The African American Doctoral Student at Argosy University, Atlanta

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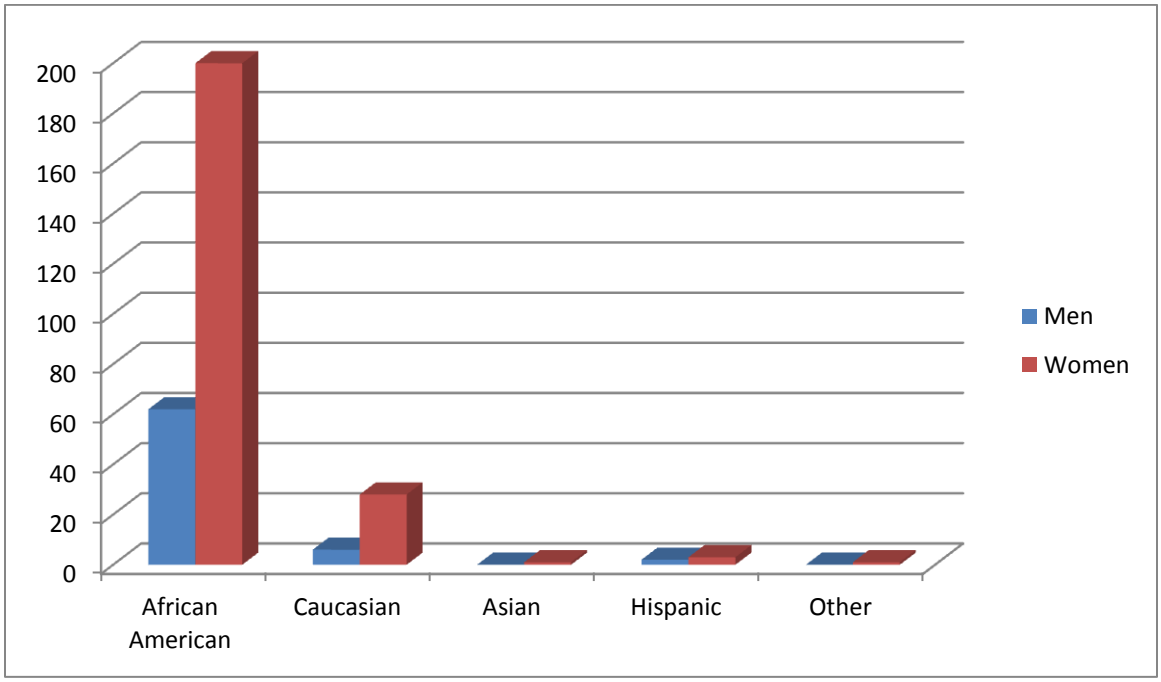
Many assumptions can be made about doctoral students, but some of the most prominent assumptions about specific character and educational traits are often false. Their journeys to complete their doctoral degrees are filled with junctures of challenge that often mimic those of a student transitioning from any beginning stage of education. Today, we will examine doctoral students in the Education programs at Argosy University. The demographic of students is primarily men and women of African-American descent, and while these students share commonalities with other doctoral students across the world, their experiences and needs are more complex than their counterparts. Many of their educational journeys have been challenging since their initial exposure into education as a child, yet they still manifest those burdens as adults. The needs as of this subgroup of adult learners may require additional attention; however, their transition into effective learning is completely attainable by utilizing specific methods to increase success. In order to successfully impact this population of students one must identify and address factors that are relevant to the African-American urban population, while also examining social and cultural motivators that can assist in identifying specific approaches that can positively benefit the attrition and retention of this demographic.

Before we can begin to assess the challenges that African American doctoral students face at Argosy University, we must first understand how specific attributes affect their understanding and learning capabilities within the Education program. Argosy University is located in a central metro location within the Atlanta city limits, and is an accredited institution by the Senior College and University Commission of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (Argosy University, 2014). Out of 302 active students, the population is comprised of over 87% African-American students, while all other races are marginally active within the

program. The chart below reflects the distribution of students which is based on current Argosy University Education program demographics:



It is also important to note that the majority of student population is contains active educators within the metro Atlanta area. Entry within the various Education doctoral programs require that students carry valid teaching certificates, and that students should either be current or former instructors who have demonstrated professional excellence within their school districts. Though there are stringent professional expectations for the program, students are accepted at virtually at any prior academic level. Though there is a minimum of a 2.4 GPA to be admitted, students can be accepted into the program on a "provisional" basis provided that they pass a rudimentary writing course, even if they do not meet the 2.4 GPA guideline. While some may see this as a disadvantage to the student, some argue that this gives students who are on varying academic levels an opportunity to pursue a higher education degree. Students are given a clear expectation of the grades and status that they are expected to uphold, and there are also made aware that their

enrollment may be subject to dismissal for not maintaining satisfactory academic progress per Department of Education guidelines.

