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Over the past twenty-five years, there has been great concern regarding the African American male student in higher education—primarily at the community college level. Often, he, meaning the African American male has been written out of the learning achievement paradigm. Far too many educational programs have been created, but not developed nor structured for him to achieve the outcome of graduation while being competent, proficient and skilled to matriculate within the workforce or continuing onward to earn a bachelor’s degree.

Seemingly, to change the learning cultural curve, educational policy makers would have worked much earlier to close the achievement gap by lending support at the primary levels of education across America to ensure that the basic foundational skills in the areas of English, Math, Reading, and Writing would be mastered before entering post-secondary educational institutions. Today, there is an urgency to train and re-train the African American male so that he can be counted within the completion of GOAL 2025 in America where supposedly 60 percent more college graduates will be working and creating progressive technologies to advance America worldwide (Lumina Foundation, n. d.).

Although the goal is commendable and needed, there is still the great educational divide. With the reduction of academic core programs, educational budgets, learning support services and the massive reduction of teacher shortage—the African American male is left without the needed resources to excel. More importantly, a large number of African American male students are located in both rural and urban areas where quality educational programs are nonexistent. If the proposed outcome is graduation and productivity, then there must be an immediate transformation in the learning curriculum and instructional design with the reimplementation of quality educational programs and services valuing the education of the African American male student.
More so, it is crucial that all educational stakeholders and policy makers take the Educational QUEST and collaborate creatively, as well as, become educational allies to ensure that the African American male student is successful in completing his post-secondary education. If this goal is expected to be achieved, then all governing parties in the field of education must be held accountable. It is only when the African American male student is thoroughly prepared through the educational institutions that he can serve as a positive contributing member of the workforce to guide America to the next level of technology advancement within the 21st Century and beyond.
Reference

College and Career Readiness on the Margins: Implications for School Counselors

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ABSTRACT

Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca (2009) suggest that content knowledge and basic skills, core academic skills, non-cognitive or behavioral skills, and college knowledge are the four key skills necessary for students to be college-ready. “While policymakers at the national, state, and local levels have endorsed the movement to raise academic rigor and demand college and career readiness for all students, the stark reality is that the educational pipeline loses far too many young people before they can even enter postsecondary education” (Hooker & Brand, 2010, p. 75). Of particular concern are the marginalized students. This manuscript focuses on those from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Black males, with implications for school counselors.

(Key words: College, career, Black males, Low-income)

Introduction

In the current age of accountability, educational reform, and the struggling economy, there is an increased need for students to graduate from high school and pursue higher education. In recent decades, Americans have seen an increasingly globalized economy and a reduction in domestic manufacturing jobs, which had once sustained the nation’s working class. In the next decade, however, occupations that require postsecondary education are expected to grow at significantly higher rates than jobs requiring less educational attainment (U.S. Department of Labor, 2009).

Only 23 percent of students graduating in 2009 in the United States met the college readiness benchmarks for English, math, reading, and science, according to data from ACT (2009). The
concern for equity, economic stability, and international competitiveness gives the American education system the large responsibility of working to close achievement and opportunity gaps for previously marginalized groups in the United States, such as minority groups and individuals from low socioeconomic status. The nation’s focus is now on increasing the percentage of students across all subgroups that will be prepared for postsecondary education and employment (Martinez & Klopott, 2005). To that end, school counselors can be critical to ensuring that all students are “college-ready” and “career-ready” before they graduate from high school.

School counselors are expected to provide the opportunity for students to develop an awareness of careers, foster students’ ability to find career information, and help students search for and attain achievable goals (ASCA National Model, 2004). The challenges between and within groups are unique, and awareness of such along with targeted efforts is critical. Of many groups warranting specific attention, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Black males appear to be at a further disadvantage. Critical to the overall improvement of such groups on the margins is a shift in focus to the facilitated empowerment of these students. “Empowerment can be defined as a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 40). Empowerment theory, which has roots in early feminist theory, is often used when counseling minorities or other populations who may face oppression from society (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). Through their data-driven comprehensive programming, school counselors are key to ensuring that the empowerment of these students on the margins are the priority instead of the deficits that are correlated with them being there.

### College- and Career- Readiness

Before examining the barriers to students on the margins, namely students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Black males, it is important to first discuss college and career readiness and what that entails. Conley (2007) defines college readiness as the level of preparation and skills necessary to qualify for and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses at a postsecondary institution without the need for remedial coursework. Despite the new age of accountability and the various tactics for strengthening school systems, Kirst and Bracco (2004) conclude that almost half of the students who enter higher education and approximately two-thirds of students who attend community college must enroll in remedial courses and programs. Many of the skills that are crucial in determining a student’s success in postsecondary education are unrelated to knowledge in content area. Instead, cognitive strategies such as interpretation, problem solving, and reasoning have been consistently identified as being even more important than specific content knowledge (Conley, 2007). Large differences often exist between the amount and type of reading and writing required in high school versus college classes as well as the analytic and thinking skills required, according to Conley (2007). In order to help students develop these skills, the school counselor can work towards systemic change, particularly for teachers to develop these critical thinking skills in high and lower level classes.

As far as career readiness is concerned, students need to be able to apply academics in the context of situations they may face in their careers. Some of these skills are the same abilities that allow for success in college. These abilities include: core academic skills such as writing,
research skills, oral communication skills, and general logic and analytic thinking skills, which are not necessarily subject-specific but are crucial to the success in college, future careers, and in a wide variety of disciplines. The current accountability system tends to focus more on content area than critical thinking skills as demonstrated by the state issued standardized tests. Students who come from middle to upper class backgrounds tend to have more exposure to a variety of experiences and have parents who are more likely to push towards mastering critical thinking skills (Ward, 2006). Upon close examination, there appears to be a gap in the system where students are not learning the skills necessary for them to be prepared for the challenges of college and careers as well as an additional achievement gap based on SES and race.

In addition to subject-focused content knowledge and cognitive strategies, academic behaviors including self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-control are behaviors necessary for academic success. Also, mastery of skills such as study and organizational skills are critical for college success, including mastery of key material and successful completion of academic tasks (Conley, 2007). Study skill behaviors incorporate necessary skills such as time management, exam preparation, seeking and using resources, taking notes, and communicating with teachers. Furthermore, the ability to work with others, coordinate and recognize the importance of study groups, and successfully participate in study groups is a study skill behavior that may contribute to college success. Many of these academic behaviors also allow students to prioritize study time in relation to work or social activities. Strong interpersonal skills and social skills also enable students to interact with a diverse group of professors and peers, thus enhancing success in college (Martinez & Klopott, 2005).

Research has found that students also need to have an understanding of the complex college admission and selection process, the academic requirements for college work, the options available to them, how to pay for postsecondary education, and the cultural differences that exist between high school and postsecondary education (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Although many students aspire to attend a four-year college and understand the opportunities an advanced degree will allow, they have little understanding of the academic and social preparation necessary to actually enter a four-year college and to be successful in such a setting. Many students also do not receive counseling on the range of postsecondary options or are given limited guidance on how their individual academic plan matches their postsecondary aspirations (Hooker & Brand, 2010). This important information, or “college knowledge,” includes thorough understanding of college admissions, testing and curricular requirements, application processes, college options and choices, tuition costs and financial aid, college culture and course rigor, and expectations and necessity of increased higher education (Conley, 2007). Furthermore, the access, or lack of access, to this knowledge can create opportunity gaps.

Students on the Margins

Research indicates that youth in low-income, inner-city schools are at risk for limited career options, reduced earnings potential, and low educational attainment (Jackson, Kacanski, Rust, & Beck, 2006). Students from this underrepresented group are often less likely to have role models who have attended college, and there may be less college knowledge in their communities (Hooker & Brand, 2010). In addition to skill deficits or barriers to information, families and
students from low socioeconomic backgrounds often lack the aspirations, internal and external supports, or the beliefs that they are able to attain higher levels of education (Akos, Lambie, Milsom, & Gilbert, 2007).

There are multiple factors that increase the risk of poor academic achievement outcomes among low socioeconomic populations, including racial bias, peer group influence, parenting practices, parental involvement, poorer quality instruction and low teacher expectations for minority children, limited school resources, and less rigorous academic coursework (Ward, 2006). Research consistently reports that in schools in urban areas, large schools, and schools that disproportionately serve students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students are less likely to have access to the resources necessary to become college-ready (Cooper & Liou, 2007). These students are also less likely to be enrolled in academic tracks and rigorous courses necessary for college preparation (Akos, et al., 2007; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009).

Barriers to college knowledge and the college application process create difficulties for obtaining college- and career-readiness among low-income and minority students. According to Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca (2009), low-income and minority students who have similar academic qualifications to their high-income white peers are more likely to attend two-year college and less likely to attend a four-year college. Therefore, it is evident that barriers exist beyond academic achievement. Successfully attending college requires knowledge of the complex application process as well as the financial aid process, which is being recognized as a significant barrier for students. According to the American Council on Education (2004), low-income students are more likely than middle-income students to file the Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) after the deadline, which significantly reduces the amount of aid that can be obtained. Additionally, approximately 850,000 students who would most likely be eligible for a Pell Grant never even file a FAFSA (American Council on Education, 2004). Furthermore, 14 percent of dependent and 17 percent of independent low-income, full-time students do not apply for aid.

Parental factors also impact academic achievement and success among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. It is not that parents of low socioeconomic status are uninvolved in their child’s academic achievement efforts, in actuality the parental absence may in fact be the result of structural barriers or lack of resources that make involvement difficult or impossible (Lee & Bowen, 2006). For example, many low SES homes are headed by a single mother who may have an inflexible work schedule, limited transportation, and younger children that make it difficult to attend informational meetings or parent conferences that often occur at schools in the evenings and on weeknights (Smith, 2009). Furthermore, parents may lack resources, such as internet access or financial means to assist children with academics or online applications. Also, parents who may not have graduated from high school themselves lack the academic skills to help their children and lack knowledge of the college process.

According to the U. S. Census Bureau (2010), 27.4% of the Black population is living in poverty, which is the highest rate out of all ethnic groups. While the Black population is at risk for not developing college and career readiness skills, Black males, in particular, are at risk of not receiving equitable educational and career opportunities. Statistics related to academic achievement, graduation rate, incarceration, college matriculation and career achievement of
Black males are indicative of a serious issue with the education and preparation of these students (Wyatt, 2009).

Black males have historically been an underserved population within education. Per Jenkins (2006), 57% of Black males were unable to read in 1900, and in 2001 44% remained illiterate, according to data taken from the U.S. Census. Consequently, Black males lag behind their counterparts in academic achievement (Baker, 2005; Noguera, 2003). The disengagement of Black males from education often occurs by the time they are in 4th grade (Noguera, 2003). This should be disconcerting for all who work with this population. Jenkins (2006) posits that Black males are disproportionately represented among those students who are forced to withdraw, have low academic performance, and, for those who persist to college, report negative college experiences. All such data lends further credence to concerns about an educational crisis affecting Black males (Hendrie, 1998).

