Understanding Stereotype Threat

The article below introduces you to the concept of stereotype threat (http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/08/thin-ice-stereotype-threat-and-black-college-students/304663/) and its impact on college enrollment, persistence, and completion. Use the information in this article to build a better understanding of your mentee, no matter their background. Feel free to reach out to your Program Manager for any questions, comments, or concerns you may have.

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Background

Retaining and graduating students from four-year degree programs is a challenge many post-secondary institutions face nationwide. For years, researchers and practitioners have strived to uncover what factors contribute to students choosing to remain or depart from a college or university. Although the literature offers many insights as to what factors impede the degree-completion of undergraduates, there has been very little change in the number of students that earned college degrees over the last 70-plus years.

African Americans in particular have one of the lowest retention and degree completion rates nationwide with only 42% earning their bachelor’s degree within six years (the national average at 57%). Stereotype threat has shown to be a contributing factor in degree completion rates nationwide.

Stereotypes and Stereotype Threat

Stereotypes can be defined as gross generalizations applied to a group of people with some level of shared characteristics. Gordon Allport brilliantly defined stereotypes as “an exaggerated belief associated with a category ... to justify our conduct in relation to that category.” In essence, stereotypes can provide a rationale for how we treat and relate to others. With regards to race, stereotypes have been used to justify individual racist acts and institutionalized racism. For African Americans in particular, racial stereotypes have promoted barriers to equal opportunities in the
United States, in both the past and present-day contexts.

**Stereotype threat** is the perceived risk of confirming a negative stereotype. Stereotype threat can impact any social group in a context where a corresponding stereotype is relevant. In educational environments, the anxiety of inadvertently confirming a stereotype has been shown to interfere with and depress academic achievement in many ways. The most widely researched consequence of stereotype threat is its power to impair academic performance.

Can you recall a time when you or someone you know felt judged by a superficial characteristic? (i.e. someone made the assumption that an individual was not a good student just because this individual played college sports) This is an example of a stereotype. Stereotype threat would cause this student athlete to overcompensate their anxieties of confirming this stereotype by overworking themselves, not advocating for help, and keep worries internal.

**Impostor Syndrome**

Although one might assume that stereotype threat affects only weaker students, the opposite is actually true. Stereotype threat affects the students who care most about disproving negative stereotypes; these students are generally the strongest academically. Thus, academically rigorous programs are the perfect incubator for stereotype threat, as well as a condition known as impostor syndrome. When a person suffers from impostor syndrome, he/she feels like a fraud despite having achieved a high level of success.

**Everyday Examples of Stereotype Threat**

The quotes below came out of 16 group interviews held among 94 participants. Read more about the focus groups in the original article (http://drive.google.com/file/d/0B-7uUglUA5seaR2ZGtBSTVvdUE/view?usp=sharing).

- A young man at one of the institutions shared how a faculty member was surprised to see him walk into her calculus class. He was qualified for the course and needed to take it as one of his academic requirements. He walked in late, and was taken aback when she stated, "You know this is calculus 3, right?" He went on to describe that she seemed very surprised to see him, an African American male, and her demeanor as well as her question conveyed that she was not expecting him to belong in her classroom. He of course let her know that he was in the right place, and responded "Yeah, I'm going to just sit down .... " He went on to say "... She was ... shocked to see me there." This incident reflects an indirect expression of a sentiment that an African American student was not intellectually capable; however, students revealed that often times this is expressed to them directly and verbally.

- A student shared an incident where a professor was so convinced that she did not belong in his classroom, that he secretly asked her classmates if they felt she was handling the workload. She went on to share, ... one particular professor ... there have been situations
where he keeps coming or asking other students about me, about whether or not they think I can do my job as a student, whether I'm pulling my weight in my class and whatever, things like that ... the fact that this one professor has repeatedly asked one of my friends ... if I can do it or if I'm contributing to the classroom as I should be, that makes me really mad.

- One student felt stereotypical attitudes toward African Americans could be summed up in one question, "Are you worthy?" She felt that the racial stereotypes placed on them always led faculty and fellow students to question whether they belonged on campus or had the intellectual skills to handle coursework.

- Students felt that the stereotypes about their intellectual capacities impacted how they interacted with their peers in the classroom. Oftentimes, students of other racial groups did not want to share class notes with them, or even work with them on group projects. One student summed up the experience by stating* ... [It is] automatically assumed that I am going to be the dead weight in the group.* Another student shared, I noticed that in one of my biology classes my freshman year, I think it was second semester, I came in late and a ... Caucasian student ... she just had [body language that said] "I don't want to be around [you]." [Since] I came in late and ... [the professor] was going over notes on the board ... [I asked her], 'Can I see your paper so I can see what I missed so I can write it down?' And she looked at me like, 'No, I'm not helping you at all. No, I'm not giving you nothing.' ... yeah, I knew [it was because of my race].

- African American students are determined to not confirm the stereotypes prescribed to them. A participant summed this up by saying 'Society already has, you know their views on how African Americans are, so it's just like if you go to school and you don't succeed, you're just fulfilling one of the stereotypes that they already have.' Another stated, I feel like I have to represent to the very best of my ability to show that Black people can learn, Black people are here to study and better themselves, otherwise if I put forth a bad example, they're all going to judge Black people to be this way.

- It was also expressed that it is difficult to formally complain or address the issue of stereotypes, especially when they are harbored by faculty. Professors are the leadership in the classroom and have a wide-range of autonomy. This level of control makes it difficult for students to challenge racist thinking or any other form of subordination. One student stated, ... students do feel like they're getting knocked because of their color ... gender ... [sexual] orientation [in the classroom]. One of the biggest problems [is] ... that teachers technically are the masters of their classroom, so for you to prove that they were doing something wrong to you is basically like an uphill battle.

- Facing stereotypes of being intellectually inferior and undeserving of college admission caused African Americans to experience anxiety that they felt was disruptive to their education. Focus group participants described this stereotype threat as another layer of stress in an already pressure-filled academic environment. One student stated, It's really sad that I think African Americans and a lot of other cultures ... we think about so much. It's not
just go to school, sit in class, do well. It's like things are going on and you're thinking about things. Like ... we gotta prove that we deserve to be here ... there's too much going on.

**Steps You Can Take**

- Stay aware of the role of stereotype threat in your life and help your mentee understand how this concept may affect their college and career trajectories, and how they can influence it.

- When your mentee gets to college, they may be part of a racial minority on campus, possibly for one of the first times in their lives. Start having conversations about this potential reality early on in high school to instill the truth in your mentee that they will belong on that campus just as much as their peers, and they will be able to succeed and thrive there.

- When your mentee searches for colleges, pay attention to the diversity figures and seek out institutions with programs designed to support first generation, low-income, and/or minority students.

- Encourage your mentee to get in the habit of studying difficult subjects with groups of peers. Researchers have found that minority students in college are more likely to isolate themselves when struggling with studying difficult subjects such as calculus, whereas students who study in groups fare much better after collaborating to navigate the material better than they could alone. (Steele, 2011)

- Remind your mentee of highly achieving public figures or successful friends and acquaintances that match your mentee's gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. These examples show your mentee a possible reality for success.