Addressing the Neglect of Students of Color: The Strategy of Life Coaching

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Abstract

During an era of declining enrollment and increasing operational costs, schools affiliated with the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) are challenged to remain vigilant in addressing the particular needs of racial ethnic minority (REM) students. Upon review of the literature on REM and first-generation students, that REM students continue to be invisible because of structural institutional neglect is notable. Yet the Christian scriptures call for the spiritual practice of seeing the other, a theme explored here through an integrative discussion. The practical strategy of life coaching is then suggested as one way to aid these students in their academic journey, because it improves the student's sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and ultimately, their success. Christian colleges and universities are urged to seriously consider implementing life coaching in order to serve students of color better.

Key Words: student coaching, student retention, a sense of belonging, people of color, first-generation students, first-generation learners, minority students

One of the authors of this article, a minority faculty member teaching at a school affiliated with the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), continually notices the lack of racial diversity in her classes and how, in each class, one or two students of color always sit at the edge of the classroom. When she invited one of these students to move closer to the center of the room, the student politely declined, saying she was more comfortable sitting in

the corner by herself because it more accurately reflected her experience of being invisible as a minority student. Though unsurprising, it sadly captured the experiences of many other minority students on college campuses.

Another one of the authors discovered a minority student's plagiarism. The assignment was a personal reflection paper, hardly the type of assignment where plagiarism would be expected. When questioned, the student simply said she did not believe she had anything of value to offer. Furthermore, the student seemed genuinely incredulous that her voice mattered. The low self-worth this student felt was deeply troubling to the professor, because it suggested that our educational institutions are failing to teach these students to overcome their experiences of invisibility and marginalization. Convinced that more than teaching such students the mechanics of writing must be done to address their sense of personal significance, the professor met the student a few more times to encourage her to develop her own voice. Later, the student sent a note of gratitude, explaining how she had not realized in the embarrassing moment she was caught plagiarizing that it would be the turning point in learning that she mattered, leading her to take her own education seriously.

Encountering students teaches professors valuable lessons. Professors have the opportunity to notice the overlooked and virtually invisible and empower those students more than professors tend to realize. So how can professors individually and institutions collectively cultivate an inclusive environment for minority students? Institutions must continue to bring systematic change to improve the experiences of students of color within their halls. While the problem has been addressed, minority students continue to face ongoing alienation on largely white campuses.

This article employs *invisibility* as a term to define the estrangement these students face. The first section focuses on REM students who have the additional challenge of being first-generation students. It then discusses how institutions structurally, though likely unintentionally, maintain barriers that promote this experience of invisibility. Next, the spiritual theme of "seeing" as a biblical ethic that acknowledges the needs of minority students is put forward. Finally, institutions must devise effective strategies for enhancing the educational experiences of minority students. Of the several promising strategies that have been introduced, one in particular will be expounded and advocated: *individual coaching*. As principally white institutions address the embedded, systemic challenges presented to their minority students, individual coaching offers students a strategy to cope immediately, while structural and cultural changes take longer to implement.

The Invisibility of Minority Students

Works such as Arthur Holmes's classic *The Idea of a Christian College* (1987) suggest numerous possibilities for re-imagining Christian higher education, some of which are

dissonant. Some possibilities are encouraging, while some present realities are deeply disturbing. Holmes's words are convicting, as he seems to speak of a future that he has not yet experienced. Christian colleges and universities should be places that "[cultivate] the creative and active integration of faith and learning, of faith and culture" (Holmes 1987:6). Written more than thirty years ago, were his claims mere idealism, or have the stewards of Christian colleges and universities simply not been listening? One continuing problem in Christian colleges and universities is the invisibility of the cultures, experiences, narratives, and theologies of non-white college students within the sacred halls of these predominantly white institutions.

The prophetic vision that Arthur Holmes articulated concerning Christian colleges and universities has yet to be fully realized because certain groups remain invisible. When students of color enter the hallowed halls of Christian colleges and universities, they are, in the words of Willie James Jennings, "entering old academic buildings that were not built with them in mind" (2014:37). The practice of Christian educational institutions proclaiming that they are living out their commitments as biblically reconciled intercultural communities, while at the same time marginalizing the experiences, culture, and voices of students of color, is disturbingly ironic.

