The Scholar Identity Model: Counseling Black Males Towards Academic Achievement

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School counselors, due to their unique positions, play a pivotal role within the school structure relative to supporting students directly and assisting colleagues in supporting students. They flow back and forth between and among the students, teachers, administrators, and families on a daily basis. The counselors’ concern for children should assist students in becoming more involved in their academics, while at the same time guiding them through social-emotional and academic crises. School counselors can be thought of as a confidante or a professional sounding board for students under their charge. Their training is specialized to meet that much needed void that exists in all school buildings. For all these reasons and more, the school counselor is in singular position to be an integral part of delivering the Scholar Identity Model™ (SIM) to the school community (Whiting, 2006).

In most school settings, the extent to which students view themselves as learners and intellectuals plays a major role in how well they perform and the confidence and efficacy they display in academic settings. Clearly, students who lack confidence in school become unmotivated and unengaged (e.g., Dweck, 1999, 2006; Graham, 1998). As an alternative to saving their ego, or "saving face"; they find their identities in other areas and settings, such as sports and entertainment. Frequently, disengaged students are disproportionately Black males
(Ford, 2010; Grantham, 2004; Whiting, 2006). Therefore, Black males who have an underdeveloped sense of academic identity are less likely to persist in school, more likely to be identified as "at risk," less likely to be high achievers, more likely to be in special education, and less likely to be identified as gifted.

In the section that follows, the characteristics of a scholar identity are briefly covered. First, however, are set forth a few propositions guiding the Scholar Identity Model (SIM): (a) Black males are more likely to achieve academically when they have a scholar identity; (b) Black males are more likely to be viewed by educators, their families, and others as not only doing well, but as being highly capable, perhaps even gifted, if they achieve at high levels; (c) we cannot close the achievement gap, the opportunity gap, or even begin to pay the “education debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006) that would place Black males at promise for achievement unless we focus on their academic identities; and (d) the earlier we focus on the scholar identities of Black males, the more likely we are to develop a future generation of Black male scholars who are in a position to break the vicious cycle of low achievement and underachievement.

In addition to these propositions, two qualifications, or assumptions should be noted. First, it should be recognize that most of the components or characteristics of the SIM which will be described later (e.g., self-efficacy, future orientation, self awareness, or academic self-confidence) may be common among most successful students, regardless of gender and race. Race conscientiousness and masculinity, the last two characteristics, are what makes the model specific to Black males. It has been argued (e.g., Brod & Kaufman, 1994; hooks, 2004; Platt, 2002; Sailes, 2003), that issues of masculinity differ across race and that, when working with Blacks and other racial/ethnic minorities on identity issues (e.g, self-esteem and self-
concept), one must consider their identity as racial and racialized individuals (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). Second, the model is not developmental to the extent that it is age bound. Developing a scholar identity needs to begin as early as possible and efforts must be ongoing; becoming a scholar is a lifelong process.

The Scholar Identity Model

The theory related to the SIM was first published in my doctoral dissertation, Young Black American Fathers in a Fatherhood Program: A Phenomenological Study (Whiting, 2004). Within this work, there was emphasis on both psychological (mindset) and sociological (environment) factors as standing in the way of and/or compromising their success in life. The SIM as an individual model was first published in Gifted Child Today as “Enhancing Culturally Diverse Males’ Scholar Identity: Suggestions for Educators of Gifted Students” (Whiting, 2006a). A variation appeared later that same year in the Journal of Secondary Gifted Education titled “From At Risk to At Promise: Developing Scholar Identities Among Black Males” for those working with other Black males (Whiting, 2006b). Whiting (2006a), and more recently with updates (Whiting, 2009, 2010, 2013, 2014), outlined nine constructs that are conceptually combined to illustrate a psychosocial and cultural model of achievement. The model was initially designed more specifically to provide educators working with Black males with a road map for fostering scholar identities in young males with implications for older males, in college and careers. The model demanded that they themselves, the educators, families, communities, and eventually the mass media, view the students through a different, more capable lens; hence, educators in particular would expect different efforts from the student and assist in instilling the idea of being a scholar, oftentimes with the result of becoming better, more understanding teachers, thus changing the ‘mindset’ of all involved (Dweck, 2006; Ford, 2010).
The SIM was never designed to fix a problem. The premise of the SIM is not to fix broken, less capable, less intelligent, or less desirous students, but to motivate, educate, and most importantly, relate to capable, intelligent students. But in order to relate to a student, a genuine concern and belief in the unseen potential or talent must be developed and honed by the teacher, coach, guardian, or mentor… and school counselor.

