CHALLENGES IN ACADEMIA DUE TO COVID-19

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When the world stood still in the midst of the declared pandemic, social distancing and self-quarantining became the new normal. While these are unprecedented times, people of color are disproportionately affected in unpredictable ways. Health reports show that the number of African-Americans dying with coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is greater than the proportion of those who reside in several major cities. This disparity is believed to be related to the disproportionate number of persons in the African American community with medical complexities which put them at higher risk of contracting and ultimately dying from COVID-19, confirming the reports from China that the outcomes were worse for persons with co-existing medical conditions. America has been bombarded hourly with disturbing news about the increasing number of positive cases and the rising number of deaths. What we aren't hearing is how the decision to close college campuses has affected the students and academicians; especially those belonging to minority racial groups, in the weight of the pandemic fall out. Specifically, are there issues that disproportionally affect Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD) programs and their African American students.

When all college students were sent home and told they would be completing the rest of the semester online, no one in authority could have imagined the complications it would cause. For some, returning home was welcomed as they eased back into the familiar comfort zone. The transition for them was unremarkable and yielded little to no change in academic performance. However, for many others, "going away" to college was a subtle escape from certain environments and/or situations that may be deemed as distracting or even volatile. Campus life gave them an opportunity to put a primary focus on academics, explore social activities, and mature independently. Being forced to move back home may have caused unsuspecting and unanticipated stress that was reflected as a decline in academic performance and/or increase in critical issues in mental health. It is without question that the at-risk learners who were struggling to maintain passing grades in face-to-face courses on campus, while utilizing every resource available, would experience greater difficulty in online classes without the support of tutors and teaching assistants. Fortunately, many universities and colleges adopted new grading policies to be used during this season of crisis, which allowed students to choose if they wanted to receive traditional letter grades or pass/fail on a course by course basis. A pass/fail option was offered to students and beneficial for non-major courses. Yet, this option was not absolute for students in communication sciences and disorders programs because pass/fail grade points do not get factored into to the overall Grade Point Average (GPA). In addition, most, if not all, graduate programs in Communication Sciences and Disorders, the GPA calculation of major courses is required for completion of the degree; therefore, the pass/fail option could not be selected. One can only imagine the level of anxiety that came with this decision and the recognition that the same decision may put their future career at stake.

Additionally, academicians were challenged with recreating course materials that were designed for interaction and collaboration in a face-to-face classroom within a relatively short time period. With this type of change, it is not always easy to maintain the equity between online and face-to-face courses, but it's not impossible. Online courses require more independent learning and interactive activities can be designed that keep students engaged whether the course is synchronous or asynchronous. The greater challenge is how to help the aforementioned at-risk learners who struggle with courses using an online format, when external resources are limited, household environments contain overwhelming distractions, and anxiety elevates amid mental and physical health and safety concerns.

Current reports on COVID-19 tell us that things will not return to "business as usual" for quite some time. Therefore, we must be proactive in a very visible and audible way in order to make sure that at-risk learners and students of color are well equipped to compete within a system in which they are already considered to be the underdog. The number of African American students admitted to CSD graduate programs has been lower than that of mainstream

students even in Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). Consider this scenario, African American students within CSD graduate programs having a difficult time adjusting to online learning may have decreased academic performance thereby putting their continuance in the program in jeopardy. Likewise, African American students applying to CSD graduate programs will now have even greater competition. That leaves us with a number of concerning questions…A) How do we prepare African American students who are potential candidates to be viable applicants during these unprecedented conditions? B) How do we provide support in order to retain the current African American students within graduate programs despite the challenges erected by COVID-19?

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