a) clearly articulate the challenges to successful attainment of a bachelor’s degree; (b) logically reason to find purposeful solutions to navigate matriculation and graduation barriers; (c) connect the relevance of campus and community networking to the successful completion of college; and (d) apply learned skills to successfully navigate the campus culture. Figure 1 provides a summary of strategies to support African American male retention and graduation as identified by Cuyjet (2006).

1. Work with already involved African American men to recruit their uninvolved same-race peers.
2. Systematically collect data from uninvolved African American men to determine how their out-of-class time is spent and why their participation in structured, university-sponsored activities and organization is low.
3. Hold student organization leaders accountable for reaching out to underrepresented groups, including African American men.
4. Provide financial and advisory support for minority student organizations, as they provide a much-needed involvement pipeline for African American men.
5. Create and support groups specifically for African American men.
6. Encourage and support consciousness-raising programming as it is likely to incite action.

7. Persuade emerging African American male students to seek leadership positions in student organizations.
8. Host an annual campus kickoff event for African American men.
a. Organize program for African American male college students designed to introduce them to campus organizations and membership and leadership opportunities.
b. Establish a mentoring program during new student orientation, encouraging African American faculty and staff to mentor African American male students.
9. Reach out to African American parents during new student orientation.
10. Form a coalition of collaborators who are interested in strengthening outcomes for African American undergraduate men.

Figure 1. Summary of AAMI Strategies.

Theoretical Framework

The fundamental purpose of the African American Male initiative is to produce students who are capable of identifying and understanding the challenges to success that will lie ahead, and then to intentionally work to overcome these challenges. This process entails a high level of self-authorship as students are challenged to balance external factors (e.g., family, socio-economic status, ethnicity and cultural background) with internal beliefs and values towards success and attainment. The AAMI therefore encourages intense self-reflection so that students not only find a solution to challenges, but can also answer the question, “How did I come to this solution?”

The purpose of the initiative is not solely based on increasing student graduation but also on developing well-reasoned critical thinkers. This is accomplished by incorporating the *elements of thought* into program design and practice as defined by Paul and Elder (2010). The *elements of thinking* as defined by Paul and Elder are shown below in Figure 2.

1. All reasoning has a PURPOSE
2. All reasoning is an attempt to FIGURE SOMETHING OUT, TO SETTLE SOME QUESTION, TO SOLVE SOME PROBLEM
3. All reasoning is based on ASSUMPTIONS
4. All reasoning is done from some POINT OF VIEW
5. All reasoning is based on DATA, INFORMATION and EVIDENCE
6. All reasoning is expressed through, and shaped by, CONCEPTS and IDEAS
7. All reasoning contains INFERENCES or INTERPRETATIONS by which we draw CONCLUSIONS and give meaning to data
8. All reasoning leads somewhere or has IMPLICATIONS and CONSEQUENCES

Figure 2. Paul and Elder's (2010) elements of thinking.

A unique variable within the initiative is that the students are developing through many stages of their own identity. However, one of the qualifiers for the program is their African American identity and intentional efforts are made to facilitate this ethnic identity development. Phinney (1989) defines three stages in the development of ethnic identity, (a) unexamined ethnic identity, (b) ethnic identity search, and (c) ethnic identity achievement. Interactions with students focus on helping them to understand where they are on the sliding scale of

identity affirmation and empowering them to use their skills and talents to be prosperous.

Areas of Focus

The AAMI uses the acronym *AMPS* to identify the focus areas for the participants, which represents a fitting acronym, as amps are a force that can be measured and also increased accordingly. ‘A’ represents *Academic Engagement*, and ensures that students maintain academics as a first priority. ‘M’ represents *Mentoring Support*, and ensures that faculty, staff, and upper-class students are recruited and integrated into the learning and success of each participant. ‘P’ represents *Peer Connection*, recognizing that strong, relevant, and positive peer groups are vital to the long-term integration and success of students on and off campus. ‘S’ represents *Student Involvement* and recognizes the importance of leadership and pre-professional skills in the development of successful students. The factors align with what the literature reports leads to persistence and success of students (Astin, 1993; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 1975).