According to Stearns, Potochnick, Moller, and Southworth (2010), students who pursue an advanced course of study (e.g. Advanced placement, etc.) are more likely to be better prepared for college than those who do not. Knowing this, it is a troubling notion to observe that Black males are the least likely (amongst Blacks and Whites of both genders) to take advanced courses. The psychological, social, physical, and personal burdens that Black males carry must be considered if the educational disparity is to improve.

There is an ample amount of research on the disadvantages that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Black males face in their academic and career development and achievement (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). However, there is a lack of research on what can be done to improve the career development of this population (Robinson & Reio Jr., 2012). Best practices regarding the empowerment of this group are needed in the literature on the topic. School counselors, leaders in the use of data and evidence-based practices to improve educational equity, are key to adding to this body of knowledge.

**Implications for School Counselors**

Turner and Ziebell (2011) posit that students believe their success is not related to their efforts in school. This implies that there are other factors beyond their control that inhibit their success academically as well as career development. This feeling of powerlessness is fairly common in minority groups due to overt and covert forms of oppression that still exist despite the efforts to expunge them. The literature often focuses on negative stereotypes which disproportionally affect Black males and the lack of culturally competent supports for these students. (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). While it is important to have an awareness of an individual's lack of resources, it is just as important to address the strengths of an individual and how he can use those strengths to overcome obstacles.

Empowerment theory, which has roots in early feminist theory, is often used when counseling minorities or other populations who may face oppression from society (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). The driving force behind this theory is to facilitate the empowerment of the client, which Gutierrez (1995) defines as “the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power
so that individuals, families and communities can take action to improve their situations” (p. 229). The three types of power listed by Gutierrez (1995) represent control of oneself, equity in relationships with others, and the power to make systemic change. One of the most distinguishing features of this theory is the counseling relationship, which is viewed as a partnership, thus, giving the client more control by eliminating power differentials.

So how can school counselors help facilitate the empowerment of their students, particularly those on the margins? Afterschool groups directed at Black male students have produced positive behaviors related to attendance, discipline referrals and academics (Martin, Martin, Gibson & Wilkins, 2007; Wyatt, 2009). In particular, high school counselor Shelby Wyatt developed an afterschool group called The Brotherhood which shows very promising results (Wyatt, 2009). The group is geared towards Black male students who were at risk for dropping out of school and focused on themes such as collaboration, leadership, and student advocacy – all of which serve as the foundations of empowerment. Those who are part of the Brotherhood perform 48%-60% higher academically than those who are nonmembers (Wyatt, 2009). This study indicates that the application of empowerment theory through group counseling can be a successful approach to help Black male students who are endeavoring to overcome unique educational challenges. A group setting allows for idea sharing for students who are in the same stage of exploring potential career options (Kerr & Sodano, 2003). Through the group counseling format, students can elicit the support of similar peers, weigh potential career options as a group, and make their way through the goal setting stages of career development by providing feedback to one another (Kerr & Sodano, 2003). One of principles that make up Wyatt’s group that pertain to the empowerment of these young men is the opportunity to develop leadership skills. For instance, allowing a different group member to lead a discussion once a week will not only help develop leadership skills and give him a sense of power, it will also help develop those critical thinking skills that are essential in college and career readiness. Also, letting the group members decide what direction they want the group to go in further empowers the members and creates a sense of equity among the group members.

Another useful addition to such a group is bringing in speakers of similar background who are currently in college or are professionals within the community. This way, the students will be able to interact with a role model who can explain how they got to where they are and how they overcame the obstacles along the way. This can give the students a sense of new possibilities and can also help them build networks. Seeing individuals who are successful is an excellent way for these students to realize that they are not stuck with one path or future and most importantly, that they have the power to change their own lives.

A final form of empowerment is gaining power through systemic change (Gutierrez, 1995). This is a perfect opportunity for the school counselor to help the group brainstorm ways they could achieve change in their environment, whether it is the school or the community. It could be something simple as using the creative arts to raise the awareness of the faculty on their perspective. Encouraging and facilitating historically disenfranchised groups to begin this dialogue with the school could bring about systemic change and more ideal conditions for these students to thrive. It also allows the students to realize that they have the ability to change their environment, and more importantly, they can change their response to the environmental conditions which may be beyond their control.
In addition to the powerful impact of group work on improving college and career readiness in students on the margins, school counselors can also facilitate the empowerment of students via individual planning. The Brotherhood program developed academic, career and personal/social goals with their participants, and feedback from post-program surveys showed that the students found these goals very helpful in their development (Wyatt, 2009). This program led to school counselors’ reevaluation of the 4-year plan at their school and the creation of a new program designed to improve college readiness (Wyatt, 2009). Throughout this process, it is critical for school counselors to honor the respective culture of students and provide opportunities for social capital attainment with which to succeed in postsecondary life. It is necessary for the school counselor to develop a partnership with students and allow them to have ownership of their career planning process (Greene, 2006). In the early stages of career planning, the school counselor should focus on the student’s interests and strengths and help the student plan academic courses or opportunities based on these strengths and interests. Determining the strengths of a student allows for awareness and can be a good opportunity to discuss how the student can use these skills to overcome obstacles and further define them.

**Conclusion**

During a time of increased need for effective practices and the promotion of college- and career-readiness among students, school counselors and other school professionals have been called to advocate for disenfranchised groups who experience fewer opportunities and lower aspirations for educational attainment and career success. Although this article focused primarily on two groups of students, those from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Black males, many of the strategies proposed can be applied to all groups that reside on the margins. Through the ideals of empowerment theory, the school counselor can create a group setting that helps students build support and connects as well as gives them access to vital information and power. By creating and facilitating a safe environment for these students to gain power, school counselors can improve future outcomes of individuals who have historically been systematically and systemically oppressed.

Given such unique challenges to an increasingly diverse population, it is imperative that school counselors consider the ecology of students when implementing comprehensive programs to address student needs. Doing so aids in delivering services that truly promote equity, access, and social justice in schools, as transformed school counselors are charged to do.
References


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Post-Secondary Matriculation for Minority High School Youth: Multicultural Mentoring and Student Engagement

By:
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&
Nadine Connell

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ABSTRACT

Education matters. Yet disparities among racial and ethnic groups’ matriculation into post-secondary education has plagued both young people and admissions personnel. Over the years, scholars have spent considerable effort documenting the educational achievement gap between whites, Latinos, and African Americans. Little effort is dedicated to identifying “what works” in improving application and enrollment rates for Latinos and African Americans specifically. This paper offers a review of post-secondary enrollment activity for minority students and presents a multicultural mentoring program that shows promise in closing the achievement gap by matching current college students with minority high school students at risk of not attending college.

(Keywords: education, mentoring, minority youth, multicultural, post-secondary)

Introduction

Education is a key determinant to long-term positive occupational and financial outcomes. The US labor market increasingly demands college-educated workers and graduates with skills that meet high demand occupations, especially those that rely on technical skill. Community colleges and four year institutions serve both of these purposes in unique ways. Community colleges serve forty-four percent of the total undergraduate college population, with the vast majority of those students classified as either minority students, first generation college students, or both (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012). The community college system is uniquely situated for educating students for whom a traditional four year degree may not be the immediate post-high school option, perhaps because they have not been exposed to national college visits by their parents, they must work while attending school, or they are interested in cost-effective college options. Despite the role that community colleges in particular have played in granting access to higher education for these students, many are still not taking advantage of these programs. Given the importance of educational attainment for advancement, social policy in the US remains conflicted in how to address issues surrounding both post-secondary enrollment and subsequent retention of minority students, who generally do not
advance as far as their majority counterparts when transitioning from high school or going on to
earn advanced degrees (Brindis, 2002).

The Pew Research Center reports that Latinos could comprise one-third of the US population by
2050 (Passell & Cohn, 2008). The percentage of Latinos in the US is currently close to seventeen
percent, while African Americans comprise thirteen percent of the total US population (United
States Census Bureau, 2012). This represents a major demographic shift over the last one
hundred years (Gratman & Gutman, 2000). Latino youth have, historically, been less likely than
their White or African American counterparts to attend college (Brindis, 2002). In recent years,
however, these numbers are changing rapidly, as post-secondary institutions are beginning to see
a steady increase in Latino enrollment. At present, 46% of Latino/high school completers attend
college, in comparison to 45% of African Americans, 51% of Whites, and 67% of Asians (Fry &
Lopez, 2012). This upward trend has been positive over the last two years for both Latinos and
whites, but is decreasing for African Americans, where college enrollments have dropped three
percent over the last two years (Fry & Lopez, 2012).

The “educational gap” noted by scholars continues, but community colleges and four year
institutions are poised to ameliorate this trend. Although the upward trajectory in college
enrollment generally reflects considerable progress, the benefits that come from this
advancement realized by Latino youth may be less than expected. When the numbers are
disaggregated, it becomes clear that Latinos are enrolling in community college at much higher
rates than at four year colleges, but enrollment rates do not appear to correspond to graduation
rates. Fry, 2011 confirms this trend:

Much of [the] growth in college enrollment among young Hispanics has been at
community colleges. Of all young Hispanics who were attending college last October,
some 46% were at a two-year college and 54% were at a four-year college. By contrast,
among young white college students, 73% were enrolled in a four-year college, as were
78% of young Asian college students and 63% of young black college students. (p. 3.)

As a result of continued concern for minority youth achievement, knowledge of the enrollment
and persistence literature is becoming increasingly more important and both factors require
careful consideration for students, families, institutions of education, and policymakers alike.
Ultimately, the completion of either an associate’s or a bachelor’s degree is paramount to life
success in the world of work. However, Latinos and African American students fall well below
their White peers in degrees actually earned. While 57 percent of Asians and 44 percent of
whites have earned an associate’s or bachelor’s degree, only 21 percent of Latinos and 30
percent of African Americans have done the same (Santiago & Soliz, 2012).

Rather than continuing to document the educational gap, it is time for scholars and policy
makers to address “what works” in improving college enrollment and retention among minority
youth. This paper examines three fundamental themes found in the mentoring, educational,
social policy, and community psychology literature which have been additionally associated with
post-secondary matriculation for Latinos and African Americans: cultural competence; student
engagement; and, structured mentoring programs. Following an analysis of these three
influences on academic success, we offer a review of an emerging and promising college-based mentoring program for at-risk high school youth.

**Literature Review:**

What Works in Post-Secondary Matriculation for Minority Youth?

