AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS AND UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION: A CRITICAL SOCIAL COMMENTARY

Joy L. Kennedy, PhD, CCC-SLP
Department of Communication Sciences & Disorders, East Carolina University,
Greenville, NC, USA

— ABSTRACT —

This commentary focuses on the challenging recruitment and retention matters of African American (AA) undergraduate students in the field of Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD). Most recently, Ginsberg (2018a) offers a framework to facilitate the understanding of AA student recruitment and retention matters in CSD using the qualitative responses of AA speech-language pathologists. As a result, this commentary provides insight to the author's experiences with AA undergraduate students using themes of community, outside resource connections, and culturally competent, caring mentoring. Furthermore, this article provides recommendations for inclusive teaching and learning practices with AA undergraduate students during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

This commentary analyzes the sociocultural implications of the current COVD-19 pandemic on the undergraduate education of African American (AA) students in Communication Sciences Disorders (CSD) programs. While the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the nation's awareness of health and social disparities (Deal-Williams, 2020), there has minimal discussion of how to retain and recruit AA students in CSD during this global pandemic. In a recent review of the literature, Ginsberg (2018a) highlighted recommendations from 11 (nine females, two males) African American Speech-Language Pathologists - for the retention and recruitment influences of AA students in speech-language pathology programs. In the study, Ginsberg (2018a) revealed four central themes of mentoring – culturally competent mentoring, caring mentoring, co-mentoring, and mentors connecting students to outside resources. In another article, Ginsberg (2018b) utilized an 'academic resilience framework' to describe the experiences of the study participants in their undergraduate and/or graduate CSD programs including the following: Microaggressions, Culture Shock, Isolation, Mentoring (on a personal level), Community, and Grit.

As an undergraduate program director, the themes in Ginsberg's (2018a, 2018b) articles have motivated me to reflect on the achievement of the AA undergraduate students in my department's program. I began to use different terminology rather than only satisfactory (e.g. passing) or unsatisfactory (e.g. failing) grades in major courses. Specifically, during the immediate transition of course instructional methods from face-to-face teaching to online teaching amid the COVID-19 pandemic, my utmost concern was for those students who demonstrated low achieving grades in prior semesters and how the abrupt transition to complete online learning. However, there was another more specific reason to be concerned and that included the matriculation of current African American students in CSD undergraduate and graduate programs. That concern was related to increased enrollment of African American students at the undergraduate level since the 2013-2014 academic year. The data indicated an increase

of CSD undergraduate enrollment of racial/ethnic minority students from 20.6% to 29.5% in the 2018-2019 academic year (CSD Education Survey, n.d.). Accordingly, CSD faculty needed to become more attentive to the retention of underrepresented student populations. More importantly there were three keys areas where faculty needed to better understand the concepts of community, outside resource connections, and culturally competent, and caring mentoring. I offer my reflective experiences with the undergraduate education of AA students with teaching and learning connections during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community

The development of community was a theme of success for the participants in Ginsberg's (2018b) study. Four of the study participants completed their undergraduate degrees at a Historically Black College/University (HBCUs); however, the specific undergraduate degrees were unknown. In comparison, only one study participant earned the SLP master's degree at an HBCU. Thus, the majority of the study participants earned their SLP master's degrees at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Interestingly, while in graduate school, the study participants reported the benefits of having formal community networks such as the National Black Association of Speech-Language and Hearing (NBASLH). In contrast, among undergraduates, only one study participant mentioned maintaining communal relationships in the transition from undergraduate to graduate courses at the same university (Ginsberg, 2018b).

Similarly, most of the AA students enrolled in current university undergraduate program participated in informal meetings or study groups together to create their own community. In my conversations with the AA students enrolled in our program, their group gatherings were inspiring and provided a sense of identity and belonging within the undergraduate program. While most undergraduate students assume responsibility for their participation within communal networks, CSD programs may need to shoulder some of that burden and consider methods for the intentional engagement of AA students in virtual groups for informal (nonacademic) and formal (academic) discussions based on student interests during the COVID-19 pandemic. The informal groups may serve to facilitate opportunities for the students and faculty to develop mentoring relationships; whereas, the formal groups may need to consist of intentional grouping of students for the teaching and learning of diverse cultural experiences in a variety of subject areas. As a result, faculty will be able to foster community building that is inclusive of all undergraduate students in the deliberative practice that seeks to affirm and empower students of diverse racial/ethnic groups (Gay, 2010).

