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Helping Black Men Succeed as Students Is Focus of Community-College Meeting

By Katherine Mangan

San Francisco

Marilyn L. Riley is still haunted by a teenager named Dante, who came reluctantly and angrily to her summer program for black men and ended up nearly walking away with five credits from Mesa Community College, in Arizona.

The first few days, he slouched in his chair and glared at his instructor, his cap sideways, his pants sagging.

"Sweetie, in my world, this isn't going to work," the petite adjunct professor and clinical psychologist, who is also black, told him. "You've got all this leadership potential, but no one's going to relate to you when you're looking like a thug."

By the end of the summer session, she said, he was sitting up straight in his chair, was demonstrating critical-thinking skills, and was within striking distance of earning five college credits. But before that could happen, his mother packed up and moved the family to New Mexico, and he had to withdraw.

Ms. Riley told that story here on Tuesday at the annual meeting of the American Association of Community Colleges, in one of several sessions devoted to the challenges of recruiting and retaining black men.

Thirty-nine percent of black men earn a credential or transfer within six years of enrolling at a community college, according to the U.S. Department of Education. That compares with 45 percent of all students.

The program Ms. Riley helps run, "Students Striving for Excellent Performance," is offered by Mesa Community College, the largest of 10 community colleges in the Maricopa County Community College District.

Karen Hardin, chair of the counseling department at Mesa, said a key to the program's success is selecting faculty members who not

only are content experts but also are "approachable and have a passion for what they're doing."

'Fear and Anxiety'

Last summer 28 high-school students completed the five-week program. Since its start, in 2008, 99 students have earned a total of 374 college credits through the program, and about half have gone on to enroll at Mesa after graduating from high school.

To help familiarize students with support services like advising and tutoring, groups of students are sent off with a list of a half-dozen offices with instructions to interview someone there and report back to the class. "It takes away the fear and anxiety of the unknown and gets students used to talking to adults face to face, not just by texting or Facebooking," said Ms. Riley.

Students take two required courses during the summer, each of which earns them three college credits. One covers basic college-success skills, like time management and study techniques.

The other—"African-American Pride and Awareness"—delves into students' cultural roots, prejudices, and feelings about how they fit in to society. "We want them to feel that they belong here and that they can control their own destiny," Ms. Hardin said. Instead of dwelling on the poverty or fractured family that may be working against them, "we want to empower them to rise above it."

Handing out brochures at track meets and speaking to church groups, the program's tiny staff recruits students and their families, and interviews them together to get a sense of family dynamics. Advising and teaching is tailored to the needs of each student, and successful graduates are brought in as peer mentors.

One such mentor resisted joining but is now pursuing a doctoral degree at Arizona State University. "His friends are all back where he left them, out on the street, doing drugs, having babies," said Ms. Riley. "We can preach it all day long, but when they hear it from their peers, they get it."

'Reluctant to Ask for Help'

Finding ways to help black men succeed in college was a theme of several sessions at the annual conference.

In a session on Monday, J. Luke Wood, an assistant professor of administration, rehabilitation, and postsecondary education at San Diego State University, described his [research on black male students in community colleges](#).

He visits community colleges to administer surveys and advise

them on strategies for recruiting and retaining minority men.


Mr. Wood said that faculty members tend to pay more attention to students who speak up in class and that many black men, in particular, lack the confidence to do so. In addition, "a lot of men are reluctant to ask for help because it makes them look weak," he said. "You have to be proactive in establishing relationships with these men."

The community colleges' association lists [77 minority-male success programs](#) on its Web site, but Mr. Wood estimates that there are probably 70 more that aren't listed.

During one presentation, LaTonya Jones, a student adviser at Houston Community College, described intervention strategies it is using, including community-service and bonding activities for black men to help them feel connected to the college and to one another. On Chivalry Day, for instance, participants in the Men of Honor program, which offers tutoring to local schoolchildren, wear their club shirts and ties and pass out carnations to women.

Ms. Jones is working on a proposal to offer college classes geared specifically to the needs of black men, to help ensure that they make it through the first year. An economics class, for instance, might cover financial planning for black men, while a history or English class would encompass black history and literature.

"If we can get them through the core," she said, "they'll graduate."


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These interventions all seem like excellent ideas to help any students who lack family role models. However, in the end, none of them would help a student like "Dante" who is profiled in the opening of this piece. It sounds like he was succeeding until derailed by a decision by his mother. This is an all too frequent problem for first generation college students whose success is actively (even if inadvertently) sabotaged by their families. I am not really sure what one does about that, or if one can really try. Unfortunately, many first generation college students need to figure out themselves that they need to put their extended family aside if they want to succeed.

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