Until recently, ethnic diversity efforts at Christian colleges and universities have lagged behind secular schools (Paredes-Collins 2009). As a result, racial ethnic minority (REM) students have faced difficulties surviving, much less succeeding, in Christian institutions due to their experiences of marginalization and lack of support (Pérez 2010). Many of those difficulties stem from the conflict between the institutional values, prevailing "cultural tool kits" (Emerson and Smith 2001:76), and worldviews of mainstream white evangelical administrators, teachers, and students, and those of REM students. This is especially true with regard to prevailing perceptions of racial and structural inequalities, poverty, and independence versus interdependence in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) (Smith 2009).

In the latest demographic study commissioned by the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), enrollment of REM students had increased, but CCCU institutions still lagged behind non-CCCU institutions, with one geographical region showing an increase of just 1.5 percent in six years (Reyes and Case 2011). The lack of ethnic diversity and sluggish growth patterns within Christian colleges and universities makes REM student invisibility more problematic and contributes to the pervasive normativity of whiteness in the majority of spaces, curricula, and activities (Harper and Hurtado 2007). Consequently, matriculation through a PWI is "analogous to an acculturative experience" (Cole and Arriola 2007:381) for REM students. Considering the stigma among African American and Latino/a students (Pinel, Warner, and Chua 2005), exemplified in their perceived inferiority in cultural language, dress, classroom behavior, and ability to socialize, and the questioning and suppression of their racial and religious heritage (Joiner Jr. and Walker 2002; Simmons et al. 2013), what occurs is a form of cultural eradication.

The irreducibility and normativity of whiteness that facilitates the invisibility of REM students is not a new phenomenon. As in the case of African slavery during the late 16th-mid 19th centuries, even Christians have struggled to see the melanin of certain peoples without seeking to own and spatially displace those bodies, especially those of a darker hue. Early colonizers' framework of racialized oppression in rationalizing and propagating the subjugation of black and brown bodies for matters of cost efficiency is well-known (Richardson 2000). Less prominent, however, is the fact that this racialized framework was able to gain tremendous traction and establish itself as the *modus operandi* in colonial society—and afterward—because it "arose inside of, nurtured itself on, and even camouflaged itself within the discourse of theology" (Carter 2008:12). That whites historically problematized blackness theologically has been the metaphorical Achilles heel in efforts by Christian colleges and universities to make REM students feel a part of the institutional fabric.

The invisibility of REM students dehumanizes them. Due to the decades of silence of institutions regarding issues of race and social justice (Harper and Hurtado 2007) or the neutralizing of racial norms, realities, and discourses through the construction of coded languages (Castagno 2008), REM students are stripped of their ontic status of full humanity (Freire 1996). The unrecognized agency of REM students attending PWIs epitomizes the unique sort of objectification they experience in such settings. Gradually, the process of assimilation disempowers and strips the oppressed of their native cultural clothing, covering the consequent nakedness with new cultural clothes that resemble those of their oppressors. In this process, their individual as well as corporate voice is diminished and disempowered, becoming an echo of the dominant group's voice (Freire 2000). This invalidation of voice completes invisibility.

Racial and Ethnic Minority First-Generation College Students

Since many racial and ethnic minority (REM) students are also first-generation college students (FGCS), we must understand the impact of that fact on retention. Of all black females entering college, 48% are first-generation college students (Collier-Goubil 2015). The FGCS population among Latinos, however, is even higher than other ethnic groups (Spiegler and Bednarek 2013:322).

One of the major challenges for FGCS is the lack of traditional support networks, such as college-educated parents who can aid their children in navigating college (Ishitani 2006). This resulting lack of social capital needed to succeed in the college environment can affect academic performance (Soria and Stebleton 2012). For example, compared to their continuing-generation peers, FGCS tend to lack confidence in asking faculty for help (Collier and Morgan 2008; Swail 2014), to experience more confusion over fulfilling assignment expectations (Collier and Morgan 2008), and to lack academic preparation in general (Ishitani 2006). FGCS also tend not to be as involved in student life, because they often work at paid employment more hours

than continuing-generation students, are more likely to live off-campus, are more likely to help out at home (as cited in Spiegler and Bednarek 2013:326), and have isolating and disconnecting college experiences (Soria and Stebleton 2012).