Outside Resource Connections

The Ginsberg (2018a) study participants endorsed the need for AA students to have 'outside resource connections.' For many of the study participants their outside resource connections included attending the NBASLH Convention (Ginsberg, 2018a). Additionally, in my undergraduate program director experiences, I frequently advised students regarding the available on- and off-campus resources, specifically in the areas of mental health and awareness. In my experience most students who appear on my academic warning lists have acknowledged diagnosed and/or undiagnosed mental health difficulties often related to stress, depression, and anxiety.

The stress of the undergraduate experience is often exacerbated by the demands for high grade achievements for graduate school admissions (Roos & Schreck, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the American College Health Association (ACHA) provided explicit guidelines for universities to consider in the availability and provision of mental health services for students to include telemental health and other resource connections to increase student care (ACHA, 2020). These guidelines have become very important for the retention of AA undergraduate students who consistently verbalize challenges with mental health due to working multiple jobs, being first-generation college students, and other family/personal issues. In order to recognize the diverse cultural mental health expressions of AA students, faculty will need to acknowledge that a variety of social and cultural variables (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc.) affect the 'expressive behaviors' (learning, thinking, speaking, performing, etc.) of AA students within and outside the academic classroom (Gay, 2010).

Culturally Competent, Caring Mentoring

Finally, the participants in Ginsberg's (2018a) study advocated for culturally competent, caring mentoring in CSD programs to aid the recruitment and retention of AA students. Based on the study participants' experiences, culturally competent mentoring should involve faculty from all racial-ethnic backgrounds involved in listening and talking to the AA students and getting to know them personally. The study participants defined caring mentoring as building safe and welcoming communities that

develop trust, rapport, and care in relationships (Ginsberg, 2018a). The AA students in my current department's undergraduate program frequently communicate that the actions of care demonstrated by faculty members influenced their ability to believe in themselves, succeed academically, and pursue CSD careers. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the AA students' gratitude of expressions focused on faculty who were intentional in their actions of care in the offering of additional academic support and outside resource connections.

Culturally competent caring is inclusive, action-oriented, responsive, and accountable which is a component of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010). Consequently, culturally responsive actions of care also involve understanding and talking about social inequities. In CSD undergraduate programs, faculty will need to consider having conversations with students about evident sociocultural inequities that many undergraduate students of color possibly experience daily. More specifically, topics of online education access, will enable faculty and students to engage in 'problem-posing dialogue' (Freire, 2009) of technology and internet resources that either support or challenge teaching and learning within educational institutions and the implications for underrepresented student populations.

Conclusion

This commentary provides a brief overview of recommendations to facilitate the retention and recruitment of AA students in CSD programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The themes of community, outside resource connections, and culturally competent, caring mentoring are strongly suggested in response to Ginsberg's (2018a, 2018b) study results and my personal experiences. Finally, novel teaching and learning perspectives should be incorporated into online teaching approaches to also enhance the recruitment and retention of AA students.

References

American College Health Association (2019). *Considerations for reopening institutions of higher education in the COVID-19 Era*. Retrieved from https://www.acha.org/documents/resources/guidelines/ACHA_Considerations_for_Reopening_IHEs_in_the_COVID-19_Era_May2020.pdf

CSD Education Survey (n.d.). *Communication Sciences and Disorders Trend Data*. Retrieved from https://www.asha.org/uploadedFiles/Communication-Sciences-and-Disorders-Education-Trend-Data.pdf

Deal-Williams, V.R. (2020, June). Addressing disparities in the wake of injustice, violence, and COVID-19. *The ASHA Leader,* Retrieved from https://leader.pubs.asha.org/do/10.1044/2020-0601-addressing-disparities-of-injustice/full/

Freire, P. (2009). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th Anniversary Ed.). New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group.

Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.

Ginsberg, Sarah M. (2018a). Increasing African American student success in speech-language pathology programs, *Teaching and Learning in Communication Sciences & Disorders*, 2 (3). doi.org/10.30707/TLCSD2.3Ginsberg2

Ginsberg, Sarah M. (2018b). Stories of success: African American speech-language pathologists' academic resilience, *Teaching and Learning in Communication Sciences & Disorders*, 2(3). doi.org/10.30707/TLCSD2.3Ginsberg

Roos, B.H., & Schreck, J.S. (2019). Stress in undergraduate students studying communication sciences and disorders, *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups*, 4, 1430-1444. doi.org/10.1044/2019_PERS-SIG10-2019-0003

Contact Information:
Dr. Joy L. Kennedy
Email: kennedyjo15@ecu.edu