Support for education as a means to upward mobility is gaining solid ground in US public policy. The last four years have witnessed considerable attempts at improving federal initiatives designed to increase minority educational attainment. These include approving more funding for Head Start, minorities in STEM fields, and initiatives aimed at increasing the number of minority teachers in the US. Presumably, increasing the number of both minority educators and multicultural educational settings could improve attainment through modeling minority success as well as increasing engagement of minority students; this concept of cultural competence runs deep in social policy practice. Indeed, many educators and policy makers cite cultural competence as a factor that is presumed likely to improve educational attainment outcomes for minority youth, particularly Latinos (Koebler, 2011). Student engagement is another factor showing promising results for minority students, but student engagement activities are not often offered prior to college enrollment. Some evidence supports student engagement as a successful indicator of enrollment of minority youth into post-secondary education institutions, suggesting its importance for student retention both in practice and theory (Kuh, Cruce, Shoupe, Kinsie, & Gonyea, 2008). Finally, structured mentoring of minority youth by currently enrolled college students is a programmatic approach in its infancy, but showing potential in helping youth overcome basic barriers to enrollment. Cultural competence, student engagement, and structured mentoring are reviewed as promising practices in the literature related to postsecondary matriculation for minority students.

**Cultural Competence**

Cultural competency is not simply an acknowledgement of race and ethnicity, but rather a framework or lenses from which people view the world. This framework might include behaviors, attitudes, or policies “that enable effective work in cross-cultural situations” (Office of Minority Health, 2005). The ongoing question, yet to be resolved in the literature, is whether race or ethnicity is important in the mentoring relationship or as a variable that promotes academic achievement and success. Must youth be paired with mentors of their own race or ethnicity to fully benefit from the relationship? Similarly, do the components of the mentoring relationship determine whether same race pairs are more or less desirable with regards to success? Mentoring relationships vary in their formality, length, structure and content; an understanding of how these variations interact with both mentor and mentee ethnic identities is an important piece of this puzzle.

Mentors are often selected as a result of individual belief systems (McGoldrick, Giordno, & Pearce, 1996). Mentees also tend to self-select mentors who are in the same race or ethnic groups (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003). However, extant research is sparse in this area, and the results of
the success of self-selected mentoring relationships have yet to offer concrete conclusions. Ogbu (1990) is best associated with the similarity attraction paradigm, which states that those mentees and mentors coming from similar ethnic or racial backgrounds are most likely to have successful mentoring relationships. Flaxman (1992) however, suggests that cross-race relationships can work just as well. Rhodes (2002) also found benefits of cross-race matches between mentee and mentor. In a study of the success of Big Brothers-Big Sisters, Rhodes finds that youth in same race matches were actually more likely to report alcohol use than were their peers in cross-race matches. Additionally, parents of minority youth also reported positive interactions among mixed race mentoring groups (Rhodes, 2002).

Within mentoring programs, cultural sensitivity is paramount to a quality relationship, but the debate is beginning to lean positively toward cross-cultural relationships as a form of cultural competency and as beneficial practice. In fact, the term cultural competency does not necessarily imply that mentor-mentee must be of the same race or ethnicity, but rather a mutual understanding and appreciation for language, beliefs, immigration status, and level of acculturation, among other factors develop out of the relationship (Armstrong, 2011). Sánchez and Colón (2005) state: “an important further consideration is that the similarity attraction paradigm suggests that similarity in experiences and interests may be equally or even more important matching criteria” (p. 193).

One important study (Ensher & Murphy, 1997) demonstrates that satisfaction ratings of the mentor-mentee relationship were based on perceived similarity between individuals, rather than directly related to race or ethnicity per se. Cultural competence is a valuable concept that requires significantly more exploration. Recent literature in the field of school psychology summarizing Tracking Theory, or the placement of students in similar or homogenous groups based on a variety of matching characteristics (e.g., parental involvement, or racial makeup of teachers), suggests that such policies may actually have negative outcomes for students. Although cultural competence as a programmatic principle, combined with a school’s need to group students for practical purposes, is often embraced as a meaningful exercise, Clauss-Ehlers (2010) purports that “Tracking has become the new method of in-school segregation for students” (p. 997). This points to the potential downfall of such practices and emphasizes a need for further exploration.

The literature is mixed regarding cultural competence and best practices of matching mentee with mentor. However, the emerging picture produces criticism that cultural competence working in practice means matching strictly by race or ethnicity. Cultural competence encompasses much more than a shared ethnicity; indeed, to assume that two people will be able to forge a successful relationship out of such a limited component of identity is antithetical to the idea that any individual can become well-versed in cultural competency. Furthermore, little research to date can demonstratively point to a clear link between a relationship based on shared ethnicity and improved academic success. We must be careful not to confound competency with similarity. So while elements of cultural competence do appear to be linked to mentee satisfaction with the relationship (Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2012) the concept requires considerable more thought in assessing its meaning, operationalization, and unintended consequences in practice. Also of note is the role that such competence can have in increasing
student engagement across the academic sphere, thereby causing gains in achievement and other educational outcomes. We next examine the role that student engagement has on student success.

**Student Engagement**

Student engagement is a multifaceted term, encompassing cognitive, behavioral, and emotional commitments to school (Fredericks, Blumfield, & Paris, 2004). Whereas behavioral engagement implies attachment to school through school-directed activities, cognitive engagement adheres to a stricter definition encompassing a dedication to learning (Finn, 1993; Fredericks, et. al, 2004). Emotional engagement is operationalized in a myriad of ways in the literature, but generally refers to an emotional attachment, or “feelings of belonging” to the school (Fredericks, et. al, 2004). Others point to a general definition that encompasses educationally “purposeful” activities, focusing more on process than affective relationships (Green, Marti, & McClenny, 2008, p. 514). This underscores the problem of the chicken and egg debate that remains rampant in the student engagement literature. While scholars assert a connection between active participation in school activities and a sense of belonging, others posit that low academic achievement may cause students to withdraw from school, regardless of the quality or accessibility of activities (Wark & Tittle, 1994; Willms, 2003). Poverty and other risk factors may also place some children at early risk of low achievement and eventual school withdrawal, which can confound the effects of programming (Van der Klaauw, 2008).

Greene, Marti, & McClenny (2008), in their research on the Effort-Outcome Gap for minority youth state that their findings “reflect the possibility that African American students are working harder to persist and achieve educational goals than their peers, who generally are less academically ‘at-risk’” (p. 529). In this study, African Americans reported being more engaged than their white counterparts, but their higher level of engagement did not translate into higher academic achievement. Thus, high levels of student engagement may not be enough in and of itself to facilitate educational success and subsequent post-secondary enrollment for minority students. These findings point to the importance of further research and understanding of the causal processes underlying the relationship between engagement and achievement.

Because student engagement as a practice consists of such a wide variety of operational definitions, pinpointing the most effective practice becomes a challenge for educators and researchers alike. Sports, after school activities, mentoring by a teacher that leads to a sense of belonging, or simply activities designed to improve educational attainment are all considered student engagement practices. Researchers generally use constructs tapping into both a sense of belonging and those targeting as participation in school activities as measurable variables related to student engagement. Disengagement by students, therefore, is operationalized as the opposite: lower school or class attendance; reduced likelihood to completing homework or being prepared; or, participating in sports or extracurricular activities (Willms, 2003). This convention, however, leaves room for debate about the ways in which achievement and engagement are related; certainly, students can be engaged and but still have poor school performance. Conversely, students with good school performance do not necessarily have to be actively engaged outside of traditional classroom activities. To date, scholars have actively documented the negative effects of disaffected or disengaged students, but the interaction between engagement and academic
outcomes is less understood. Criminologists, for example, have known for a long time that social bonds in the form of attachment to school are key determinants in preventing delinquency, but these findings can be confounded by including academic success as a measure of attachment (Hirschi, 1969; Sampson and Laub, 1993).

Student engagement activities, such as mentoring, are often viewed as protective factors that can help ameliorate the risk associated with disengagement and presumably, increase student achievement. Previous research supports this assertion. In relation to academic achievement, student engagement is generally related to positive outcomes. Typically, student engagement practices with the stated purpose of improving academic achievement are shown to work well in actually improving academic outcomes. Kuh (2003) demonstrates that the more students engage in learning activities, coupled with feedback responses and continued practice, the more they learn more and benefit from those interactions. These findings suggest that academic mentoring as an afterschool activity could potentially improve outcomes for lower income youth, both minority and not.

Mentoring is thus just one factor in a wide variety of influences that comprise the implementation of “student engagement.” In this sense, mentoring may be most applicable to emotional or behavioral engagement, and is often described in these terms. For example, Mmeje, Newman, Kramer, and Pearson (2009) note that “Ethnic organizations may indirectly give Latino/ students a sense of belonging to an institution, but engaging Latino/a students through educational role models is arguably the most effective strategy to realize success in the academy” (p. 300). Yet the combined effects of the role that mentoring can have in increasing cultural competence and student engagement has yet to be fully explored in the literature. Next, we examine the ways in which mentoring has been successfully implemented in school settings.

**Mentoring**

Mentoring is a potentially powerful tool for improving long-term outcomes for low income and minority youth. Perhaps the best known mentoring program in the US, Big Brothers Big Sisters, is often lauded for its one-to-one mentoring, where children facing adversity are paired with an adult mentor (Big Brother Big Sisters). Although Tierny and colleagues (Tierny, Gorssman, & Resch, 2000), among others, point to the positive outcomes associated with Big Brothers Big Sisters, an inescapable factor in one-to-one mentoring programs is that they are generally very time consuming and resource intensive for staff and volunteers alike. Finding matches, pairing appropriately, and ensuring continuation of the mentee-mentor match requires multiple full-time staff, a strong understanding of logistics and organization, and the willingness to devote full time resources to the program.

We contend that mentoring as a practice; however, is still quite fluid, with both the structure and quality of relationships varying in many meaningful ways. Crisp and Cruz (2009) point out that mentoring has now been defined in more than fifty different ways, underscoring the lack of consensus that currently exists. Researchers agree that in general, the activities of the program essentially define what type of mentoring is happening. Those activities may include age appropriate developmental and emotional support from a teacher or educational guidance and
advice from a community member. Both models have seen gains in achievement and point to effective outcomes.

In one study of students whose parents have not attended college, the simple activity of discussing college with mentors who have attended college was shown to be positive (Dubois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). Ashtiani and Feliciano (2012) found “for both outcomes—enrollment and degree completion—the effect of mentorship on the postsecondary experiences of low-income youth is surprisingly more pronounced than the effects of high school GPA, expectations of attending college, and even parents’ level of education” (p. 3). Their findings point to the importance of meaningful relationships, ones often developed through sports or other levels of student engagement. Of interest is that fact that both family members as “mentors” and religious leader mentors had no effect on academic achievement or post-secondary matriculation. In-school mentors related to student engagement activities were impressively important. In one study (Ahstaini & Felciciano 2012), 74 % of youth who were mentored by a coach or athletic director matriculated into postsecondary education. Those youth, who did not have mentors, in comparison, matriculated at only 39 percent (p. 2). Additionally, the authors conclude that employer-mentors make a significant difference as well. Students who were mentored by either an athletic coach or an employer were more likely to attend college than were their middle and upper income counterparts (Ashtiani & Feliciano, 2012).