Social class is also a major factor in the invisibility and retention of FGCS, especially those who come from working class backgrounds and experience a "cultural mismatch" with the college institution (Stephens et al. 2012:1180). While their middle and upper class peers have been socialized to value independence, FGCS tend to have been socialized to value interdependence (Stephens et al. 2012). Since the college institution is built on middle-class norms of independence, this produces a lack of fit for FGCS that can result in achieving lower grades than their peers (Stephens et al. 2012). Independence is associated with the perspective and worldview of many middle and upper class people who emphasize self-actualization and entitlement, while working class students are socialized to take into account others' needs and to value connection. Their emphasis on interdependence may encourage those FGCS to shy away from the attitudes and behaviors associated with independence that would help them succeed in the classroom. Moreover, while it is commonly believed that over time FGCS will be shaped by the college institution in ways that promote greater independence, the mismatch between FGCS and the institution may actually be reinforced (Phillips, Stephens, and Townsend 2016). The value of interdependence may encourage FGCS to continue to rely more on their families and home communities for support, thereby resulting in less independence (Phillips et al. 2016). A cultural mismatch can continue throughout college and result in reinforcing social inequality between FGCS and their continuing-generation peers (Phillips et al. 2016).

While the above focuses on FGCS in general, REM FGCS face additional challenges. For example, family dynamics impact the experience of REM FGCS in other ways. On one hand, for many Latino FGCS, family serves as a source of motivation for academic success, and they see their education as leading to the betterment of their families (Gloria and Castellanos 2012). Also, as Tiffany Wang points out, FGCS may view their success not only as a personal achievement, but also as the family's success (Wang 2012:338). On the other hand, family can also be a source of stress. FGCS, especially Latinos, experience "family achievement guilt" (Covarrubias & Fryberg 2015:421). They may feel like they are abandoning or betraying their families by being given opportunities to rise in social class above their family that other family members did not receive. These and other factors contribute to the unique challenges that REM FGCS face, making them especially vulnerable to invisibility within educational institutions and hence lower retention.

Institutional Neglect

The lack of recognition and the difficulty of inclusion of minority students as part of the larger student body is an intransigent problem in North American higher education. Racial and

ethnic minorities, and under-represented groups in particular, report greater isolation and lower sense of belonging compared to white college students (Ecklund 2013). These experiences are associated with a variety of undesirable outcomes educationally (performance, retention, graduation rates) and personally (mental and physical health). Christian higher education is not exempt from these issues. Indeed, they may be even more pronounced in religious institutions. That these issues often go unnoticed or are deliberately ignored by institutional forces compounds the difficulties these students face.

This is clearly a specific form of institutional neglect. Recognizing it as such shifts the burden of work regarding race relations onto the institutions rather than the students. However, this does not imply malicious intent on the part of institutional leaders in Christian higher education. On the contrary, the structural forces that create and propagate unhealthy environments for racial minorities exist because administrations often do not have the cultural resources necessary to recognize and diagnose issues that arise on their own campuses.

Racial and ethnic minority enrollment at Christian universities continues to lag behind secular institutions (Haralu 2005; Paredes-Collins 2009; Reyes and Case 2011). According to the CCCU, in its *2009 Noel-Levitz Market Research Executive Summary,* even when non-white students do enroll at CCCU schools, they are less satisfied with their overall college experience and less likely to choose the same school again compared to white students (2010:19). Retention and graduation rates in Christian colleges and universities are associated with the strength of social integration, social networks, and initial academic performance (Burks and Barrett 2009; Saggio and Rendón 2004). Minority students have difficulty achieving these foundational thresholds in predominantly white institutions (PWIs), making their retention less likely.