While it may be a requirement for these adult learners to be exemplary models, it is important to note that many of these learners have been plagued with achievement related issues since their own inception into education as children. Many African American children have lowered academic moral due to conflicting student self-perceptions and cultural differences within the academic environment. Hans Bak's research contends that African American students are more likely than any other demographic to experience lower success on academic tracks, but the issue is exacerbated when the students attend schools in Caucasian districts (pg. 13, 1993). While there is not extensive research that has been conducted to prove this theory within Argosy's population, some African American students may have developed negative connotations after being reared in this type of environment. On the other hand, students in urban environments face even greater challenges, as these students suffer from a lack of intellectual growth, and are less likely to do well than their other counterparts because the innate desire to excel in academic studies was not properly instilled (Ramsey, 1998). These learners may have social and familial environments that have a host of socioeconomic issues (ranging from a single-parent household to a lack of economic resources) that cause significant disparages for the student to develop positive attitudes towards learning (Ramsey, 1998). These issues alone can significantly affect a learner's ability to matriculate, and naturally may create a lack of focus for further academic studies on the collegiate level.

Once these learners enter higher education, they may be further affected by conditions within the university system. According to Michelle Mont, many higher education institutions have not developed adequate programs that are "culturally-responsive to the concerns and needs

of students of color," and that a successfully attrition requires that educators and administrators confront and negate previous held ideologies regarding African American competency skills (2012). Despite being within an urban population, the university still must uphold specific teaching guidelines and curriculum; therefore, the program may not specifically cater to this population. African American learners value having their heritage acknowledged within the classroom setting to establish a sense of belonging, and they also prefer to have the instructors to integrate their own aspects of knowing and learning within the classroom (Mont, 2012). Students also may lack a higher level of academic preparedness and integration as they reach this academic level, which is often predetermined by their childhood education. In a report by Swail, Redd, and Perna (2003), they cited that African American students face the following issues that adversely affect their achievement:

- Negative social environment
- Racism and discrimination
- Stressors amongst members of their own race/culture
- Not enough professors of own race/lack of diversity
- Racist institutional policies and practices
- Doubts about ability to succeed in college
- Negative self-concept
- Lack of accountability
- Familial or professional challenges that interfere with productivity

Virtually all of these attributes, obstacles, and challenges are important in understanding the motivations and mindset of African American adult learners, as they explain why many of

the students do not matriculate within the program within the designated timeframes. Students routinely cite that they cannot correlate a long-standing motivation to complete the program, yet are apprehensive with sharing their past experiences with professors and counselors. As the sole Academic Counselor for this demographic, students have cited that they feel uncomfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions because they believe that adverse judgment or reactions will ensue. Many have admitted that they would rather quit or return to their studies at a later date than to address issues that affect their ability to learn. Students appear to be most affected by social and personal challenges that are present within their lives, but they also have lowered levels of motivation because they believe that the work is too challenging for their academic level.

As we have vaguely examined the role of motivation and student accountability, it should be noted that these factors are key issues that affect that African American demographic at Argosy University. Polite and Davis state that many urban African American learners do not accept taking responsibility for their academic shortcomings, and many develop a pessimistic attitude because they feel that failure is inevitable due to their past failed attempts" (pg. 213, 1999). I have had numerous sessions with doctoral students in this demographic who have expressed a firm belief that they do not possess the mental capacity to excel, or who refuse to correct an assignment when the professor is open to corrections. It almost appears that the student has created an indestructible wall that is opposed to any forms of constructive criticism, yet he or she refuses to take accountability for their work. Motivation is also further complicated by the student's purpose to pursue doctoral studies in the first place. Most of these adult learners enroll into the program due to personal and professional life transitions. Carol Kasworm expressed that many adult learners are motivated purely from their own goals and life priorities;

however, that motivation can be deterred by their prior beliefs and obstacles that discourage learning (pg. 6, 2003). This directly correlates with the data we have discussed thus far, as cultural, racial, socio-economic, and prior experiences all have a tendency to plague the African American demographic of students.