A growing number of mentoring programs between college and high school students offer promise in continuing the encouraging trends in Latino and African American enrollment in postsecondary education. Latinos in particular perceive barriers to post-secondary enrollment as a result of family pressure or desire for the student to stay near home and care for siblings. Concerns about immigration status are also paramount (Valladares & Romas, 2011). Both Latinos and African American students also report multiple process related barriers to enrollment, such as finding and receiving financial aid (Akerhielm, Berger, Hooker, & Wise, 1998). Structured relationships that focus on the college application process, expectations, and realistic goals from existing college students appear to show promise in overcoming these types of barriers.

To date, many of the promising practices associated with mentoring high school youth around academic achievement and college preparation occur at the four-year post-secondary level. Mentoring programs are often viewed as promising, but the efficacy of programmatic components is still under review. It is our premise that federal policy could adopt further standards for mentoring-related programs for minority and first generation college youth, using structured and research-based practices to better prepare students for both two year and four year degrees. Below, we describe one such model and ongoing successes.

The College Mentoring Model at the University of Texas at Dallas

The Home Builders Institute (HBI), a DC based nonprofit organization, was awarded a grant from the US Department of Justice to provide mentoring for youth. Originally conceived as a mentoring model for youth entering the construction trades in more than twenty-five sites nationally, the model slowly changed and developed into promising programs in various
locations. One of those was in Dallas, where a partnership developed between HBI and the University of Texas at Dallas (UTD). In light of the role that UTD plays in the area community, this partnership allowed both organizations to work off each other’s strengths in order to develop and implement quality, evidence based programming.

UTD has become a leader over the last few years in diversity and community engagement. With the launch of an office to oversee and develop diversity initiatives across all facets of the university, and with the support of the UTD administration, minority recruitment is a focal area for UTD. With that support in mind, two professors were able to launch a new mentoring program for local high school students who participated in the AVID program at a local high school. Advancement Via Individual Determination, or AVID, is a national nonprofit serving students whose parents did not attend college, and who are in need of additional college preparedness instruction. AVID serves youth who are primarily Latino (50 percent nationally), with African American students comprising about 20 percent of all youth served. In the HBI-UTD program, the participants tend to be mostly Latino, although the students do hail from a variety of backgrounds, including African-American, Asian, and White.

The model is unique in the world of mentoring. Unlike the traditional one-to-one mentoring model focused on building relationships, the HBI-UTD model employs structured group mentoring, with one college student paired with up to five AVID mentees in ninth and tenth grades. Another nontraditional component is the structured curriculum designed to enhance AVID’s success with college readiness planning. HBI-UTD college students and their faculty advisors take the program one step further: the mentees are welcomed onto campus and participate in campus life with their college mentor. From an afternoon in the residence halls and student union, to attending a faculty lecture, and watching student a capella performers, AVID students form bonds with their mentors, who offer academic and college application coaching. Furthermore, high school students are given unprecedented access to the college campus as a way for them to better see themselves belonging there. Meanwhile, university faculty and staff are also available for the mentors, allowing them to be the recipient of more informal mentoring as well.

Cultural Competence

An important part of the UTD model is cultural competence, applied as a cross-cultural practice with UTD’s unique student population. College mentors range in diversity unlike almost any other program in the country, whether it be based on race/ethnicity, age, or life experiences. UTD mentors represent students who have faced just as many, if not more, life challenges as the high school mentees. Indeed, UTD student mentor have overcome barriers to enrollment and persistence that include extreme physical handicaps, returning to school after active service in the military, undocumented status, and poverty. The diversity of the mentor volunteers has contributed to the overall success of the program, as the wide range or races, ethnicities, and family socioeconomic status are at least as varied than the mentee youth they coach. UTD mentors are able to share their challenges, but more importantly, they are able to offer concrete solutions for overcoming life’s barriers. Of special note is that because mentors represent all of the ethnic backgrounds of the high school mentees, AVID students get to meet and interact with others like them who have worked for and attained academic and life success.
Student Engagement

Mentor-mentee structured events are scheduled by UTD faculty in held in a variety of settings, including the university campus, the high school engaged in the program, and local sites of note, such as the Dallas Zoo. As a result, the AVID students, who are already working in a program that supports student engagement, are immersed in ongoing discussions about academic success, achievement, and college preparation. The mentoring program provides yet another avenue for the high school youth to ask one-on-one and group questions about the intricacies of applying, securing scholarship funds, and balancing school with work. Structured curriculum also focuses on career exploration and the partnership with the university allows students to access information about a wide range of fields and experiences, including personal interaction with experts from around that globe that would most likely not be available in other settings.

Mentoring

The key to the UTD model is structured, academic-curriculum based mentoring. Unlike one-to-one mentoring programs, this model employs small group mentoring, pairing one mentor with up to five mentees. Requiring fewer resources and less staff time, group mentoring in the UTD model is proving to be operationally effective and cost conscious. Furthermore, the structured curriculum allows for the academic focus while still giving groups the opportunity to form strong personal relationships within a controlled setting. Big Brothers Big Sisters estimates operating costs at approximately $1000 per match (Childtrends, 2011). We estimate costs to UTD to be approximately $500 per year.

Following the research, which points to academic mentoring as a promising approach to college enrollment (Dubois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002), UTD offers a structured curriculum built around academic coaching and mentoring by those who have succeeded in enrolling and persisting in college. It allows high school students to explore an environment previously blocked off to them due to structural factors outside of their control, gaining access and social capital when their own circumstances do not allow it. Furthermore, it offers the opportunity for college students to act in an expert capacity, increasing their interpersonal skills and offering them otherwise difficult access to faculty and staff within the institution, giving them another doorway to advancement after graduation.

Conclusion

Three variables present in the literature point to promising developments in mentoring research and practice as related to postsecondary enrollment for minority youth. Cultural competence, student engagement, and mentoring programs that include an academic component are programmatic practices and concepts that deserve continuing attention by researchers and policymakers alike. The UTD mentoring program introduces these three promising practices through a diverse group of mentors, structured activities, and a focus on education and academic related outcomes. This model, while in its infancy, demonstrates that a considerable number of
youth can be reached with a reasonable outlay of resources, and college students may be an effective, but previously largely untapped, resource for mentoring programs nationally.
References


Jessie Redmon Fauset is an underappreciated novelist of the Harlem Renaissance whose work privileged the working-poor and middle-class existences of Negro women.\(^1\) Apparently a supporter of companionate marriage, she acknowledged the life-style of single African American women from the mid-nineteenth century into early twentieth centuries, and acknowledged women’s sexual desires often with impunity. Companionate marriage emerges in the early twentieth century, accepted women as sexual beings and encouraged heterosexuals to select a compatible/friend to marry. Companionate marriage contrasted with Victorian purity guidelines previously embraced by the dominant culture/whites. Fauset’s novelistic character development was so subtle that many readers missed her womanist privileging and only observe middle-class, Victorian like, Negro characters.

Typically Fauset’s novels were critiqued as novels of manners that focus on middle-class urban, Negro morals, passing and tragic mulattoes\(^2\). Thompson (2009) observes that:

> Harlem Renaissance authors often constructed chaste and pious middle-class black characters who were self-conscious about their responsibility to “uplift the race.” …Influenced by Victorian ideals, novelists, playwrights, and autobiographers often created characters that followed stringent moral guidelines in romantic relationships and even in marriages (pp. 4-5).

Thompson makes a direct connection to Fauset’s novelistic women in her observation. However, a closer reading of her work reveal the complexity and insight used to expose the psychosocial impact race, gender, class, and sex have, specifically, on colored women and how they faced and claimed their dignity and selfhood in the process. duCille (1994) points out that “long before critics talked in terms of dialectics, Fauset explored the disparity of desire and danger and the complications of identity and ideology in the lives of women across class and racial lines” (pp. 436-437). This essay, will focus on two generations of Strange women, in the novel *The Chinaberry Tree*, and examine the psychosocial and political complexity of unmarried African American women who first experience sexual victimization then learn to privilege and acknowledge their desires. More succinctly, this paper argues against a conventional belief that
the Strange cousins marry their suitors. From the onset it is clear that Lauretine Strange, the protagonist, will not leave her mother. The other major character in this novel is Lauretine’s first cousin, Melissa. Both characters must come to terms with their matrifocal, Strange woman history, and discover inner-strength and forgiveness by accepting their alternative cultural woman’s sphere where their woman-centered family, self-acceptance, desire and friendship, allow them a special bond as empowered Strange women living single in a patriarchal environment.

Kamme-Erkel (1989) finds that Fauset offers a “positive picture of black middle-class marriages” during the early twentieth century” (p. 76). Simmons (2000) asserts that as a novelist, Fauset “followed tradition in making heterosexual relationships central in her fiction” (p. 8). Yet, she adds, “Fauset marked her vision of marriage as egalitarian and modern, not Victorian” (Simmons, 2000, p. 12). Fauset’s novels indicate that she was a race woman and a womanist who sought to uplift and promote her less fortunate sisters.

The conclusion of Jessie Redmon Fauset’s 1931 novel, The Chinaberry Tree, leaves many readers with the impression that her main characters select marriage and a happy, middle-class, colored, heterosexual life. Although not a direct observation about The Chinaberry Tree, Simmons finds Fauset “non-judgmental about young women’s sexual experiments, also leads her protagonists toward marriage in the end” (Simmons, 2000, p. 14). Literary scholar DuCille (1993) reasons “Fauset’s ending is problematically conventional only if The Chinaberry Tree is mistakenly read as realism” (p. 100). Many readers approach this novel with romantic notions believing the goal for the heterosexual female protagonists is love and marriage to professional, middle-class Negro men. Fauset plays with cultural standards of the dominant culture and gender norms of masculinity and femininity in the early twentieth century. On the surface it appears that public disappointing and devastating romantic relationships, precedes her main characters choices to be single women. A close read of the novel proves the Strange women more complicated than their suitors, and less predictable in their romantic relationships as their experiences and discernments of self-identity increase. Fauset signals the unconventional nature of this family of women with their surname “Strange.”