Further, good evidence suggests that the racial issues plaguing North American higher education are particularly pronounced in Protestant colleges and universities, which comprise the majority of CCCU members. In his study of racial diversity among American Protestant colleges, sociologist George Yancey argues that initial negative reactions to racial integration in education led to increased majority ethnic enrollment at higher educational institutions just as white flight increased enrollment in private Christian elementary and high schools (2010). As a result, Christian colleges and universities were predominantly white for much of the twentieth century and continue to lag behind secular institutions on simple measures of racial diversity in enrollment.

Christian colleges and universities also tend to have fewer minority faculty and staff compared to secular schools (Menjares 2016). This deficit in faculty diversity negatively affects students of color, who might benefit from minority faculty and staff to advise and mentor them through the challenges of higher education (Confer and Mamiseishvili 2012; Rood 2009). Minority students may also be less likely to make use of health and counseling services (Kearney, Draper, and Barón 2005), partly driven by the inability of colleges to meet demand

for same-race counselors and health professionals (Cabral and Smith 2011), a deficit that is only more problematic for institutions that under-employ minorities.

The relative homogeneity of these school populations present particular challenges to minority students because it tends to create a culture where white perspectives are taken for granted (Case and Hernandez 2013; Dahlvig 2010). Under these conditions, the perspectives of minority students and the issues they face based on their race tend to be subsumed under the dominant assumptions of "color-blind" ideologies (Emerson and Smith 2001). Color-blind racial ideology suggests that racial progress is best achieved by asserting the unreality of race as a biological reality and operating as if one does not see it.

Nevertheless, the social realities of race persist, regardless of well-intentioned efforts to not acknowledge its biological realities. Scholars have noted that color-blind orientations towards race issues tend to make people reluctant to acknowledge or discuss racial issues, which ultimately hinders people and institutions from addressing them at all. Minority students at Protestant colleges and universities report their frustration at the difficulty of highlighting racial issues, largely because of this commitment to operating in a color-blind manner. It is no coincidence, then, that institutions use the language of neglect on issues of race on campus. Dominant color-blind paradigms actually render invisible the populations that they are intended to help. To blind oneself to race is to blind oneself to the identity of a great number of marginalized people. When institutions do this, they organizationally become blind to large swaths of marginalized students.

A related difficulty of discussing race issues within North American Protestantism is the tendency toward individualizing the problem, rather than acknowledging overarching structural issues (Emerson and Smith 2001). Racism is then predominantly seen as an issue at the individual level and therefore something to be addressed individually. This dovetails with the commonly held theological commitments to individual responsibility for sin and the necessity for repentance by the individual. Because institutions and groups are untrained in thinking in structural terms, racism at the structural level of analysis is overlooked. Lower enrollment of minority students and the relative paucity of minority faculty at Christian colleges and universities is a structural issue. The structures of religion and higher education in the United States tend to funnel people in certain directions that cannot be reduced to individual decisions or discrimination (Yancey 2010). Moreover, Protestant institutions may be uniquely under-qualified to address these issues because their constituencies have historically not been open to structural accounts of racism and, therefore, cannot see existing issues.

Admittedly, institutions vary in their levels of commitment and types of strategies in addressing issues of race, even within Christian higher education (Paredes-Collins 2009). However, students at CCCU-affiliated colleges report less interaction with diversity initiatives than peers at other private schools (Pérez 2013; Schreiner and Kim 2011). This picture suggests that Christian colleges and universities continue to under-serve minority populations who face

unique challenges and difficulties. Other research, however, demonstrates that CCCU-affiliated schools are, in fact, improving (Longman 2017).

While common individually and institutionally, overlooking the other must continually be challenged. While the research cited above demonstrates that more must be done, articulating a Scriptural impetus as motivation for change is also imperative. What witness does Scripture give? How can the marginalized be treated better? What imperative can guide Christian educators?

