Invisibility Syndrome of African Americans in Educational Institutions

Remarks by **Anderson Franklin**
Honorable David S. Nelson Professor of Psychology and Education

I want to spend a little time talking about some of the things that have been of primary concern to me about the experiences of African American students in educational institutions. These are the concerns which touch upon my academic, scholarly and professional interests, as well as personally, because they are central to the African-American community of which I am a member. A fundamental focus of my concerns is how do we improve the pipeline for students coming into academic institutions as well as provide the environment for them to be able to take full advantage of our intellectual traditions. Our seminar on Catholic intellectual traditions explores diverse topics in particular how our traditions create ways of knowing.

As a psychologist, when I think of ways of knowing, I also think about how they create ways of being. In the African-American community, we are very much concerned with what the present and future generations of students in college are becoming from their learning the traditions of the academy. It raises the age old issue of identity, particularly racial identity, and preserving identification with the African American community. This concern is represented by the question what do African American students do with their knowledge gained in college, and how is it shared both with the African American community as well as the greater society. Or, do we see that knowledge essentially becomes privileged in a manner where there is little interest in sharing it with the community due to identity transformations from college experiences

that offer attractive competing alternatives. We therefore are concerned on a number of levels about the welfare and well being of students as they come into our educational institutions because of the pressures upon still young evolving identities. An essential concern is what happens to African American students' identity from exposure to the intellectual traditions that come from our institutions. Equally important what are the barriers that prevent meaningful exposure?

There are enough structural barriers to college admissions for African American students, but there are also psychological challenges for our students as they try to fulfill their own and parents' aspirations for coming to college. Parent's weekend at Boston College we know is a special orientation for future students, and their parents. They are appropriately anxious in their responsible search for the best institution to prepare their child for the future. Of course, one of the concerns is what happens to that child after they get into an institution as illustrious as Boston College, an institution that is also a predominantly white institution? This reality is not a transitional concern within the African-American community but has deep roots exemplified by a long standing scholarly discourse within the community about the formation of African American identity and how that identity is linked to educational aspirations, academic achievement, career and giving back.

The literary area is replete with exploring identity issues for African Americans. For example, the writings of Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (upon which I base a lot of my theory and understanding) or *Native Son* by Richard Wright and the works of James Baldwin to just mention a few. Many literary pieces explore what happens to the identity of African-Americans as they are exposed to different kinds of experiences in everyday

living, and particularly our understanding of how race, racism, discrimination and prejudice impact development of the individual. The university is no exception as a particular cultural context that influences identity development.

As we look at the circumstances of so many young African Americans trying to get into college from the community– and there certainly has been an increased number coming into college – we ask ourselves a question: "How can we get more in, but also how can we help direct them toward public service goals that inevitably benefit their community of origin?"

What we find is that there are certain gatekeepers to this greater goal. The common gatekeeper is the admission requirements and the competitiveness of college admissions. Then, the next level of concern after admission is how do they become an essential not isolated part of the campus? Becoming part of the campus is more than just being enrolled in classes, our concern is equally about the person-environment fit, as my colleagues and I like to talk about. Or in other words, how do African American students genuinely fit into the campus culture? To what extent does their experience of person-environment fit contribute to their success as African American students on campus? It is central to not only being successful on campus but also for graduation, and life after graduation. We are very much concerned about what happens after they graduate, such as the direction they take in commitments, responsibilities and leadership. An African American student's identity and identification is very much a factor in their subsequent relationship to the community. Identity formation has been a major area of study within psychology, and racial and ethnic identity development in particular over the past two decades. Confusion and disillusionment about your racial identity can compromise well-

being and achievement, something that can happen in the transformative college years. And so in my work with a variety of community programs preparing African American students for college admissions I learned an area of primary curriculum focus is strengthening resilience and providing perspective in social identity that can buffer personal challenges for students in new settings like our campus.