The Scholar Identity Institute

Moving the model from theory to practice, in the summer of 2006, the Scholar Identity Institute (SII) was co-created at Vanderbilt University with Professor Donna Y. Ford. For the next four years, the SII provided intensive engagement for nearly 100 young Black males. The SII was designed to expose the young men to the 9 constructs of the SIM. For two weeks during the summer, the young men were introduced and reintroduced, time and time again, to Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy (1997), Locke’s theory on goal setting (1968), bell hooks’s (2004) discussions of masculinity, sexuality, and popular culture, and other scholarly writings on various topical subjects from Tarek Grantham, Tyrone Howard, William Cross, William Julius Wilson, Michael Eric Dyson, Pedro Noguera, and myself.

The young men were provided with a curriculum on psychosocial and cultural behavior to aid in assessing their personal roles and responsibility, as well as ways to cope with the sometimes structurally racist and sexist beliefs present in their everyday lives at school and in society. The curriculum was extensive and refined over the years with the goal of being accessible, engaging, personal, relevant, and fun. In 2009, after four summers directing intensive programming, four pillars or supports (family, school, community, and mentors) were added to the 9 SIM constructs. Additionally, in 2009, I wrote two follow-up articles: Gifted Black Males: Understanding and Decreasing Barriers to Achievement and Identity and The Scholar Identity Institute: Guiding
Darrel and other Black males. The program then went national. The constructs of the Scholar Identity Model and custom versions of the Scholar Identity Institute have now been taught in several school districts across the country (San Francisco, Miami, Baltimore, Minneapolis, and a two year $1.5 million dollar grant was given by the Heinz Foundation to work with two entire school districts in Pittsburgh, PA). Later the focus will take us to the Achievement Gap Initiative conducted at Vanderbilt University. What follows is a brief description of each of the 9 constructs and the four pillars of the SIM.

Scholar Identity Model™ conceptual model
Whiting, 2015
The SIM Constructs

*Self-Efficacy*

According to Bandura (1994), self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave. Such beliefs produce these diverse effects through four major processes. They include cognitive, motivational, affective and selection processes.

Self-efficacy (SE) is the foundational construct for the SIM from which all the other constructs are built and ascend. SE is the belief in one's self to accomplish a given task with the full knowledge and comprehension of the requirements for completion. In the development of the SIM and the populations engaged, SE is central to academic achievement/attainment (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). The SIM is also concerned with the intersections of race, gender, culture, and socioeconomic status with SE.

Working with the young men in various settings, we found an increased level of academic SE across the board. These young men demonstrated an increased self-confidence, self-control, and resiliency. They began to believe they could succeed at problem solving when fully comprehending a task (e.g., when using the scale of SE, it was noted that when faced with a task of cognitive ability, the students did not feel what Steele and Aronson (1995) refer to as a *stereotype threat*. As the summer’s SII progressed, the Black males participants’ levels of SE became stronger. In words and deeds, they were more than whistling Vivaldi (Steele, 2012); they pushed back against negative stereotypes about Black males. They exceeded with regularity the requirements and sought out new ways to challenge themselves. Initially, many of the young men would wing it when they did not know an answer; many would also blame extenuating circumstances (especially racism) for their missteps.
Issues relating to masculinity and stereotype threat initially interfered with asking for assistance – to ask for help was to be ‘weak’ and not ‘masculine’ in their eyes and limited experiences. However, after one summer’s work, when faced with an unfamiliar or difficult obstacle, they asked for assistance. Once the young men understood the importance of their SE, they were ready for future orientation, to envision life beyond their present circumstances. School counselors must be well versed in scholarship on self-efficacy in their efforts to guide and support Black males.