Seeing Students: A Scriptural Ethic

Christ taught his followers a way of seeing that enabled them to see the unseen. What the polytheistic cultures of Mesopotamia did not see, God revealed to the Jewish people and others. What the devout religious leaders missed in the first century, Jesus, God in flesh, revealed to them, yet masked his answers in miracles, parables, and curious questions. Twenty-first century Christian educators are mandated to pursue this way of seeing that apprehends reality and truth, not mere perceptions. God, who made the invisible visible, is our teacher, but are we listening? Are we looking? Are we asking the correct questions? Do the cultural lenses through which we look block a clearer vision? Have we, as Christian educators, participated in overlooking the invisible in our institutions? As God reveals truth, those who are faithful will intentionally follow its path, wherever it leads. This theme of seeing—of God seeing the invisible and making the invisible visible—is woven, in fact, as a strong thread through the whole of Scripture.

Being seen offers a tremendous foundation to personal well-being even if circumstances may not change drastically. In Hagar's desperation in being oppressed by Sarah and abandoned by Abraham, she flees her slave masters (Genesis 16:1-15). Sitting alone in the desert, God finds her (v. 7), hears her (v. 11), and addresses her (v. 11). God reaches out to Hagar, a female, an Egyptian foreigner, an unmarried mother. These circumstances created enormous cultural distance in her day apart from her human estate, itself a vast spiritual breach with God, yet God sees her (v. 13-14). God promises good to her (v. 10-12). Psychologically and even physically, Hagar is strengthened when she grasps that God demonstrated concern for her. She experiences God's presence and willingly returns to a dreadful situation she could not yet alter. While this story should not be misapplied, much can be drawn from it. The effect of presence and empathic understanding with another person should not be underestimated. As God's current emissaries, educators should speak hope into the lives of those mistreated in the academy (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

A second passage, 2 Kings 6:8-23, describes how God works to protect his prophet Elisha from the army of an angry King Aram, and Elisha calls on God to open his servant's eyes to see the same (v. 17). Elisha has a spiritually guided sight that his servant does not, enabling him to

see the situation as it was, not how it appeared. Centuries later, those who call on the name of the same LORD have a responsibility to ask God to see our present reality with spiritual insight, guided by the Spirit of truth. The academy, its policies, and even its building projects may have a history or purpose that should be addressed directly, reconsidered, and possibly challenged. One example among many is a CCCU-affiliated institution in Texas that did not permit African-American enrollment until the late 1960s. While this university has since apologized, others may not have publicly acknowledged their lack of sight. Why are academic Christian institutions not ahead of the cultural curve?

Christ came to bring sight, to reveal our neglect, and to save us (Isaiah 61:1-2; Luke 4:14-21). His insight brought confusion, challenge, offense, and freedom, then as today. John 9 records a story of a man born blind, whose sight Jesus restores. Though seeing this miracle, the religious leaders and those in positions of power remained blind. Even educated leaders sometimes overlook the obvious. Entrenched in institutional patterns and rules, the Jewish Pharisees did not recognize Jesus as God, despite their religious training. Personally and professionally, Christian educators should beware of skewed, structurally embedded perspectives that could enable and contribute to institutional neglect of those who are systemically ignored.

These verses are a mere sampling of the Scriptures that describe how God sees humanity and how God calls us to see reality accurately, spiritually. The apostle Paul prays for the church in Philippi to "abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight" in order to "discern what is best and … be pure and blameless until the day of Christ" (Philippians 1:9-10). As educators, we must critically see and assess ourselves, our teaching methods, our class comments, our personal interactions, and our possible institutional culpability. Colleagues must remind each other how certain idioms and views are micro-aggressions against members of particular ethnic groups. One of us recently cringed at a faculty presentation in which the speaker was fond of using the descriptor "cotton-pickin'" as a positive reference, without realizing how that might conjure up quite different feelings among some in the audience.

An integral part of human being is relating to other human beings. When a person objectifies another, rendering them seemingly less than human, the other appears invisible. Ralph Ellison describes this objectification movingly in his well-known autobiography, *Invisible Man*:

> I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then too, you're constantly being bumped against by

> those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. (Ellison 1952:7)

Conversely, those who are truly seen often flourish, remarkably. Seeing others requires intentionality, awareness, and a cultivation of relationality. Biblical hospitality has been well-articulated elsewhere (e.g. Carroll R. 2013; Pohl 1999) and complements other theories of higher education such as Rendon's validation theory (Rendon 1994). Of the two types of validation Rendon names (academic and interpersonal), the latter occurs when institutional agents nurture students' personal growth and social adjustment.