Last spring, I brought several programs together from across the country that are primarily after-school, community-based programs, to network and share best practices under the *Nelson Chair Roundtable for Networking Community Based Programs*. Those programs had two major training components to them: there's the academic component to try to enrich students to be better prepared academically for retention as well as graduation from high school. When they apply to college they are better positioned with more competitive academic credentials to gain entry to prominent colleges. The other important component in the curriculum focuses upon building social character, leadership development often based in ethnic history and racial identity, the assumption being that youth anchored by cultural roots do not abandon their racial identity but evolve it as they pursue these academic goals and objectives.

Therefore the big non-academic challenge for students when they get on campus is to make this person-environment fit be most appropriate for them. What I have found in my clinical work as a psychologist and therapist is that a profound experience for a lot of students preventing the desired person-environment fit is a feeling of invisibility on campus. This psychological invisibility which has been a part of my scholarly work is best understood as a contemporary interpretation of Ralph Ellison's thematic dilemmas in his classic novel "Invisible Man". African American students can find that they are not

really a part of our campus, the campus networks, and the groups that essentially define the campus culture or even the curriculum for that matter. Like most students they must find their way.

What's the consequence of this? You have students who are overly concerned about how they are seen on campus. So the question becomes what does that psychologically do to them and their ability to achieve? What does that do to their evolving sense of themselves as African-Americans, young citizens of the world? Is their invisibility unintentionally reinforced by our intellectual traditions because the relevancy of the body of knowledge we are sharing with them is never linked in meaningful ways to their identity and a greater family/community purpose for their being here? This presents a challenge to our campus culture to be psychologically responsive as we are academically focused. Understand, I'm a psychologist and I tend to prioritize the well-being of students. If that gets compromised, academic performance gets compromised. If not being seen as a true member of the Boston College family exists for African American students, then this can become a very significant factor in their achievement. Given our social justice values we don't just want to have students admitted to our illustrious institution, we want our students to be a part of the institutional fabric, the campus culture in seamless ways that not only imparts knowledge, but builds character and cultivates leadership from exposure to it.

We do not want to be a culture that creates the kind of experience an acquaintance of mine who graduated from one of the top ten schools observed. Her greatest lament, reflecting upon her student life over her four years to graduation, was witnessing the attrition rate of some of the brightest and talented African American classmates. Her

upset was not just that they dropped out of college, but that they were so disillusioned by it. Moreover this discouragement by an alienating culture of learning restructured their academic motivation. Some decided not to transfer to any other college opportunity but rather went to work. They were very disillusioned about the whole academic culture and its relevancy to their life and future. So I asked her: "What would you say, in essence, were the experiences of these students?" Her passionate position was that they were made to feel like they were never really accepted. She noted the faculty saw them as an affirmative-action initiative, and there really wasn't the same kind of investment in them as there was in white students on campus. This was beyond the average college student's sense of difference and struggles when joining a new community after high school. That lack of cultural relevancy for African Americans in our traditions tended to create for them a sense of being invisible on campus. Parenthetically, high educational aspirations of African Americans are not without the desire for social relevancy of that education.

Given this reality for African American students on predominantly white campuses there are several areas that make this whole issue of invisibility important for us to understand as concerned educators. Invisibility is generated by assumptions based in stereotypes about people. Negating what other people believe about you and related stereotypes is a very powerful factor in trying to be successful, but it is also psychologically and spiritually exhausting. It wears you down and takes its emotional toll.

How do you know when students are experiencing invisibility? For one, they will share it when genuinely engaged with concern about adjustment to campus and classroom experiences. For example a common experience of invisibility is conveyed as the

professor doesn't recognized me as a student in class, overlooks me, or if I give my response in class and somehow, it's not quite good enough, and a white student in class gives the same response, said a little differently, and somehow, that particular response is valued better than my view of the issue. If that happens one time, that's unique, but if it happens on several occasions, and they have corroboration from other students, that's another. These corroborations I term as "sanity checks" in my book *From Brotherhood to Manhood*. Other African American students who are sitting in the cafeteria amongst themselves are a sounding board on campus life and sanity check about such things as experiences in a classroom with a professor. With corroboration, there is some verification that your experience was not an isolated, unique experience but has integrity to it.