**Future Orientation**

The construct ‘future orientation’ is concerned with the relationship between conscious goals, intentions, and task performance. According to Locke (1968), (a) hard goals produce a higher level of performance (output) than easy goals, (b) specific hard goals produce higher level of output than a goal of do your best, and (c) behavioral intentions regulate choice behavior. Locke and the SIM also view goals and intentions as mediators of the effects of incentives on task performance, and recognizes that an individual’s conscious ideas regulate his or her actions.

Much of the goal setting is identified with the task at hand. For example, if one interrogates a student entering college, the student’s focus or field of vision into the future is usually one semester and oftentimes one class or the next exam at a time, whereas, fifth and sixth graders could only envision that week and usually just the day or what the afternoon held. Based on the age of the individual, realistic goal setting will vary; goal setting is a learned and practiced skill, as students mature they are able to plan further into the future. When working with junior high (11–14 years old) and high school students (15–18 years old) who are from low-income and minority groups, knowledge of and plans for setting goals for postsecondary educational studies or careers cannot be emphasized enough. And with those in college, conversations about postgraduate work and
employment preparation should begin in the first year. The thought process is a trained process; the more frequently one envisions goals, the more preparation goes into making them a reality.

Motivation theories indicate that people who have aspirations tend to stay focused and prepare for success (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002; Dweck & Elliott, 1988; Dweck, 2006; Graham, 1991, 1994). They think about the present and the future, particularly regarding how one's current behaviors and decisions influence future achievements. Diverse males with future targets are not overly concerned about immediate gratification and short-term passing interests and ephemeral goals. These students set realistic goals; likewise, they recognize the importance of a high grade point average, excellent school attendance, and participation in challenging courses as helpmates to reaching their dreams. They also not only have a plan, but a plan B and a plan C. Because very few of these young 18- to 21-year-olds know fully what they want or are actually capable of achieving, having productive alternative scenarios are encouraged. School counselors know the vital importance of future orientation (goal-setting) to achieving goals and dreams and they must ensure that Black males also know this.

Willing to Make Sacrifices

To accomplish academic goals, choices have to be made concerning time, effort, and resources. Sociologist Merton (1948) noted the importance of the familiar phrase self-fulfilling prophecy, which is the process whereby a person or group that has a strongly held value, belief, or an expectation, true or false, affects the outcome of a situation. Many adults have learned through experiences of trials and tribulations that sacrifices are necessary for reaching short-term, medium, and long-term goals. Black males who possess or are working toward a scholar identity also understand that sacrifice may be necessary to attain various goals. They believe and understand, and are more likely to relinquish some aspects of a social life (e.g., particular friends, parties, too many social
organizations, popularity, and so forth) and other distractions (e.g., Internet surfing and social networking sites), gaming, and television (including hours of watching sports and entertainment) to reach those desired goals. They will plan or limit social time, allocating the bulk of their time and efforts toward becoming more productive scholars. Black males who are willing to make sacrifices understand that success comes with pain (no pain, no gain); to be successful or accomplished, they must give up things they value. And this can be painful. School counselors must understand such dilemmas and be there to guide and counsel Black males through these challenges and tribulations.

*Internal Locus of Control*

A student receives (in his or her estimation) a poor grade on an exam. Many of us have been there; what we attribute that grade to makes all the difference in future endeavors. Was it bad luck? Fate? Were we incapable, or did we not muster enough effort? (Weiner, 1980). Knowing which of these categories (luck, fate, ability, and effort) the student chooses to associate with or attribute to the their success or failure is at the core of locus of control. Black males who have a strong internal locus of control are optimistic, even when faced with poor results; these males believe they can do well because they (a) they have experienced success in the face of challenges, (b) planned for the difficult (time consuming) work, (c) made the time to study and prepare for the examination, and (d) are willing, when uncertain and vulnerable, to ask for help. Thus, when they receive a less than positive result, they don't blame the test, the assignment, or a teacher with malevolent intentions. These males take responsibility and live with the results. And most important, they challenge themselves to do better next time. School counselors can help Black males to engage and increase their internal locus of control by helping them to understand the importance of effort and work ethic in
success. They can guide Black males in being more accountable for their achievements while keeping in mind and not discounting school and social injustices.