Program Framework

The program utilizes several programs within the *AMPS* framework to address the needs of the participants and to effectively satisfy the strategies to support African American male retention and graduation listed in Figure 1. These programs uniquely focus around research-defined areas of support required for

academic success with African American males and include: the Early Arrival Program (EAP), Academic Support Program (ASP), for-credit African American Male Identity Class (AAMIC), Graduation Preparation Session (GPS), and Peer Mentoring (PM). Figure 3 shows the intersection of these programs graphically.

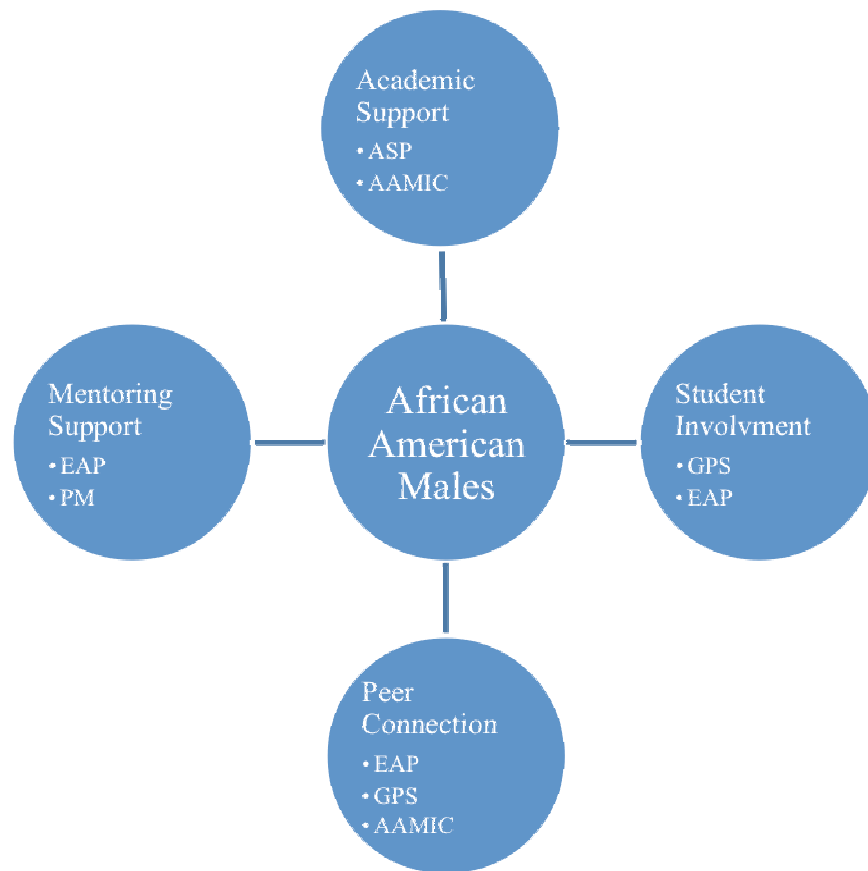


Figure 3. Programs to Support African American Males.

Additional information about each these programs is included below.

Early arrival program (EAP). The purpose of the EAP is to (a) make immediate contact with the young men who are entering the college campus, (b)

establish a sense of family and support early in an individual’s academic career, and (c) make students aware of campus resources prior to the campus wide “Welcome Week” activities and the first day of classes. The schedule runs from 48 hours prior to Welcome Week activities. To save on costs, students move in to their residence halls, or other place of residence, only one night prior to the general campus move-in. Activities include social icebreakers, meet-and-greets with campus faculty and staff, small group mentor meetings, shared meals, a campus tour, educational discussions from faculty, staff, and alumni, and lots of peer networking opportunities.

Academic support program (ASP). The Academic Support Program is centered on auxiliary services provided by a designated academic specialist to students affiliated with the program. Figure 4 outlines the expectations for the academic specialist by semester.