What happens then is that the students now must grapple with these experiences and appraise their authenticity, while internalizing how it makes them feel not just as the average student but in special ways as an African American student. They gradually become sensitive to other kinds of interpersonal exchanges on campus with a growing vigilance to assess if there are patterns of treatment. This process can become preoccupying, very frustrating, anxiety provoking, highly distracting and create enduring indignation about culminated perceived slights they experience on campus. This can be very psychologically unhealthy and counter productive for the development of students if it goes unattended to and essentially limited to airing within small isolated campus groups. Whereas common interest groups also serve a very curative and developmental purpose, they can also be litmus test for a particular toxicity in the college environment.

How does that impact the learning process? If you've read the work of Claude Steele, a professor of psychology at Stanford University, he talks about the impact of what he calls "stereotype threat." Stereotype threat is "the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype". Two types of reactions have been noted in stereotype threat in which:

1) "the person fears verifying the negative stereotype held about his or her group which is considered d*isruptive apprehension* and, 2) the person rejects the setting where the verification might occur which is considered *protective disidentification*

He has examined this phenomenon through various research studies using sample tests from the Graduate Record Exam or the SAT. Claude Steele's research demonstrated that when you put students in a position where they believe the purpose and the context of test questions is framed in what the student considers a racial comparison, that this invoked comparison can negatively impact performance regardless of previously demonstrated talent. This comparison manifests in associations to performances of the group and your group membership or the group identity which carries the presumption that one needs to do well given the history of African American students' performances in spite of the realities of ones own proven accomplishments.

We might say the student unconsciously, or perhaps consciously, begins to worry how they may reflect the educational gap associated with African American students, taking on what Dr. William Cross, a pioneering racial identity research psychologist calls a moment of "spotlight anxiety." Independent of their competence, these psychological phenomena will depress even the most talented student's performance, if they have what Steele calls a moment of "disruptive apprehension." The students feel that they have to

do well on this test because African American students do poorly, and if they don't measure up, then they're not going to be able to gain admissions. This apprehension, for some students, puts family goals at risk with such thoughts as: "I'm not going to be able to gain admission to college," or "I'm not going to be able to fulfill mine or my parents' dreams." There are many psychological associations that get evoked by what Cross calls spotlight anxiety.

The other way in which performance get depressed is by what Steele calls "projective disidentification." What does he mean by disidentification? Well, one of the ways in which students can psychologically restructure their orientation to taking a test is to psychologically disidentify with being an African American student, or performing as one. If the person is successful in restructuring his or her thinking to distance themselves from identification with African American student performances then he or she can lessen the "racial risks" in demonstrating their talents. Or it can also disrupt, meaning that they're so intent on not being identified as African American and not coming up with results on the SAT like African American students, that they create sufficient anxiety that it too disrupts performance on the test. These are powerful psychological issues that go straight to the heart of identity and how identification plays a part in academic performance.

When African American students arrive on campus they are confronted with additional challenges to their identity embedded in student life. Campus life becomes another venue for the invisibility experience to prosper. The social curriculum in many of the after school programs that I invited to the *Nelson Chair Roundtable on Networking Community Based Programs* at Boston College last spring anticipate these student life

issues and address directly the social identity agenda in going to college. In one program, they take their college bound African American students out of the community for "social identity" experiential campus visits training. They may come up to Boston College for example and drive students around Chestnut Hill and bring them on a tour of the campus and community. They talk to the kids and ask, "Well, how do you think you would feel walking around on this kind of campus?" They're looking at the ambiance of Boston College, and how it might restructure their thinking, and psychologically their sense of self which in turn impacts academic performance. One of the first things is that they come face-to-face with this whole issue of invisibility, accentuated by the experiences of difference related to being African American on a predominantly white campus. A common comment by young African American inner city students is: "I'm really not a part of that. Where I come from, there is nothing like Chestnut Hill." In those observations there is clearly truth, but not abandonment of aspirations. Our challenge is how best to address this psychological preparedness of entering African American students for the social climate on campus.