Self-Awareness

The teacher says, “Young man, please pull your pants up.” The young man complies, but thinks, “This is the style and everyone thinks I am cool and look great.” As soon as he is out of the teacher’s view, and until called on the infraction again, he continues his *sagging* (wearing pants below the waist). Self-awareness is an honest appraisal and understanding of one’s perceived and real strengths and limitations. It is not only how you see yourself but also how you are viewed by others and how you contribute to that view. Self-awareness is bound up with effort, etiquette, sincerity, character, and self-control (G. Pesare, personal communication, April 15, 1991). Black males who have a realistic grasp on those areas in need of work are willing to consider and process new (and disagreeable) information, ideas, and societal expectations toward their self-improvement (e.g., they seek a tutor in classes where they are not doing well, they study longer, and more often, and they realize that certain attire triggers negative assumptions). And finally, they take immediate and sustained actions to make appropriate transitions based on their situation.

While the current youth culture of sagging is often associated with a troubled and negative place/space (American prisons), it has become part of a contemporary vogue similar to women smoking in the Roaring Twenties, the Fonzie style of the 1950s, or the long hair of hippies in the 1960s. And as with other periods in time, these various fads are seen as troubling to the status quo. In this era, though, and particularly for Black males, the stakes appear much higher: criminalization, incarceration, and even murder (e.g., Trayvon Martin). Therefore, as a part of self-awareness, young Black and Brown men must be able to code switch as they make the transition into adulthood. School counselors can help young men to make decisions that increase and
counter improve the images and messages others have of them. School counselors can and must help Black males to be more self-reflective, which increases their self-awareness to that they make wise(r) choices in school and life.

*Achievement > Affiliation*

The need for achievement and the need for affiliation are found in varying degrees in all students. Neither is inherently wrong. The need-for-achievement student is *achievement motivated* and therefore seeks attainment of realistic but challenging goals, and academic advancement. The student has a strong desire for feedback as it relates to achievement and progress, and a need for a sense of accomplishment. The need-for-affiliation student is *affiliation motivated* and has a need for friendly relationships and seeks interaction with other people. The affiliation driver produces motivation and the need to be liked and held in popular regard (McClelland, 1978).

When the goal of academic success is foremost, but the student assigns the need for affiliation greater importance and yet still expects to receive high academic marks, discontinuity arises. Harvard economist Roland Fryer (2006) found that Black and Brown students often opt for more friends and forego higher grade point averages. A student with a strong scholar identity knows this and makes the sacrifice of having friends who are not motivated toward similar academic goals. For these diverse males, the need for achievement is stronger than the need for affiliation; thus, the number of friends they have or their popularity does not determine their identity.

While they may be social and desire meaningful friendships, they are not troubled about being popular for the sake of popularity. Black and Hispanic males with a strong need for achievement understand that high academic achievement will take them far in life. Conflicts about a student turning his back on his community, culture, or race in pursuit of academic goals may exist. The scholar identity student possesses an unassuming confidence, preferably drawn from having family
and friends who respect and support him and do not impede his progress. School counselors are needed to guide Black males in ensuring that students know how to prioritize assignments and task with friendships.

*Academic Self-Confidence*

A teacher wields unimaginable power and influence. A child’s academic self-confidence is developed through a series of successful encounters not just at home but also at school. Teachers’ expectations drive student achievement; therefore, developing a strong sense of academic self-confidence in young Black males must be understood as an imperative—pushing without coddling. Unfortunately, seemingly inconsequential microaggressions (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder (2008) set the standard for how students view themselves. When questioned about how they did so well on an assignment, Black males may refuse to complete further work.