Strange is an apt sobriquet for a family of women as the novel makes a connection between marriage, identity and desire. Generally the identities of the Strange women have been marginalized in the literature and they can be read as queer. In this instance queer is not intended to limit them to a sexual identity but their deeper desires are marginalized or overlooked by some readers so that they can be read essentially as tragically romantic or socially invisible. Fauset’s Strange women transgress unequal power relationships of race, sex, and class to live out their desires in late nineteenth century early twentieth century America. Fauset appears to write the Strange African American women against common racial, skin tone, and feminine heterosexual traditions of the period.

Women seeking or being married was the social norm during 1931 when The Chinaberry Tree was published. Faust does present colored women in various forms of middle-class marriages including the Forten’s, a family of women, caterers by trade, who reside in a dark, self-imposed exile committed to their long dead, selfish, unfaithful husband and father. Unadored and abandoned by their patriarch, the Forten daughters remain homebound, brooding, unmarried and
in darkness. “Reba and Harriett Forten went about more remote and owlish looking than ever. Neither in school nor in church did they ever utter an unnecessary word” (Fauset, 1995, p.7). Mrs. Forten remained a widow and in mourning along with her adult daughters more than sixteen years after the death of Sylvester Forten. Undeservedly, they suffer one of the fates generally reserved for middle-class heroines who experimented with sexual pleasure—social exile. The Fortens are connected and provide a contrast to the Strange women.

Legal scholar Dubler’s (2003) study contributes to the historical reasoning as to why many readers expect women to marry: “wives, not widows or any women living outside of marriage, have been cast in the central, starring role in scholarly accounts of the relationship among marriage, the family, the state, and evolving norms of sex equality” (p. 1649). Coupled with many readers expectations and willing male characters, females who decide to remain unmarried are considered unusual to some and probably strangely inconceivable for many. Fauset, a single professional woman of color, was forty-seven before she married; making her personally attuned to the responses and expectations of others to a single woman living in a patriarchal world of married women (Sylvander, 1981, p. 80).

Names, first and last, provide an important link to women’s identity in this novel. Married and widowed Negro women are clearly identified as “Mrs.”—Mrs. Forten or Mrs. Brown—who lack in some cases first names. As mentioned, Fauset interestingly bestows upon the main family of characters the memorable surname “Strange.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of strange as “unfamiliar, abnormal, or exceptional to a degree that excites wonder or astonishment; difficult to take in or account for; queer, surprising, unaccountable” seems to fit the Strange family. It denotes and characterizes the experiences and lifestyles of women who are outsiders in their Red Brook, New Jersey community. The Strange mothers embody two thought-provoking lifestyle choices of single Negro mothers. An unevenly yoked relationship between Colonel Francis Halloway and Sarah Strange (Aunt Sal) during post-Reconstruction begins the sociopolitical drama of single Strange women.

Home from his junior year in college the affluent, young white Halloway selects a black girl from a poor Alabama farming family, employed as one of his mother’s housekeepers as his love interest. Young Sarah is described as “…a girl then; she who was slender, comely and upstanding even now was in those days a slip of a brown girl, slim and swaying like a birch tree—like a white lady birch young Halloway had thought…” (Fauset, 1995, p. 1). Halloway desires the powerless “brown girl.” Sarah as the chosen, desired ‘other’ woman does not fulfill the image of the light-skinned mulatto a figure used in many preceding novels by African American writers. Abnormal for the exotic literary love interest Sarah also speaks nonstandard English. Fauset uses language/dialogue to distinguish various ethnic and social classes in her novels.

Although he sees a white lady birch when gazing at young Sarah, racial and class difference and desire cause him to maintain a public, lifelong, intimate relationship with her without the legal commitment of marriage. The narrator observes, “Halloway a lad of serious bent but of tearing tyrannical passion loved her …he could not marry her. The affair lasted all his life…” (Fauset, 1995, p. 2). According to the narrator, it is he that cannot wed her rather than she who refused to wed him. Some romantics contend that the familial and social environment coupled with the
legal system prevented the colonel from marrying Sarah. However, “despite the presence of the so-called miscegenation laws, black-white marital unions have existed from the early colonial period to the present. …on a national level, the number of black-white marriages rose just after Emancipation, peaked around 1900, then declined until 1940” (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan p. 210). If trapped by exogamy and his life-long love of Sarah, Halloway had the choice of never marrying or cohabitating with her.

Once chosen as Halloway’s woman, (“The affair was the town’s one and great scandal”) the (dis)honored and single Sarah Strange was excluded from the list of possible marriageable women in the middle-class colored community of Red Brook, New Jersey (Fauset, 1995, p. 2). The question is did Sarah exclude herself or was she excluded by other Red Brook men as a possible love interest? By the start of the nineteenth century, Rooks (2004) asserts that the prevalent image of enslaved women of African descent were as “the promiscuous harlot, or jezebel” (p. 11). Palmer (1989) observes that “working-class women and women of color have been the repositories for images of sexuality and moral inferiority; they have been depicted as legitimate sexual outlets for men, as loose women who also are so powerless that they pose no threat to men’s authority and autonomy” (p. 144). Rooks (2004) maintains that by the Victorian age “the image of women of African descent, over time, came to be closely associated with the lewd and oversexed” (p. 11). According to social mores it would be acceptable for a reader to see Halloway as having succumbed to the exotic charms of Sarah. Overcome by desire he brands himself on Sarah with their ongoing immoral relationship, a home to house his illegitimate family, and a chinaberry tree. Halloway’s possessiveness of Strange is embossed on the collective community mind when they see the house, its yard, and more specifically the chinaberry tree. However, Fauset does not construct Sarah as a sexual victim she adds more dimensions.

Sarah, it appears, was denied a choice in finding a marriageable partner from the colored working or middle-class men. One finds the idea of Sarah spending her life devoted to and obsessed by Colonel Francis Halloway likely if she wanted to maintain her standard of living. At the beginning the Colonel finds her, “…an intelligent girl, a lady, decent, loyal and amazingly clear of vision. It was only her color that kept her, …in menial service” (1995, 2). A healthy, intelligent young woman had a choice in how she wanted to live her life. As a laborer, primarily limited from further achievements because of race and gender, Sarah, ostensibly, chose to remain single and maintain a lifestyle that she desired. Another heterosexual intimate relationship even a secret one could lead to male posturing and jealousy that would ruin her and her daughter’s, Laurentine’s, middle-class existence. Although ensconced in a comfortable, colored neighborhood, she goes further by strangely distancing herself from friendships with others and leads a quiet existence seemingly always ready for a visit from or to reminisce about her paramour. Her chosen alienation makes her more unfamiliar, unaccountable and exciting—strange—to a curious community.

In her book, The Foremother Figure in Early Black Women’s Literature, Bryant (1999) surmises of Sarah:

…the she loves the figure that represents oppression for her and her people—the figure that constructs those images which she should oppose, undermine, and
destroy. She loves the powerful white male and father of her child...despite the
tension it causes in the community and within her family. Aunt Sal [Sarah] continues to love Colonel Halloway even after his death because her house, land, and a portion of his legal will remind Aunt Sal and the community of Colonel Halloway’s reciprocal love for her despite his white wife, white children, white extended family and friends (p. 113).

Literary scholar Barbara Christian characterizes both Sarah and Halloway as “passionately in love with each other” (Christian, 1985, p. 44). As a turn of the century interracial couple, (nineteenth to twentieth) the novel offers major points for consideration regarding their fictional relationship: one, that it is part of the community; two, Sarah is not described as a tragic mulatto; three, as a Negro mistress to an affluent white male her economic status increased but her social status seemed non-existent and both are precarious; and quite possibly Sarah employed birth control in having only one daughter. The relationship between Sarah and Halloway began during the latter nineteenth century and followed traditions that harkened back to the antebellum period.

Numerous historians of Victorian American and England have examined men’s dual images of women—Madonna/Magdalen, virgin/whore, angel/devil—and some have linked them explicitly with class and race divisions. Men sought sexual outlet with women who posed no social or political threat and simultaneously denied the sexual prowess of their female peers and partners—the … white women who became their wives (Palmer, 1989, p. 144).

The imbalance in their relationship is further clarified when one considers that Colonel Halloway later weds and has two daughters (Phebe and Diane) with an acceptable white woman. For white women “into the early twentieth century, marriage remained a life goal and domesticity a center of women’s existence, but ideals focused more on man than God” (Palmer, 1989, 6). Tolerance of his ongoing pubic affair with Sarah denotes Halloway’s wife’s conformity to Victorian ideals of womanhood. “The ideal white woman, being married, confined herself almost exclusively to the private domain of the household. She was demur, perhaps even self-effacing. She often deferred to her husband’s presumable superior judgment, rather than formulating her own views and vocally expressing them” (Carlson, 1992, p. 62). As stated previously, his well-known relationship with Sarah precedes his public marriage and Halloway’s legitimate family is aware of his illegitimate family. On his death bed, the patriarch has his wife, one assumes, fetch Sarah to his bedside so that they can exchange their final good-byes. Throughout the novel Sarah Strange appears to be an agreeable, loving, soft spoken, almost silent woman rooted to her comfortable home where she enjoys viewing the interactions and relationships of her daughter and later niece. The comfortable seemingly satisfied Sarah Strange never married and apparently had only one heterosexual relationship. Though Sarah decides to remain monogamous—even after his death—her sister, Judy Strange, openly and actively enjoys the attention and company of working class men.

The narrator describes Judy as “…a pretty, rather raw-boned girl, bold and tactless” (Fauset, 1995, p. 3). When she first arrives her gregariousness permeates the wider community. Sylvester Forten “encounters Judy Strange entering his wife’s door. He found her bold air and her coarse manner immensely engaging, sauntered on and forgot her” (Fauset, 1995, p. 5). With Judy, Fauset creates a woman who acknowledges outwardly her heterosexual desire and that her
needs exceed being a somber, retiring, single mother. Like her sister, Judy notably avoids tragic mulatto status, remains unmarried and eventually becomes the mother of a daughter, Melissa Paul.

Judy freely satisfies her desires and makes decisions regarding her heterosexual partnerships. Early in the novel she emerges, from Alabama, after the death of Halloway to comfort her grieving sister. Observing her sister’s subdued lifestyle Judy advises, “’God, Sarah, you don’t have to shut yourself up like this just because you had a white man do you! You ain’t the first and you won’t be the last to do that little thing. Lawdy no!’” (Fasuet, 1995, p. 3). Seemingly, she fails to grasp the passionate romance that linked Sarah and Halloway.