One connection can make all the difference in the life of a minoritized student (Dowd, Pak, and Bensimon 2013; Gandara 2002). While the connection must be sufficiently significant, it can be a tipping point to launch a student who otherwise might have floundered. Laurie Schreiner and her colleagues note attitudes that college personnel demonstrated to bolster the persistence of high-risk students: genuineness, authenticity, and creating a sense of connection and belonging (Schreiner, Noel, and Cantwell 2011). Clinical psychiatrist Daniel Siegel offers a convincing explanation that the human mind actually develops "at the interface between human relationships and the unfolding structure and function of the brain" (Siegel 2001:67). His "Inspire to Rewire" tagline reminds educators of the power they possess to impact students for good.

Leaders of CCCU are to be commended for intentionally raising awareness of institutional neglect, especially within its consortium. In addition to previous iterations, since 2015, the CCCU has formally hosted a conference dedicated to the discussion of diversity. Moreover, numerous sessions were related to diversity at the most recent CCCU International Forum (2018). Many CCCU-affiliated institutions have added diversity offices and sought to diversify faculty, staff, and students as well as university cabinets. Executive Director Dr. Karen Longman summarizes the ten-year percentage increase, albeit small, of students of color enrolled at CCCU institutions (Longman 2017: 13-19). These are encouraging steps.

From the time that God called our ancestral parents from hiding (Genesis 3:8-10; 4:9-14) to the present day, humanity struggles to stand in the spotlight of their own corruption and see the suffering they have caused others. Those who possess power usually do not rush to release it. Overcoming this tendency in order to empower others is one of our high educational callings. Christian institutions of higher education are called to a higher standard, the standard of treating the invisible visibly, to focus our attention, programs, and funding on those who have been under-privileged and overlooked.

Toward this end, how can colleges and universities increase the sense of importance, connection, and belonging for a student who may at times feel invisible or different? One strategy that has shown promise in increasing the visibility and institutional care of REM students on campus is life coaching. Providing one-on-one attention from a staff member for an

extended amount of time appears to improve the extent to which students of color experience being seen. It is toward this intervention that we now turn.

Implications for Practice: The Strategy of Life Coaching for Student Visibility

To increase participation, deep learning, and retention, students of color need to be seen, valued, and empowered to live out their particular identities during their higher education experience. Most environments, in which they are the minority, have been insensitive to their unique cultural and individual needs or even outwardly hostile toward them. These students need an educational environment that nurtures all parts of their experience through positive interaction. Students will be more connected at a college or university where at least one institutional representative makes an effort to get to know them, affirm their importance, and empower them to succeed in their goals and dreams. A relationship with a life coach can be encouraging, empowering, and transformational, especially during key periods in life transitions, when facing adjustments and difficulties, and when choosing to pursue a new direction.

Life coaching is a professional relationship in which a trained coach develops a trusting partnership with a client (in this case, a student) and helps her or him explore their strengths, values, and life purpose, overcome their barriers, and reach their goals. At a college, the coach holds the student as "naturally creative, resourceful and whole" within an atmosphere of curiosity and acceptance, and keeps an intense focus on the student's agenda as a whole person: capable, relational, and expert in her or his own life (Kimsey-House, et al. 2011:8).

Life coaching has been tested as a positive tool for increasing college retention, and might also be effective in creating a fertile learning environment for minority students, and thereby increase their sense of belonging. Individualized to students' needs, life coaching promotes self-advocacy, overcomes obstacles to success, and encourages goal-setting. In a study examining the effects of life coaching on college retention, Bettinger and Baker found that "personalized support and advising might bridge students' informational gaps and help students complete tasks they might not otherwise complete" (2011:2). They go on to discuss how, in "coaches' interactions with students, they work to help students prioritize their studies, plan how they can be successful, and identify and overcome barriers to students' academic success" (2011:2).