It gets more complicated. I'll give you an article I will reference later that looks at how social class impacts performance on predominantly white campuses such as Boston College, and what are the contributions to adjustment of African American students from African American middle class families in contrast to less privileged families. Regardless of family income there are certain things African American parents want to know. How do their children come to Boston College and be successful? What puts their child at risk after they get here? I have noted that psychological invisibility is one of those risk factors.

Dr. Beverly Tatum, formerly a Dean at Mt. Holyoke and now President of Spelman College in Atlanta, wrote that when African American students come on predominantly white campuses they insulate themselves from the sense of alienation and therefore invisibility by sitting together in the cafeteria. Well, what does that do? It provides comfort, safety, and space to be themselves.

How do students make themselves visible in a fulfilling manner and in safe spaces, and what is this psychological phenomenon that makes this a relevant issue? I wrote an article in the *Counseling Psychologist* talking about how visibility is important too. Meaning, we have to understand as much about how, in this instance, African American students go about making themselves visible on campus creating certain presence with their social networks that support them successfully through the academic and social challenges here. This was demonstrated by Claude Steele and others at the University of Michigan, where they established a program to support African American students to be successful on campus without being overwhelmed by the environment. What's interesting is that they found that setting up a dormitory for African American students was helpful in terms of maintaining and elevating academic performance. But one of the most important elements in that process was the informal rap groups that got created within the dormitory. They essentially allowed the students to talk safely about their experiences on campus and how to navigate the campus community. An essential point of mine is that what good is our intellectual ways of knowing if they create particular psychological ways of being that compromise our educational aspirations for African American students and the community? We must not allow this to happen within our Boston College family.

Beverly Tatum tried to create a different academic community that takes into consideration the way in which African American students create for themselves a survival network and integrate it into the college community. She formed the ABCs institutional model that represents: Affirm identity, Build community, and Cultivate leadership. I shall come back to leadership as an important goal of the University. What she felt was extremely important was to build on the ways in which students create their little isolated social networks. From this knowledge find a way to facilitate greater inter-group connections and engagements with other social networks on campus.

If we step back and look at the social structure of Boston College campus, I'm sure that we can identify different social networks of students. I agree with Beverly Tatum that if we are going to be involved in a pluralistic society then we have to do something in which social networks on campus, particularly those limiting diverse social contact engage each other. If they remain homogeneous and isolated, then that creates a disconnected community and student life environment that I believe is inconsistent with Boston College's social justice mission and ever-evolving institutional identity.

The other focus for the University is building community. Beverly Tatum's belief and mine is that the more that you get different groups to engage each other, the more it begins to build a very different community on campus. Now, what she's doing is essentially addressing the issue of invisibility of students on campus, African American students in particular and others that feel marginalized in some manner. She notes that all of this concerted effort should be towards the goal of cultivating leadership within a supportive community. Like many from the African American community I believe that African American students coming out of the university should have the necessary skills

and be prepared for providing leadership. It is extremely important for the African-American community that we evolve new generations of leaders. That the generations of students that come to predominantly white campuses and become exposed to diverse intellectual traditions will inevitably utilize their new knowledge and competencies in ways that give back to the community while building their career.

My challenge to you attending this seminar therefore is to keep in mind that psychological invisibility is a very profound experience, and this threat of being seen and treated as a stereotype puts academic performance and future contributions at risk for African American students. Unless we engage the social networks on campus as an educational imperative, we will not fully prepare a new generation of leaders, in particular African-American leaders that must also deal with a global community. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." These issues matter.

So my questions to you for this discussion are: Question one, are African-Americans invisible in Catholic intellectual traditions? Two, how do we engage African-American students to include their intellectual contribution in a pluralistic community? And three, how, in our ways of knowing, do we cultivate future leaders for the African-American community from those students we admit to Boston College?