Judy’s physical appearance in the novel is brief yet her influence radiates throughout. Her daughter, Melissa, admires her mother but prefers to bury the memory of her mother’s “constant succession of suitors who were ever at her door. Their presence made the household alive and merry and yet, somehow unseemly, thought Melissa” (Fauset, 1995, p. 14). She recalls the men as working-class: “these fellows were laboring men for the most part, truck drivers, road-members from the South, big, hard sweaty, black fellows, masons and bricklayers. A few of them were recruited from the upper ranks of menials, a house-man, a waiter, an occasional chauffeur” (Fauset, 1995, p. 15). It appears that she looked forward to a day when Melissa could take care of her own needs and allow Judy to further pursue her own. Judy creates a marriage myth for her daughter, Melissa. Mr. Paul, the fabricated husband, was conjured to validate her daughter’s need for social acceptance. Moving to an urban area, Philadelphia, she kept the factual details of Melissa’s biological paternity from her and inserted a Paul fantasy. Strangely, Judy bestows a masculine first name as Melissa’s fictional last name “Paul.” Aware of provincial attitudes Paul, serves as a protection against the possible social exclusion Melissa would suffer as the child of an unwed mother in Red Brook, for example. (Yet it is unlikely that Melissa would be ostracized by Judy’s cluster of friends.) Judy’s only concern with marriage seems to be to enable her daughter’s sense of well-being and social standing. Personally, she appears unconcerned with marriage and in a humorously tongue in cheek scene, Judy rushes Melissa off to Red Brook with the doubtful tale that she intends to wed on the run while in route to Chicago. The idealistic and romantic Melissa eagerly offers to stand-up and be her mother’s bridesmaid. The narrator recalls:

But Judy had protested, hurriedly averting a suddenly flushed face. “Nonsense baby. Stanton wouldn’t like that foolishment. We’ll stand up before a Justice of the Peace down in City Hall just before train time. You go on to your Aunt Sal. …And anyways she’ll let you stay with her for a few days until I can write you from Chicago” (Fauset, 1995, p. 15).

Judy seems more enthusiastic about her young daughter’s leaving than being joined in marriage to Stanton.

Both Sarah and Judy confront the sexual behavior or moral agency of a nineteenth century “Victorian lady” who denies knowledge of her sexuality. Sarah remained in an illicit relationship with a married man while Judy entertained many men. Their lifestyles offer differing models to the ideology of domesticity or rather the cult of true womanhood of which women of color could
never belong. Furthermore they confront the bourgeois Victorian virtues of the celibate maiden, aunt or spinster. “Perhaps the most common among the spinster tales of the early nineteenth century were those about single women who devoted themselves to good in the family and community, undertaking whatever tasks or duties were required for the happiness and well-being of others” (Chambers-Schiller, 1988, p. 37). Spinsters and true women were middle-class white women respected and accepted as part of families and an integral part of the community. The Strange mothers were not considered wholesome members of their communities.

The measured pace of Red Brook was quickly replaced by the fast life in Philadelphia for Judy where she enjoyed the company and favors of working-class men. Marriage, for Judy, became a fiction on which to nurture then wean her daughter (Melissa Paul). Melissa demonstrated a need to believe she was the result of a legitimate family unit. Judy uses pending Chicago nuptials to persuade Melissa to move-in with her sister—Sarah—while “supposedly” Judy builds a life with a new husband—Stanton—in Chicago. Consequently, Sarah’s public shame and Judy’s uninhibited lifestyle cause their nubile daughters to seek initially the security of marriage for respectability and economic protection.

Chastity a social imperative expected of Victorian brides was denied Sarah and possibly just ignored by her sister, Judy Strange. Unlike her sister Judy teeters between being a poor and working-class, single mother who, having nurtured her daughter to her mid-teen years, is ready to lay claim to more independence and passion by relinquishing further maternal responsibilities. Fauset’s Strange single mothers are not preoccupied with being nurturers, married, or seeking forgiveness from a higher power. They face life on their own terms, ignoring public scorn, while engaged in heterosexual relationships during the turn of the century. It is clear that Sarah likes her home and wants to remain there; however, it is unclear if she ever wanted to marry Colonel Halloway. She reinforces, to Laurentine, how much she loves the dearly departed. Their child is another manifestation added to Sarah’s dishonor and later Laurentine’s perceived rejection in the community. Although more receptive than Halloway, Sarah is less than an ideal mother. Seemingly preoccupied with memories of her lover, Sarah seems ignorant to the preoccupation of her daughter to marry and be socially acceptable.

The socially rejected Laurentine desires acceptance in colored middle-class Red Brook society whose entrée, as she sees it, is through middle-class marriage. However, the dubious morals of her parents made Laurentine an undesirable marriage partner for her spousal choice—Phil Hackett. Hackett, a middle-class, Negro, politician seeking elected office, is attracted to Laurentine but such a union would destroy his political desire. DuCille (1997) finds “…Laurentine does not attempt to escape the burdens of her mixed heritage by passing for white. She plots instead to pass into the welcoming arms of bourgeois black society through marriage to a colored man of means and property” (p. 97). Laurentine forced to grow-up friendless, an outsider, and accused of “bad blood” is less interested in marriage than belonging to Red Brook’s black bourgeois. Her cousin’s experience is different.

Transplanted in Red Brook, Melissa’s romance with an Alabama preacher’s son and all round good guy Asshur Lane begins to grow. As his optimistic name suggests, he reinforces her self-assurances and intends to continue steering her along a lane of respectability. A reader imagines that she would bloom once married to eager Asshur. “Tell you what Melissa, marry me now—
before I go away, I can take care of you, protect you—‘’ (Fauset, 1995, p. 91). This offer of wedded protection comes as Melissa is an official outcast in the community and with her first cousin, Laurentine. The narrator reveals “But her ambition was stronger even then her fear of loneliness” (Fauset, 1995, p. 92). Although Melissa desired marriage and wants to be assured, accepted and active in her community and family she decides:

And that’s why I won’t marry Asshur though I like him such an awful lot. If I get stuck with him what chance would I have to go further? No I’ll either go on the stage or I’ll marry one of these professional men and get somewhere and have a good time. …ten years from now? I know where I’ll be. Either in New York or Queen of the May in Red Brook (emphasis mine, Fauset, 1995, p. 94).

Adolescent Melissa has seen her future and views marriage as one option to her preferred life of “good times.” Though she likes Asshur “an awful lot” she has no intention of being “stuck.” For Melissa marriage could be a pleasure destroying institution, a view possibly shared by her mother, where a woman is denied satisfaction or pleasure outside of the home. Concurrently, she also recognizes that she has a choice of whom she chooses to marry and Asshur’s choice to be a college educated farmer is unappealing to her.

Malory Forten, a snob who wanted a pure and virtuous wife, is Melissa’s choice for a husband. Melissa is aware that “Malory, she knew, wanted his roses dewy, his woman’s reputation, not to say her virtue, unblemished and undiscussed” (Fauset, 1995, p. 252). He specifically reveals, “‘Melissa, every fellow does want his wife to be on a pedestal; he’d like to think of her as a little inviolate shrine that isn’t ever touched by the things in the world that are ugly and sordid’” (Fauset, 1995, p. 265). Fundamentally, eighteen year-old Melissa agrees with him and responds, “‘I haven’t had such a lot of experience, but it seems to me, Malory, that while all this about shrines and pedestals and things like that are awfully pretty, really beautiful, that life doesn’t permit you to keep things like that in your head’” (Fauset, 1995, p. 265). She confirms her innocence but tactfully questions life on a pedestal. He goes on to reveal one of her duties as his wife: “‘Listen, honey, I’m just a miserable snob… Part of your job as my wife will have to be to get it out of me. Hope you’ll like that Melissa.’” She dutifully responds “‘I’ll adore it, Malory’” (Fauset, 1995, p. 266). He is idealistic; she agrees with him, though she knows reality is different than life on a pedestal. Twentieth century (purse poor) Malory tells Melissa he expects her to be an ideal Victorian wife.

Realizing that she comes from a less than virtuous family of women Melissa confesses to Malory that Laurentine is her cousin and his negative response offers further insight into why Melissa feels the need to be married and her belief in the power of a wife. Offended by Malory’s off-putting comments and snobbishness Melissa decides “‘The darn snob! Well, I’ll get all that nonsense out of him before we’ve been married long…Well, Mr. John Paul,’ she apostrophized the father whom she never remembered seeing, ‘I’m mighty glad you took it into your head to marry my mother…’’” (Fauset, 1995, p. 263). Marriage, at least in young Melissa’s mind, allowed a wife to extend the vision of her husband to see the world from another point of view, as well as, preventing a notorious label from being affixed to a woman. This type of thinking is in line with the 1920s and modern marriage where “women and men would not play the same roles in the modern family, but their distinct parts would achieve equal recognition, most notably
as partners presumed to contribute equally to family well-being” (Palmer, 1989, p. 20). Fauset biographer, Carlyn Sylvander finds “in Melissa Paul and Malory Forten Fauset has deliberately chosen the most convention-bound characters to spring her most unconventional surprise on, for the two are just before their marriage found to be half-brother and half-sister” (Fauset, 1981, p. 195).

The revelation that Melissa is also a Strange woman who just avoided an incestuous marriage to her half-brother causes her mental collapse—she is not the daughter of John Paul, or the progeny of a legitimate union, and most of the people in town knew her history before she. Her views of marriage and who she is have been destroyed. Loyal and saintly, Asshur reenters the novel to heal the homebound Melissa offering the gift of “an immediate marriage” (Fauset, 1995, p. 338). He maintained the same unchanged plans for living in the South on a farm. The somewhat dazed and still recovering Melissa replies, “‘How soon do you think we could go? Asshur you’re sure you want me? No foolin’?’” (Fauset, 1995, p. 338). Melissa is being cared for meticulously and lovingly by her family—Sarah and Laurentine. Suffering the loss of a devastating and public romance with her half-brother authenticates Melissa’s standing in the Strange family of women; moreover, as a Strange woman she must follow tradition and recover from her marriage fantasy.

After her painful rejection by the spineless Hackett, Laurentine does much soul searching and recognizes her value and acknowledges her desire to create. She ponders:

Now she knew different values. …She was young, she was strong, she was beautiful; she had been, in comparison with the relaxed standards of the day, almost ridiculously careful of her name and fame. In brief she was the epitome of all those virtues and restraints which colored men so arrogantly demand in the women they make their wives. …Hackett had thrown her over. Her heart grew sick and faint again at the memory of those other days—she must never, never let herself in again for that sort of thing. She had seen now that there was something in life besides marriage (Fauset, 1995, pp. 124-125).

Laurentine gains self-confidence and begins a pattern of self-reflection that causes her to question the need for marriage to a middle-class black man for acceptance into bourgeois society.

Like her cousin, Laurentine also has a second chance at marriage. After she gains economic independence, self-recognition for her accomplishments, warm female friendships, acceptance in the black middle-class she begins a relationship with the divorced Dr. Stephen Denleigh. Fauset makes clear that women have choices and marriage is not a guarantee for happiness. Although Fauset denies readers the masculine voices of Halloway and Forten, the dialogues between the couples Laurentine and Denleigh and Asshur and Melissa reveal the men to be romantic and eager to wed.