<i>Fall Semester</i>
Present on all academic services provided by UofL to assist in student success.
Identify all the courses that have supplemental instruction (SI) and Learning Assistance (LA) instructors.
Gain commitment from students to utilize an academic service for all courses with a grade of C or lower based on self-reporting.
Participate in group study sessions.
Conduct one-on-one meeting at least once per semester in order to evaluate test-taking strategies, note-taking, and study skills/strategies.
<i>Spring Semester</i>
At the first Graduate Preparation Session discuss academic development and have each member complete an Individual Success Plan.
Meet with all AAMI students who end the fall semester with a GPA < 2.0. In these 30-minute conferences, the students will be challenged to identify

<p>the factors that led to their academic performance in the fall semester. The staff member will also gather information on the student, including their test-taking strategies, note-taking, study skills/strategies, and time management methods.</p>
<p>Based on the student's comments and other information gathered, including relevant contextual information (e.g., first generation status, job, residential or non-residential), recommendations are made for academic success. Follow-up meetings will be scheduled at the end of the meeting for those students identified to need one.</p>

Figure 4. Academic Specialist Expectations for ASP.

African American male identity class (AAMIC). An emerging goal of the AAMI is the creation of a Black Male/Cultural Identity Course worth 1-3 credit hours. Sixty percent of the class would be taught by a faculty member within an academic unit (e.g., Pan-African Studies), with AAMI task force members teaching 40% of the class. This course would support the ideals of academic success while engaging students in the classroom. An academic course has several benefits, including: more frequent interactions with the AAMI students; increasing the rapport and institutional credibility of the program and AAMI mentors and students; adding structure to the first-year student experience; allowing for a true “living-learning community” within Housing and Residence Life; and providing students with both social and cognitive developmental experiences during their most formative year in college.

Graduate preparation sessions (GPS). GPS meetings serve as out-of-class meetings focused on developing life skills, coping strategies, and success tips for AAMI participants. They serve as an important tool to create formal and informal

networks, and provide a safe space through which university resources and involvement opportunities are shared. These programs include but are not limited to dinner etiquette, personal finance, academic mediation, life planning, and assertive communication. With the addition of the African American Male Identity Class, the structure and purpose of the GPS Meetings are intended to become more informal in nature.

Peer mentoring. A member of the AAMI task force supervises the Peer Mentoring component directly with the assistance of four undergraduate or graduate students (of any race or gender) to create and supervise a *mentor team*. This team will consist of a *Mentorship Coordinator* and three work-study eligible students as *Assistant Mentorship Coordinators*. This team approach creates a web of student mentorship that meets the unique needs of the participants, while spreading the work-load among several qualified students and staff. The AAMI Mentor Coordinator is paid a small stipend during the year. Coordinator duties include: being a liaison to the AAMI task force and mentors; selecting and screening mentors; assisting with the GPS and class responsibilities; and assessing the mentorship program.

Participant Recruitment

The following are the planned steps as the program looks to welcome its second cohort of participants. Throughout the months of May, June and July, task-force members and AAMI alumni students will utilize several marketing

strategies to recruit students to the program. This period will also be utilized to conduct mentor training and all preparations for the Early Arrival Program. The program will, as with the first cohort, be capped at 50 students to ensure adequate resources will be provided to the freshman students and to those continuing in the sophomore iteration. The program timeline is outlined below in Figure 5.

Mentor application Due (late April)
Request list of admitted African American Males (Early May)
Send e-mails and postcards with details of the program (Mid-May)
Mentor Selection (Mid-May)
EAP Planning Meeting (May-July)
Utilize AAMI student group members to call potential students (May-June)
Introduce AAMI to students throughout orientation sessions (May-June)
Mentor training program (May-June)
AMI Task Force Members contact parents and potential students (June)
Seek commitments from students (June)
Book arrangements for Early Arrival Program (July)
Financial Aid and Advising Assistance Program (July)
Mentor Families Created (July)
EAP prep session (Early August)
Early Arrival program (Prior to Welcome Week)
Mentor/ Mentee Socials (Welcome Week)
First GPS meeting (Early September)

Figure 5. Participant Recruitment Timeline.

Conclusion

The persistence and graduation of African American males at four-year institutions of higher education has increased in past decades, but still remain consistently and significantly lower than that of their non-African American male counterparts (Planty et al., 2009). African American male retention rates are also lower than their female counterparts of the same ethnic background. These data continue to be a reality, despite the extensive literature on African American students in college. It is incumbent on institutions of higher education, particularly public institutions, to remain vigilant about creating programs and services that target and support African American males through college and on to graduation. The University of Louisville, in an attempt to answer the mandate to be a premiere metropolitan research university, is seeking to do just that through its African American Male Initiative.

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