To better meet the needs of the African American adult learner population, higher education entities must identify areas of opportunity to assist retention and attrition, as well as utilize specific learning strategies. Setting the stage for success is important from the onset of beginning a degree program, so support personnel like counselors must satisfactorily address specific implications. Kasworm suggests that student service and support professionals should respect the adult learner's needs and goals by understanding that each individual is unique, and that their own perceptions are key determinants to understand their motivations for learning (pg. 7, 2003). Providing a supportive environment with viable solutions to their issues often combats adverse experiences within the educational system, and personnel should also work to become sensitive to cultural and/or gender based issues. It should also be noted that as adult learners transition in life that they may be more receptive to adapting new perspectives and understandings; however, proactive and respectful advisors play a critical role in developing these new attitudes (Kasworm, 2003). Attending college for adult learners must give value to their own personal beliefs to build a solid connection of understanding, and also may give the student the ability to use their newfound knowledge immediately within their own lives.

Educators may also hold a pivotal role to change the mindset of these students and to encourage motivation to progress, as they are on the front lines of guiding the student throughout the program. Stephen Brookfield advises that all educators take the time to "critically reflect" as it gives he or she a chance to evaluate their practices, values, and gives an unrestricted view of

what their students need (1995). Each educator must reflect to ensure that their practices are culturally responsive to the African American population, but they should never cater to students as this may deter intrinsic motivation. Educators should aim to meet their needs with teaching methodologies that promote critical thinking and building their intrinsic motivation to learn in and out of the classroom (Brookfield, 1995). Ken Bain also suggests that successful educators promote learning by modeling and creating their course to be stimulating to the basic senses; but also, teachers should already possess deep ideologies and knowledge that directly integrate with their beliefs of the capacity for humans to "learn, grow, and change" (pg. 84, 2004). African American students, like all students, want to feel represented within the classroom, and want their feelings and experiences to be acknowledged. If an educator actively promotes this ideology within their practices, then the student can change their existing mental framework to a more positive understanding of education. Bain also states that teachers should promote learning outside of the classroom to enable to students to practice critical thinking and reasoning in real-life situations, and to build the student's confidence in understanding the relevance of their intellectual growth (pg. 114, 2004). One must always remember that educators have a greater propensity to address issues immediately since students are required to attend classes, so it is in the best interest of any program to provide educators with the necessary tools to effectively support a student's needs.

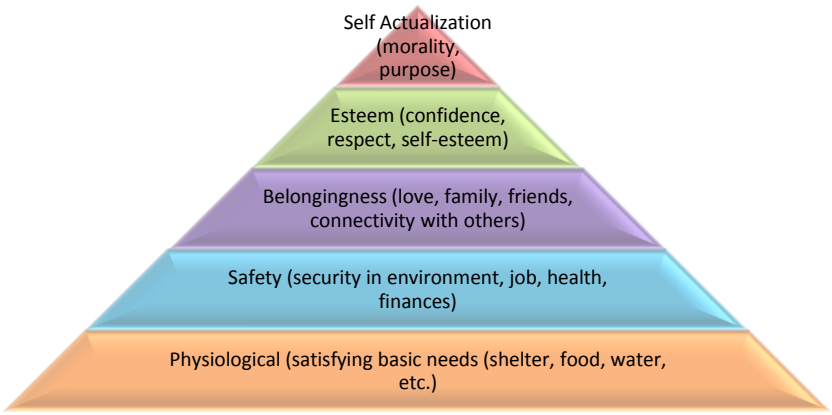
Since this population has a number of pre-existing conditions that can affect learning, the most advantageous approach that instructors and support staff can utilize when constructing their lesson plans and curriculum is Vincent Tinto's theory on adult learning and retention. His theory focuses on three major areas that affect adult learners:

1. Academic difficulties

2. Inability for the student to resolve their educational and occupational goals
3. Failure to become incorporated within the intellectual and social constraints of the institution and beyond (Swail et. al, 2003).