Like Asshur with Melissa, Denleigh almost immediately after meeting Laurentine expresses his love for her; however, he is pushy and authoritarian in his approach. As Simmons points out “Fauset makes it clear that domineering male attitudes are inappropriate in the modern era” (Fauset, 2000, p. 12). After his confession of past marital woes, in the form of a question, he
tells Laurentine “‘You’ll understand me, Laurentine? You’ll see me clear?’” (Fauset, 1995, p.158). Cautiously, Laurentine responds with an audible confident vow: “‘Oh, I will Stephen, I will’” (Fauset, 1995, p. 158). So that a reader will not mistake her utterance for romantic cooing she simultaneously affirms to herself “And I will, too” (Fauset, 1995, p. 158). Marriage for Laurentine is no longer a way to gain respectability. Denleigh misreads Laurentine response probably in the same way that he failed to understand his former wife—Irene.

The subtlety of Fauset’s dialogue between Laurentine and Denleigh reinforces that marriage is no longer a priority for Laurentine as she becomes more confident in her decisions and intellect. Whimsically and impulsively, Denleigh asks her to marry him as if it is her idea: “‘if you want me to we’ll drive over to Morristown and get a license and get married to-morrow—Sunday’” (Fauset, 1995, p. 161). Ideally a younger Laurentine would have been eager to “marry-up” with Dr. Denleigh at the slightest provocation and take her place at the bridge table of Red Brook’s Colored Society. Sensitively, she responds “‘You’re sweet Stephen—talking of marriage—we’re not even engaged I’d have you to know” (Fauset, 1995, p. 162). Laurentine likes signifyin on Denleigh. Just as Denleigh confidently reads Laurentine’s desire for marriage, her mother’s love for the colonel, and his former (now deceased) wife to Laurentine, she understands that Denleigh’s interpretative skills are therapeutic for him. It is clear that Laurentine enjoys Denleigh’s companionship just as she enjoys sidestepping his assertions, articulating her opinions to him. A reader finds Denleigh too eager in his conversations about marriage, like Asshur and Malory. Malory wanted to place his wife on a pedestal, Asshur wants to protect her goodness and Denleigh wants to possess, and persuade his bride that he is able and sincere.

One Christmas Laurentine imagines being happily married to Denleigh “he replete with content, she brimming over with the realization of her great good fortune” (Fauset, 1995, p. 199). As their relationship progresses, she is happy and comfortable. Denleigh tries to persuade Laurentine again to marry him. He tells her: “‘It will be much more fun being married,’ he told her sagely, ‘wait and see. This way we could still be separated. Married we’ll be one. No this is all very fine, my dear, but I must be much more sure of you than this. You must be surer of me…”’ (Fausest, 1995, p. 238) Again, Denleigh condescends to inform the supposedly clueless Laurentine. Laurentine replies with another quip, “‘I wonder,’ she would murmur, ‘if I can be’” (Fauset, 1995, p. 238). He believes he must marry to possess and be fully confident of her love for him. It seems the roles have reversed—Denleigh is desperate to marry. Moments before Denleigh’s declaration Laurentine, according to the narrator, “was serene, triumphant, sure of her lover, for the first time in her life sure of herself” (1995, 238). At this point in the novel Laurentine has what she longed for as a child—respectability, acceptance, friendship a respected place in the community. Moreover, “she had seen now that there was something in life besides marriage” (Fauset, 1995, p.125).

The concluding pages of the novel involve the two couples—Laurentine and Denleigh, Melissa and Asshur—together with Sarah all sitting under the chinaberry tree. Denleigh thinks “I ought to get Laurentine out of all this...But I don’t believe she’ll really ever want to go away...” (Fauset, 1995, p. 340). On the final page Denleigh begins to understand that Laurentine is connected to her home and family. Asshur is thinking happily of marriage, home and children. Most importantly the narrator concludes the novel:
But Laurentine and Melissa, so widely different were thinking on none of these things. Caught up on an immense tide of feeling, they were unable to focus their minds on home, children, their men...Rather like spent swimmers, who had given up the hope of rescue and then had suddenly met with it, they were sensing with all their being, the feel of the solid ground beneath their feet, the grateful monotony of the skies about their heads, ...and everywhere about them the immanence of God. ...The Chinaberry Tree became a Temple (Fauset, 1995, p. 341).

Curiously, a novel that spends much of its’ plot focusing on marriage never culminates in one wedding ceremony. Fauset’s Strange women go through the courting rituals it appears maintaining their single marital status. By the end of the novel it is the men who are engaged in a marriage fantasy, Laurentine and Melissa’s final thoughts are “widely different.” They no longer require marriage as a rescue. Significantly, Judy Strange is not punished, denigrated or disparaged for pursuing her desire. Fauset allows single female characters to survive being a kept mistress, having children out of wedlock, enjoying the company of men, being self-supportive, and free to live independent lives. She does, however, punish indiscreet spouses and a violent man. Halloway dies and the disgraced, lecherous Sylvester Forten returns to his Red Brook family terminally ill. The physically aggressive Malory disappears. The spoiled upper-class Irene dies after numerous affairs then her divorce from Denleigh. In contrast “Pious, pure, domestic, and submissive—the ’true woman’ portrayed in sentimental novels and the new women’s magazines would have abjured public activity as unbecoming, even unthinkable” (Evans, 1989, p. 69). Laurentine does ponder marriage to Denleigh and even credits him with her positive self-image but she is extremely decisive about her independence. She notifies him after another proposal:

“You restored me; you made me respect myself. You made me alive to my own inner resources. No matter what fate may spring on me, Stephen, I can never be that wretched, diffident, submissive girl again. It’s possible I might become a force for evil as well as a force for good. But I’ll never be a tame cat again” (Fauset, 1995, p. 204).

Laurentine is forever changed. The younger Strange women do not marry but remain at the house with Sarah and the chinaberry tree.

After all of the family secrets are exposed, the Strange women come to terms with their wants and desires. The foreshadowing found throughout the novel suggests Laurentine and Melissa continue to live with Sarah. Early in the novel when her half-sisters offer to send Laurentine away for training and her mother asks why she didn’t go to New York or Paris where she could meet people. “I [Laurentine] couldn’t go away and leave you here mother. And I knew you wouldn’t leave” (Fauset, 1995, p. 13). Denleigh asks her if she always lived in Red Brook and she responds “Forever and ever,’ she said solemnly, ’and I suppose I always will’” (Fauset, 1995, p. 101). In the middle of the novel in retrospect the narrator recalls: “That was a lovely winter. Laurentine and Melissa looking back in later safer years on this year in which fate showed itself at its sorriest, often recalled this season, dwelt on it, relived it; Laurentine with a certain sweet poignance; Melissa with a familiar pang of terror, a prayerful sense of gratitude” (Fauset, 1995, p. 236). There is no mentioned of family, no mention of husbands. Melissa has a
premonition when she first sees the chinaberry tree: “Here she would stay, here in this house, in the shade of this Tree she must and would live” (Fauset, 1995, p. 16). She even doubted her marriage to Malory. “This time next year, we’ll be together, you and I in our own home. Say it and believe it.” She said it and didn’t believe it, though she wanted to” (Fauset, 1995, p. 194).

The novel closes with the same Strange women who open it—“Aunt Sal [Sarah], Laurentine, and even Melissa...” (Fauset, 1995, p.1). They are a family of women who, for the most part, love men but do not marry in the novel. For Laurentine and Melissa until they gained some sense of their self-acceptance they believed they needed men/husbands to be acceptable to themselves and within the community.

Fauset’s choice to not include a wedding reinforces her interest in who configures a family. In her study of Black Women Intellectuals Allen finds “Fauset’s model family differs significantly from the traditional, nuclear unit. According to her, the family is a group of people who link their labor, form a common pool, and work for the unit’s benefit” (Allen, 1998, p. 52). She adds, “…families act as a substitute mirror for the black subject in that the members can provide healthy images of other black people in contradistinction to dominant stereotypes” (Allen, 1998, p. 65). The Strange younger women were mired in false beliefs that marriage would solve their problems. They find that with the support of family and friends there are solutions. Marriage is an institution that women should approach cautiously. Dominating male behaviors are characteristics of which women need to be aware. As duCille points out Fauset is not writing realism but conceives possibilities for Negro women, usually positive, where they are allowed personally and professionally to experiment and fail or experiment and succeed with or without the institution of marriage. They are allowed to be strange. Single male characters are represented as being just as eager and sometimes as idealistic as Victorian women to marry. Finally, premarital sex and single motherhood are not realities for which women should suffer. Fauset’s strange younger women embrace, forgive and love one another living single open to the possibility of a marriage and accepting life as single women. The Strange women are positioned as queer because they live outside of the idealistic, traditional family structure and learn to embrace a marginalized, “strange,” single woman lifestyle. A wedding never takes place, the Strange women are never identified as wives, in a novel that focuses on the institution of marriage I hold that the Strange women embrace their desires—for Sal, a comfortable middle-class home; Judy, a man/men and a new life in Chicago; Laurentine, her own business, adoring middle-class friends and a respectable suitor; and Melissa, a supportive and loving family—and they continue to live single.
References


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1 Jessie Redmon Fauset was the “Literary Editor” for the NAACP’s *The Crisis* magazine from 1919-1926, discovering many writers including Langston Hughes and Marita Bonner. In addition to being a novelist Fauset was also an essayist, poet, short story writer, children’s writer, editor and translator.

2 Bone, *The Negro Novel in America,* succinctly denounced Fauset’s novelistic attempts as “uniformly sophomoric, trivial, and dull” (p. 101). The groundbreaking studies by Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism* and Carby *Reconstructing Womanhood*; critique Fauset’s novels collectively, usually offering the limited example of Fauset’s *The Chinaberry Tree* as demonstrating her exclusive cultural concern for the Negro middle-class, who, according to their interpretations might as well be Euro-American culture in blackface.

3 Thompson, *Beyond the Black Lady,* p. 121.


6 Sarah’s employment as a domestic in the Halloway household signals her status concerning race, class and gender. For example, “By 1900, white women, as soon as they had enough money, turned their housework over to a variety of less powerful women—Afro-American, Mexican-American, Asian-American, Indian, European immigrant, or rural migrant—who they perceived as inferior. Just as white men derived status from a racial—class hierarchy, so did white women” qtd. from Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt,* p. 6.

7 Webb, *The Garies and Their Friends;* Hopkins, *Contending Forces;* and Brown, *Clotel;* are examples of nineteenth and early twentieth century novels that construct black women who appear white as the love interests or victims of white males. By extension, their light complexion and other Caucasoid characteristics also made the characters beautiful according to narrators and other characters in the novels.