Black males who believe they are strong students feel comfortable and confident in academic settings, learning, and playing with ideas. Most important, they do not feel inferior in school, and they do not feel the need to negate, deny, or minimize their academic abilities and skills. These males have a strong work ethic—they spend time doing schoolwork, they study, and they require little prodding from parents and teachers. An often under used cog in the teacher tool kit is the role of the teacher as a facilitator, a guide, and a confident person who will allow himself or herself to see and not be threatened by an outgoing Black male with verve. *Verve* is the propensity for energetic, intense, highly stylized body language and is an essential component of a learning style of expression for African American children (Boykin, 1994.)

This does not mean allowing Black males to be the class clown or disruptive in class, but it does mean understanding and having the savvy to use such behavior as a teachable moment. I often use the concept of Academic Aikido in my workshops. Here, I am referring to the ability to
understand the underlying battles taking place in all classrooms every day, with students pushing against authority merely as a stage of development. For most males (as with females), the onset of puberty marks a point where students, even when faced with the fact that they are wrong, once they commit to leaning into an idea, thought, or position, they are unable or unwilling to back down. It is at this point when the adult drawn into this battle of wills must appear to concede ground, turn (only momentarily), and give way in the direction the student is pushing. It is then and only then that the student can relax enough to hear the adult. While listening and learning from the student, we begin to turn them in the direction we wanted to go all along. The turn may be subtle, or it may be a hairpin turn, but we must be willing to hear and see it when they cannot. Ultimately, students with a high academic self-concept understand that in order to be successful, effort is just as important, or more important, than ability. In essence, a student does not care what we (the adult) knows until they know we (the adult) cares. The application of Academic Aikido provides the adult with the opportunity to display care and redirect the student’s focus. School counselors can and must guide Black males in their journey to be confident in academic settings.

*Race Consciousness (formerly Racial Identity and Pride)*

Even before the election of America’s first African American president (Barack Obama), keyboards across the nation could be heard tapping away about the so-called Obama effect. Writers across the nation heralded the arrival of a new post-racial society. It was as if the 2008 election of President Barack Obama marked the end of race and racism. That notion has been beaten back (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Kaplan, 2011; Metzler, 2008; Hughey, & Jost, 2011; Sharpley-Whiting, 2009; Touré & Dyson, 2012; Wise, 2010). In too many ways, society has and continues to remind Black and Brown boys and men of their place and race. The average Black teen acts in line with (and sometimes against) stereotypical racialized scenarios daily. In any case, self-esteem and self-
concept, racial identity, and pride affect students’ achievement and motivation (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). Teachers, and others in positions of authority in teaching and learning capacities, must receive continued professional development regarding the persistent significance of race, identity, and racism.

For Black males, race and a scholar identity have high salience; racially conscious Black boys and men are comfortable in their skin and simultaneously aware of the limitations from without that are placed on the skin their in. They push back against the boundaries on their racially gendered identity. They seek greater self-understanding as racialized beings; they attempt to grapple with the historical and social implications and constructions of their racially gendered identities, but they are also highly cognizant of the importance of adapting to racially heterogenous and homogenous (if they are the only Black male therein) environments, of being bi- and/or multicultural (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). Just as important, they do not equate achievement with acting White or selling out (Ferguson, 2001; Ford, 2010; Fordham, 1988; Fryer, 2006; Whiting, 2006). These young men refuse to be constrained by social injustices based on gender, socioeconomic status, and race or ethnicity. School counselors, unlike too many classroom teachers, have or should have received training to address the social and emotional needs and identities of their students, including but not limited to self-esteem and self-concept. When working with any student of a minority group, particularly Black males school counselors cannot be colorblind. They must be grounded and versed in race conscientiousness.

*Masculinity*

Masculinity is often a difficult concept to pin down. Broadly, masculinity is recognized as possessing the qualities or characteristics of manliness or of being a man. There are nonetheless
myriad ways of being a man and expressing manliness, even though as a culture the U.S. tends to accept hegemonic masculinity—tough, hard, domineering, and dominating—as normative.

Contemporary representations of and ideas about American Black masculinity tend to lean toward the negative—hypersexual, thug, gangster, violent, abusive, less intelligent athlete, and absent father. Out of whole cloth and against the grain of mainstream culture, Black men, women, and boys have attempted to craft an oppositional narrative of Black masculinity that at times conforms with hegemonic American masculinity, confirms the worst stereotypes of American Black Masculinity, or upends the former narratives.