Students' initial exposure to a college or university professional can have an impact on whether or not they decide to choose that institution and may influence their adjustment to the educational setting. Though vital to every new student, such a connection may be especially important for students who are not fully part of the dominant institutional culture. For REM students attending predominantly white universities, international students, differently-abled students, and other minority students, establishing a sense of acceptance and belonging may

not only determine their decision to stay at their current university, but whether they stay in college at all. Life coaching is one way to forge this sense of connection, acceptance, and belonging in higher risk minority populations at CCCU institutions.

As one example, imagine a life coach being a primary contact for a new minority student at a small, private, Christian liberal arts university in the Midwest. The student is a non-traditional freshman, in her late twenties, a wife and mother, and an African American originally from the Deep South. She faces several cultural adjustments as she starts classes, but she is contacted during those early weeks by a life coach from the university who offers phone sessions every other week during her first semester. The coach does an initial get-to-know-you session with this student, and forms a trusting professional relationship. The student learns to use the coaching sessions to voice her concerns, explore her career interests, discuss her values, strengths and goals, and overcome her difficulties with various roles and responsibilities. Her experience of an uplifting, safe space to process helps her to adjust, connect, and thrive at her institution. By the time she completes the coaching relationship after her first semester, she is more likely to be a committed and involved part of the college. This encounter with a caring university professional may have made the difference in this student's retention, but beyond this temporary result, might also create deeper and lasting change by affirming her identity and encouraging her ultimate success.

African American student enrollment at PWIs has increased over the last century, but this increase has not kept up with the changing demographics of the U.S. population (Longman 2017; McIntosh 2012). Numerous variables influence the lack of persistence of African American students at PWIs, but a study by Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) suggests that a sense of connection, acceptance, and belonging is an important factor. Bettinger and Baker also suggest that reducing students' feelings of separation and exclusion plays a role in student success and persistence (2011). Pittman and Richmond suggest that the "degree of affiliation that a student feels toward the university is linked to better social adjustment" (2008:344). Vincent Tinto, a pioneer in retention research, asserts that "students' integration into their social and academic college environment predicts whether they are likely to remain enrolled in college" (2006:2), and this integration plays a role in initial commitment and degree completion. A welcoming campus culture, including positive interactions with other members of the community, is an important aspect of initiating a feeling of belonging among minority students. A study examining Caucasian and African American student interaction on PWIs found that "cross-racial interactions are positively associated with black and white students' sense of belonging on campus" (Strayhorn and Johnson 2014:388). Students who receive life coaching early in their college career are not only more likely to stay at their university initially, but also to persist (Bettinger and Baker 2011).

Research shows that coaching also has a significantly positive impact on self-efficacy, with clients using three times as many self-efficacy statements in the final session of coaching

than when the coaching process began (Gessnitzer, Schulte, and Kauffield 2016). Coaching also helps reduce irrational beliefs and depression and increase work performance (David and Cobeanu 2016). Positive, self-efficacious beliefs also led to an increase in goal attainment (Gessnitzer et al. 2016).

Coaching is also able to help students develop strategies for improved emotional awareness as well as tangible goal-setting skills (Robson-Kelly and van Nieuwerburgh 2016). Jordan, Gessnitzer, and Kauffield (2016) suggest that a resource-oriented and solution-focused coaching approach has a strong positive impact on students, and Wasylyshyn, Gronsky, and Haas likewise provide evidence that coaching helps students to apply insights and provide positive reinforcement for change (2006). Coaching considers the client (in this case, the student) to be the expert on his or her own life, which helps the student become empowered to accept responsibility for his or her change processes (Gessnitzer et al. 2016) and is especially useful for multicultural sensitivity.

In a recent coaching study of 94 undergraduates, the subset (n = 8) of minority undergraduate students (self-identified as black and Hispanic) who received at least three sessions of life coaching saw gains in each of the following domains: awareness of their values and aligning those values with decision-making, confidence in goal-setting, and attainment; confidence in and satisfaction with their choice of major; compatibility of their choices with their faith, values, and strengths; confidence in their life purpose; and confidence in self (Lefdahl-Davis, Huffman, and Stancil 2017). The greatest growth area after receiving professional coaching was in the area of self-confidence, which seems to be an important result for those students who are often minoritized and may have difficulty feeling a sense of belonging and affirmation of identity at primarily white universities. These results, albeit from a small sample, offer hope for life coaching's efficacy in improving student outcomes.