Administrators and program chairs can work to create effective retention by first being committed to the needs of this population. As stated prior, African American students may feel disconnected as they do see efforts to connect with their diverse needs, so the program should be focused on acknowledging their culture, heritage, and experiences. The program should also create initiatives to curb academic difficulties by providing tutoring or academic assistance to combat prior feelings of academic insufficiencies. Tinto's theory also calls for retention and attrition to take place in various stages, where from the onset of embarking into a program that students have an understanding of what is expected. Educators and support personnel should create realistic expectations for what will occur within the program, while bridging a gap to understanding by creating adequate pre-entry and assessment protocols to ensure that students are placed based on their own unique needs (Swail et. al, 2003). By thoroughly addressing this need educators will be able to help adult learners to make the transition into the program a smoother process, while also giving the student the necessary resources and support to address the challenges of becoming a student again. Swail, Redd and Perna also contend that utilizing Tinto's philosophy also encourages the student to develop a higher sense of accountability within the program because they have been clearly instructed and advised what is necessary and expected to matriculate (2003). The student has more individuals who are vested within their success, but who also make strides to encourage personal success to uplift the student to become successful in their future endeavors.

To further ensure that this type of approach is successful, it would also be highly advantageous to connect Tinto's theory with that of Abraham Maslow. Based on our prior research, students also have issues dealing with their own personal needs, along with finding confidence and self-esteem within themselves. Maslow's hierarch of needs theory directly ties in these types of motivators, and stresses that unless each of the motivators is fulfilled the individual can never truly reach higher levels of motivation, purpose and success (Silverman, et. al, 2000). The following chart below illustrates this model:



Support personnel can work to help a student to access these levels of fulfillment by providing the necessary tools to build stability. Silverman and Casazza contend that colleges and universities can provide resources to connect with those that satisfy basic needs and safety, while counselors can help the adult learner to build esteem and confidence while also creating new or existing social bonds (2000). This will ultimately help the student to have an increased ability to achieve success, while also changing their perceptions of the benefits of the educational environment.

Though these plans may definitely spark a change within this complex demographic, unknown variables still exist that could plague future success. First, it may become a challenge

to “cut through the red tape” on a corporate level to impact changing some elements of curriculum or the current student services support efforts. Argosy University is a for-profit institution that is owned by a major business corporation, and despite the positive connotations of these efforts, any changes must be approved specific licensing and accrediting agencies. The plan may be initially approved; however, legal regulations could delay an immediate implementation within the Education and Student Service departments. Secondly, there are no guarantees that students will be receptive to change due to their existing values. Inevitably, not everyone will be a success story. Some students simply do not have the desire to change, as their prior beliefs and experiences may be irrevocably set within their mindset. I have interacted with a group of students within this population who simply refuse to accept any forms of assistance. As one student told me in our confidential sessions, she “does not trust the system,” and holds a strong judgment that she is entitled to pass the program because she is African American. While not all students hold this sentiment, who are we to judge her for her opinions? Her thoughts may not be valid to others, but those thoughts may have merit amongst her peers. In these cases educators and support personnel should never condemn a student for their opinion, but should be encouraged to foster a greater sense of support and opportunities for the student to excel through their determination to complete the requirements. Lastly, how can we really be sure that these issues are the only factors that plague student success? Our plan of action should incorporate more extensive research where each student provides a confidential analysis of their educational and personal journeys thus far. Not only will this shed more light upon how their experiences have been translated within their life, but it will also help administrators and educators to plan more appropriate approaches to increase success, attrition, and retention.

While there may be no definitive answer to determine if the aforementioned initiatives will be successful with this demographic, reasonable efforts must be taken to avoid further complications. Changing a student's opinions, values, and preconceived notions is not an easy feat: it is an intricate process where educators have to utilize all of their resources to show the student that there is hope. The extraordinary levels of fear and apprehension that these students face undoubtedly decrease motivation to learn, but change is plausible when an educator can show his or her student an appreciation of education that engages them from within. The principle of establishing hope only increases the likelihood that the learner will formulate a new sense of understanding; therefore, it is dually important for the educator to have confidence that their practices can help the student to want to change. Change is not inevitable; but rather, it is a manifestation of the sheer will and determination of a person finding a purpose to overcome their prior challenges to evolve into their own image of success.

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