The role of the SIM in schools is crucial to combatting retrogressive notions about Black masculinity as well as exploring how performances of normative masculinity are at odds with academic success. Studies like Kozol's *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (1992), *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (2006), and *Fire in the Ashes: Twenty-Five Years Among the Poorest Children in America* (2012) reveal how counselors, teachers, administrators, and peer pressure can exacerbate negative identities and undermine a scholar identity. Using ethnographic accounts, Ferguson (2001) also presents in *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*, the structural rituals that lead to the hardening of young Black boys during their school years that oftentimes contribute to feelings of uselessness and desperation.

But here I counter that Black males with a scholar identity do not equate hard work, the pursuit of high academic ranking, intelligence, and studiousness with being unmanly. Moreover, they do not equate success with selling out or acting White. Rather, being a scholar is taught and celebrated as an integral part of a self-possessed masculinity. Such students do not feel the need to belittle and resist learning opportunities; in fact, students with a scholar identity feel empowered
as young men in that they are able to access knowledge that will add to their future goals and expectations.

Like the American teacher’s race and gender distribution, the counselors too follow a similar European American (White) that could lead to a cultural clash. Counselors working at majority minority schools or those who are unfamiliar with the cultural differences often have lower expectations due to race and gender. This is where it becomes imperative for the counselor to reach to learn more about the all students and not see Black and Brown as broken.

Four Pillars: Home, School, Community, Mentoring

The 9 constructs of my SIM must not only be understood as something that happens in one classroom on a Saturday morning or at a two-week summer camp. The SIM must be woven into the fabric of the young scholar's life. The mere comprehension and knowledge of any one construct is insufficient for full integration of information. For the constructs to become an integral part of daily life choices, the scholar’s ability to apply and analyze what is learned as well as synthesize, evaluate, and ultimately create from that information is at the heart of transferring the theory (Bloom's taxonomy, 1984). Therefore, it is necessary that the four pillars (home, school, community, mentoring) support and encourage the scholar outside the model.

*Home* is the first place Black male students should receive positive messages about being a scholar. Those from single-parent and two-parent families need to have family training on SIM, if only to be able to better assess how well teachers are teaching and their students are learning. Involved parents intuitively and actively know if their students’ needs are being met. However, training in SIM allows a shared language and philosophy of learning between the teacher,
student, and family, a transparency and seamlessness in accessing and attaining academic achievement.

School is where children between the ages of 5 or 6 years old (often earlier) spend a significant portion of their day. If successful, this process goes on for at least 13 years. Therefore, the formative years are crucial; what is learned must be sustained and continue across the grades, especially from elementary into middle school, between middle school and high school, and again between high school and college. Educators need continued professional development that is culturally responsive. While working with educators across the country, I have noticed that more than three quarters of those has little or no coursework to become culturally competent (as noted by Ford, 2011). Many have read brief articles, and if funds are available, they have attended half-day or full-day seminars once a year. This type of ad hoc professional development falls woefully short of what should be provided for one of our nation's most valuable resources. The SIM is more than professional development; it empowers teachers, and it can be the answer to knowing how to establish and maintain that special learning relationship with all students.

Community is inclusive of home and school, but SIM defines communities as those spaces between and around the home and the formal school settings. They are the nerve centers that may occupy a significant portion of a student's life, particularly those students who have working or uninformed or uninvolved, or for other reasons, absentee guardians. Community leaders (local youth centers, YMCAs, gyms, sport teams as well as community police) should all be exposed to a much pithier version of the SIM; they should be made aware of the constructs, their definitions, and the basics on how to assist in the affirming qualities of the model.