Although life coaching can play a significant role in helping people set goals, overcome obstacles, and increase life fulfillment (Bellman, Burgstahler, and Hinke 2015; Richman, Rademacher, and Maitland 2014), it is still a relatively new intervention at the university level, particularly with minority students. Applying life coaching with under-served, minority, and at-risk students, and measuring the results with careful research and program evaluation, will create opportunities for greater connection, resiliency, and belonging among students and university personnel. It may ultimately help connect our most valuable and precious resources (students) with an effective source of help and hope (life coaches).

Suggestions for Further Research

Discussions regarding how universities might unknowingly be prorogating a sort of institutional neglect toward students of color—not least because they operate within an embedded majority culture that becomes normative—should be further explored through

intercultural training, focus groups, and diversity initiatives. Further research is needed on actual studies of student life coaching and minority student retention. How residential first-year undergraduates respond to life coaching compared to non-traditional adult learners also needs to be studied.

Conclusion

Racial and ethnic minority students experience greater isolation and a lower sense of belonging in college resulting in a variety of associated undesirable outcomes (e.g. lower educational performance, retention, graduation rates, lower mental, and physical health). Poor mentoring, feelings of isolation, and different value systems have been shown to discourage minority students from finishing their degrees or pursuing careers in higher education. These issues are more pronounced in Christian higher education, often going unnoticed or at least un-addressed due to insufficient human resources, and institutional forces compound the difficulties these students face. As many REM students are also the first in their families to attend college, they lack traditional support systems to navigate higher education.

In an effort to reach underrepresented students, many colleges have put in place faculty-mentored minority interest groups in addition to various student support services, such as writing centers, financial aid workshops, and assistance programs. However, universities must change on a deeper level and shift the institutional culture. Creating a sense of belonging for students from under-represented groups is crucial to their success, which includes encouraging students to explore their identity and build self-efficacy. These students, unfortunately, often feel that they cannot be themselves, and furthermore are asked, explicitly or implicitly, to assimilate to the mainstream culture, without their own cultural heritage being recognized.

The institutional change required to become more inclusive of REM students will take time. Life-coaching alone will not be sufficient. It remains an individualized approach to an institutional problem. Nevertheless, it is one technique among several that can be used by universities to improve the experience of REM students while larger institutional change is pursued. The growing body of literature demonstrates how even one significant connection with a “representative” member of the university community can create a sense of belonging and facilitate the post-secondary transition of minoritized students, and the development of their collegiate identities (Dowd et al. 2013; Gandara 2002; Schreiner et al. 2011). These results warrant institutions taking a more active role in creating additional structures that respond to the challenges that under-represented students face in an attempt to lessen their sense of invisibility and to increase their sense of belonging.

Although life coaching is a relatively new concept on college campuses, it has emerged as a promising, innovative intervention in an educational setting. Unlike other traditional

services (e.g. academic advising, counseling, mentoring, and tutoring), life coaching focuses on outcomes and emphasizes creating an alliance to deepen self-directed learning, goal setting, and action planning to improve student engagement, satisfaction, and performance. As a student support service, this coaching does not hold the stigma of therapy, while still providing a comprehensive assessment of the entire student experience, including environmental, psychological, and skill-based concerns. For under-represented, first-generation college students, coaches can uniquely offer aspirational individualized support to 1) bridge information gaps, 2) build skills, 3) serve as a link between the student and the institution, 4) counteract self-doubt, 5) ease transitions, and 6) promote self-awareness, self-determination, and self-advocacy.

What individual and collective endeavors have been carried out to increase the visibility and inclusion of all students at our institutions? To engender meaningful engagement, how have faculty, administrators, and staff all strived to build a diverse academic environment where under-represented students feel they belong and can count on people like a family? Pluralism embraces open-mindedness and rejects privilege. Addressing the needs of minority students requires a substantial financial commitment from the academy to pursue its goal for institutional diversity. The intervention of life coaching is a relatively unexplored technique holding promise to improve minority student outcomes. The way forward will be costly, but that way will be well worth it.

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