Role model/mentor is critical in the life of young boys. A successful mentor is able to guide, push, and support the young Black male, which is central to success. A mentor's wise and good
counsel can last a lifetime. I can remember my first thoughts when I heard former National Basketball Association Most Valuable Player Charles Barkley state, “I am not a role model.” “How silly!” I mused. “Does he not know that a person who is considered a role model seldom if ever chooses to become someone's role model?” I have yet to meet a student who did not have a role model outside the home. In my life I’ve had three or four, all male, none of them my father. My first was someone I’d never meet: Julius “Dr. J.” Erving. He never knew it, but I wanted to be as famous as he was. Dr. J never asked for my attention, but to me it didn't matter. He was a symbol of a strong, well-liked, and all-powerful Black male. With my academic pursuits, my high school track coach filled the void. He was someone I could talk to, watch, and attempt to emulate. Indeed, he recently sent me a picture of himself and a group of students visiting the White House. He is still a role model; he too never asked to take up that mantle. He told me that I had potential before I knew what the word meant, and that has made a difference ever since. I now know that a well-placed counselor could have made a difference in my life when I needed it the most. What if I never ran track, played football, or joined a swim team?

*The Counselor*

It has been more than 25 years since I sat in a high school classroom. I remember those days, particularly, those last days, with a heightened degree of fear and uncertainty. Fear of what was next. Not sure of what would become of me. Recently I attended a high school reunion. As one can imagine, seeing classmates after a quarter of a century occasioned both shock and awe. Our principle was there, as were several teachers, and coaches. One of the people in attendance was my guidance counselor. When I was reintroduced he asked, “So what did you end up doing?” It was at that moment that I remembered that in the four years at my high school I had actually only met with him two or three times. There was very little counseling and no guidance offered. I
could not help but think that this guy was still there and wondered how many others passed through without the assistance of a good counselor.

In 2012 Vanderbilt University’s George W. Peabody College of Education, as part of its summer institutes, began the Achievement Gap Institute. As the chair of this endeavor I wanted to create an experience that I would pay to attend. I was able to bring in specialist in the field of urban education from across the country. Just a partial list of presenters included Gloria Ladson-Billings, Beth Harry, Sonia Nieto, Donna Ford, Tim Wise, Dough Fuchs, Michael Nettles, Joe Renzulli, James Moore, Chance Lewis, Richard Milner, Fred Bonner. Joy Davis, and Malik Henfield. These and many other presenters met each year with no more than 25 teachers, principals, superintendents, counselors, and program coordinators.

June 2015 will be the 4th consecutive year of the five day intensive program focused on theory, research, and practice on student motivation, performance, achievement, discipline, and counseling. My charge at the conclusion of all institutes is for the institute fellows to continue by working, collaborating and writing from the field. Several of the fellows have kept in touch. Three have returned to present on their continued work in their districts and school buildings. Below one of the participants who return the following year to address the new fellows write on her thoughts and perceptions as a counselor.

No one can deny the overall educational gains of the twenty-first century, even if globally the United States continues to lag behind. On all measures Black, Latino, and low-income students, are achieving—but not necessarily at the optimally levels represented by their sheer numbers. They continue to be underrepresented in postsecondary gifted education programs and at elite colleges and universities. And overrepresentation in special education is now a joke and expected. However, school counselors are charged with delivering programs and
services that support the academic development, social-emotional development, and college and career readiness needs of all students. With an emphasis placed on multicultural competency, counselors must identify the unique needs of diverse populations and implement opportunities for their academic success via culturally-responsive, data-driven, and evidence-based resources. Counselors who focus their efforts on decreasing those risk factors that hinder the ability of students to establish a sense of connectedness to the school environment increase the likelihood of academic and social-emotional success among diverse and low-income students. Lapan, Wells, Petersen and McCann (2014) concluded that establishing a sense of inclusion in the school environment promotes higher attendance rates, increased achievement through grade and test scores, and lessens negative outcomes that lead to adverse situations that limit academic accomplishments. By assisting students with developing an understanding of how they identify themselves and connecting those perceptions to educational and career interests, counselors encourage positive learning experiences that lead to long-term goals for future endeavors (Lapan et al, 2014).

Through collaboration with teachers, administrators, community members and other stakeholders, counselors serve as catalysts for change, particularly if they purposefully develop positive climates and engaging opportunities—supported by data—that consider multicultural and academic and environmental factors that promote student achievement (McMahon, Mason, Daluga-Guenther & Ruiz, 2014). Specific areas in which school counselors should be intentional is with subgroups of students who present with multiple barriers that may impede their ability to define their value within an educational context to achieve. Counselors may consider students who have an adverse perception in their ability to succeed, lack familial support for educational and career goals, have limited environmental resources and perform at levels below their
capabilities, for example. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Framework and ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors, which are standards that prepare students for postsecondary education and career readiness, allow for the integration of models that provide advocacy and social justice approaches as well as models that encourage identity development (Holcomb-Mccoy, 2007 and Whiting, 2006).

**Voice from the field on the SIM and the School Counselor’s Role**

*Mrs. Kennedy’s Implications for School Counselors*

I previously worked in the non-profit sector for an organization that implemented intensive youth development programs addressing the academic, personal-social and service development of students. I would later work at a small, private HBCU affiliated with the Baptist denomination. In both roles, I supported the academic and social-emotional needs, with an additional focus of leadership development. The empowerment instilled in students in these settings encouraged them to fully engagement in their growth as well-rounded individuals who pursued scholarly endeavors. Without direct exposure to the SIM, many high achieving male students nonetheless received mentorship from educators, family members and community members who recognized their potential for greatness. With this in mind, they developed characteristics associated with each construct intuitively. However, all students’ success can and must be cultivated. It should not be left to chance, genetics, social class, or the luck of having nurturing households, mentors, and school environments. SIM is a deliberate commitment to all students’ success, particularly those presenting risk factors. In effect, for those students who floundered or failed to take full advantage of the opportunities presented to them, The SIM, as
deployed in counseling situations within the school environment, acts as guiding principles to develop those students’ motivation and the belief that they could succeed.

In my current setting as a school counselor, I recognize situations for which intentional focus on a student’s identity can be the deciding factor in their ability to connect or engage in school. Although the population I now serve represents less than 5% of minority students, there is a great need for counselors to reach students with the multicultural awareness and competency learned through their education and expected through continuous professional development. The overarching expectation for our students is to assimilate to the majority population with little focus on understanding the unique needs of our diverse students. I consider one student who excels academically, demonstrates an inquisitive mind, and yet he often viewed at times as a difficult student because his behaviors do not fit the mold of our typical students. He presents as authority at times, a difficult student for peers to interact with and less engaged at times. I find it interesting that through my conversations with this student he recognizes traits that make him different (beyond his racial/ethnic identity) and struggles to find ways to overcome challenges in his interpersonal relationships. While his parents are involved in his education, I see that intentional efforts to assist him with developing his scholar identity would be beneficial. I work with other students who face similar difficulties with creating a sense of pride for self while embracing aspects of the predominate culture around them. I believe implementing mentoring opportunities with the foci being scholar identity aligns with the revised school counseling standards now known as the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors (ASCA, 2014).

Consulting with other Educators to foster a Scholar Identity in Students

Consultation is one of the many roles that guide counselor interaction with school personnel by sharing knowledge about how social-emotional needs can effect success in the
learning environment. Educators working directly with students in the classroom often look to their school counselors to offer strategies to reach unmotivated students, those who appear less engaged or for other various reasons do not perform at their level of academic capability. Counselors can work with classroom teachers and other school personnel as appropriate to ensure that the precipitating factors for which they can offer assistance do not hinder a student's academic success. Secondly, school counselors can help teachers with planning rapport-building activities with diverse students in mind to engage students. Thirdly, counselors can provide resources that encourage the use of learning materials that represent the diversity of student populations. Beyond, consultation when appropriate school counselors can develop action plans for mentorship and specific small groups to address the needs of Black male learners. Some school counselors may argue the need for these interventions or strategies for students without regard to race or ethnicity. While, I would agree, it is imperative that school counselors are aware of the unique needs of Black males and other culturally diverse students when working with them. Moreover, educators should keep in mind that diverse students do not represent a monolithic culture. Being mindful of cultural differences, teachers should have a sound knowledge of their students and understand when characteristics of a group apply and when an individual student's profile may differ.
References


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