8 Berry, *The Pig Farmer’s Daughter and Other Tales of American Justice,* notes that miscegenation statutes were in place to prevent interracial marriage not interracial fornication.
Sarah was capable of having children but only gives birth to one child. Halloway’s oldest daughter with his wife is one year younger than Laurentine. Although a 24 year-old Laurentine is shocked to meet her half-sisters, Sarah appeared composed and aware of their existence—Fauset, pp. 11-12.
ABSTRACT

Assessment is an essential element in higher education and determines the career of students even years after they left the university, this essay discusses different assessment methods in higher education and compares the findings of the literature with the reality of students’ experience of assessment at a Sino-British cooperative university in China. Suggestions for improvements and alternative methods are made and discussed whether they can work or not at this university. The majority of the results is in line with the literature and supports the worldwide trends in assessment theory and practice.

(Keywords: assessment, quality assurance, feedback, higher education)

Introduction

Assessments are milestones. They determine the behavior of the students during the semesters and years of studying. Usually the final exam period marks the end of a semester and the beginning of the holidays. At the beginning of a new semester many students seem to be relaxed. The exam period is still far away. But the less the remaining weeks are the busier the students are. This cycle of activity can be observed semester after semester, year after year, and decades after decades. But assessments not only determine the behavior of the students during their studies. Assessments also determine the professional life and career plans of the students many years after they have left the universities. Good and bad experiences with assessments will be everlasting memories. Like Race (1999) writes: “Even decades after the students complete their last examinations, their assessment results continue to be scrutinized when they apply for promotion, or change jobs or career directions” (Brown & Glasner, 1999, p.61).

Given these observations it is obvious that conducting assessments is an essential element in higher education. All professors and teachers should be aware of the importance of assessments and well trained in recent research results according assessment methods and strategies. These are also the main objectives of the following essay. To achieve this, the essay is divided into two parts. The first part discusses two different existing assessment methods. The second part
proposes alternative assessment methods which could be used to meet high demands on assessment.

To compare the findings in the literature with the reality in my university, a Sino-British cooperative university in China [called UNI afterwards]. I conducted a survey among my Chinese students. The students were in their last year of their undergraduate studies. So they have made many experiences with assessments already and were able to share their impressions. I received 48 answers on which the following research is based. If nothing else is stated the code of the answers is shown in Table 1 – Code of answers.

Brown states: “The ways in which universities assess students’ achievements are often a mystery to them” (Brown & Glasner, 1999, p.3). The summary of my students’ answers in Figure 1 supports the statement of Brown: 77% of the students have chosen that they agree. One third of the students even fully agree with Brown. Numbers like these stress that is still necessary to improve assessment strategies and to involve the students when doing so.

**Final Year Exam**

**Description**

One assessment method that is widely used in higher education is the final year exam. This is usually a written, unseen and closed-book exam which is invigilated by a senior invigilator and a team of assistant invigilators. The final year exam takes place after the completion of teaching at the very end of the semester. Usually, one or two reading weeks separate the teaching weeks from the exam period which covers two weeks.

In the literature the role of assessment methods is divided into a formative and a summative role (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p. 163ff; Morss & Murray 2005, p. 123ff.). In the “Code of Practice on Assessment” of my university (UNI, 2009, p. i) we can find the following definitions of these two terms:

*Formative*  
Assessment designed to provide learners with feedback on progress and inform development.

*Summative*  
Assessment which provides a measure of achievement or failure in respect of a learner’s performance in relation to the intended learning outcomes of the program of study.

According to the definition the final year exam has mainly a summative role. The formative role is restricted to the published mark achieved by a student around six to eight weeks after the exam.
Quality Assurance, Moderation Process and Marking

Beside the definition of assessment related terms the “Code of Practice on Assessment” (UNI, 2009) provides a reference point for quality assurance. Related to quality assurance two terms are often used: validity and reliability. The following definitions can be found in the literature:

“Validity is the degree to which the assessment tests the learning outcome(s)” (Morss & Murray, 2005, p. 116f.). “The other key term relating to assessment is reliability, which refers to reproducibility of marks” (Morss & Murray 2005, p. 117).

To meet the requirements of validity the final year exams in higher education with a British background have to pass a moderation process before the exam period. Firstly, the module leader prepares suitable problems, provides the solutions, and allocates marks to all parts of the exam. The problems should match to the defined learning outcomes of the module. In a moderation form this relation should be stressed and explained. After this the draft version of the final year exam is passed to an internal moderator who checks the correctness of answers, clearness of formulations, grammar, spelling, and the validity of the exam questions. After this check the module leader can adjust the draft version according to the suggestions of the internal moderator. Then, the exam is passed to an external moderator from a different university to do a similar check as the internal moderator. At the end, the module leader adjusted the exam to meet all the requirements of the moderation process. In total, the whole process takes around two months and assures the validity of the final year exam.

To make the final year exam reliable, a similar moderation process is used. Due to the first moderation process, the marking scheme is already defined and agreed. So the module leader marks the students’ answers according to this marking scheme. From the research literature it is known that there are “biases in marking students’ written work” (Brown & Glasner, 1999, p.83). The author describes the following biases: “Gender bias”, “Ethnic bias”, “Halo effects1”, “Contrast effects2”, and “Presentation bias3” (Brown &Glasner, 1999, p.85ff.). To avoid the first three biases blind marking can be used. The students’ names are not visible when the examiner marks the answers. A defined marking scheme can avoid the bias of the contrast effect. Only the presentation bias still remains.

After the marking of the module leader the higher number of ten or 10% of the scripts is passed to an internal moderator. The “Code of Practice on Assessment” (UNI, 2009) defines the tasks of the internal moderator: “Scripts covering the range of achievement should be considered. The moderator should check both standards and consistency of marking, particularly at the borderlines” (UNI, 2009, p. 3). After the completion of the internal moderation process the results are submitted to the Board of Examiners. At a meeting with the Board of Examiners each module leader has to explain the distribution of marks. “Boards of Examiners must ensure that a procedure is in place for the identification and investigation of any unusual patterns of distribution of marks (for example, a particularly low pass rate in a module) before any final

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1 If the identity of a student is known, this can influence the marking results.  
2 The order of marking can have an effect on the results. E.g. an average work can be rated lower after reading some high-quality works.  
3 The appearance of a written work, like handwriting, spelling errors, etc. can influence the results.
decisions about individual students are taken” (UNI, 2009, p. 4). So firstly, the approval of the Board of Examiners is needed before the marks can be released to students. In total, the whole process takes around six to eight weeks and assures the reliability of the final year exam.

As a teacher, I am interested in how many hours my students spend on learning for a 2.5 hours exam. The results are shown in Figure 2. On average, the students spend 78 hours\(^4\) on learning for the final exam.

How much time the students need to prepare for an exam should be known by them. But do they also know how much time the examiner spends on designing and on marking a 2.5 hours exam to meet all the requirements of validity and reliability of the quality assurance and code of practice? Usually, I spend 40 hours on designing the exam, from the beginning to the final submission to the registry. Here, the students have a very good feeling for this task. The mean of their guess is 43 hours; median and mode are 40 hours as reported in Figure 3. For the marking of 100 scripts the mean is 56 hours, the median 40 hours and the mode 50 hours (see Figure 4). But here, the reality is different. To mark 100 scripts according to the principles of reliability I spend usually 80 hours. Here the students underestimate the workload.

Feedback

In the “Code of Practice on Assessment” (UNI 2009, p. ii) Feedback is defined as “Comments (whether written or oral) given by assessors to students on their performance in an assessment task”. In the literature authors agree how important feedback is. One example of Gibbs (1999) demonstrates this in a very clear way: “To get better at playing darts you have to be able to see where the darts land” (Brown & Glasner 1999, p.46). To make this example even better we should add “… you have to be able to see immediately where the darts land”. Because feedback is only useful if the time period is relatively short between the assessment and the provided feedback. Otherwise the students have moved on and have different things in mind.

The only feedback the students get for their final year exam is usually the total mark. Strictly speaking, in comparison to the definition this is not even a real feedback. Secondly, the time period between the assessment and the publishing of the total marks is too long for a good feedback. However, the quality assurance process with reliable marking, moderation process, examiner board meetings, etc. takes its time. In this case we are confronted with a trade-off between quality and response time.

Due to the fact that there is no real feedback provided it is interesting to know how the students feel about this. In Figure 5 the results are shown to the statement whether they are satisfied with the feedback they got for their final exams. Surprisingly, 48% of the students still agree that they are satisfied. 52% of the students disagree, but a very high number of 19% fully disagree that they are satisfied. These findings give reason to think about improvements.

\(^4\) If students used “weeks” instead of “hours” as a time unit the transformation “1 week = 40 hours” was used. If students gave a number of “hours per week” the transformation “1 semester = 12 weeks “was used. If students stated a range the midpoint of this range was used.
Suggested Improvements

As complex processes are installed to make sure that the final year exam meets the requirements on validity and reliability, the feedback procedure could still be improved.

The underestimation by the students of the workload to mark all the scripts could be one reason why so many students are unsatisfied with the feedback. Maybe they wish to get their final mark earlier, but have to wait longer because of the moderation process. So, more information about the moderation process should be shared with the students. This would increase the acceptance of longer feedback times.

Where I studied it is usual that at a fixed day and time the students could come to an invigilated room where they have access to their marked scripts. The students have time to read the examiner’s comments and see the distribution of marks. They have also the possibility to check the sum of marks and to ask questions about the marking. The examiner is also present. Of course, the students are not allowed to take the scripts out of the room or to change anything. I had the impression that this process is really helpful for the students to learn from their own errors and have a better feeling why they got a certain grade. To introduce such a system could improve the satisfaction with the feedback of the students’ final year exams. Actually, there is no internal moderator to check the marking. Here, the students do this job for their own scripts – unpaid and with a very high motivation.

As an open question, I asked my students to share their ideas how the feedback could be improved given high student numbers. Their answers are similar to my suggestion:

- “Give exam paper back after being marked”
- “Provide the marked Mid/final exam paper”
- “Comments on the final exam paper”

Assessed Coursework

Description

Beside the final year exam assessed coursework is used regularly. Usually, the coursework consists of weekly homework assignments. The problems of the assignments are closely related to the current topic of the lecture. The students have usually one week to solve the problems and submit their solutions. The master solution is presented at the tutorial after the due date.

I use this method of assessment for two of my modules. However, the assignments are different: In module A the assignments count 10% to the final mark of the module. So, the coursework has formative as well as summative character. In the literature we can often find that this combination could be puzzling. E.g. Biggs and Tang (2007) state: “This difference between formative and summative reminds us that continuous assessment…is problematic when it is used for both formative and summative purposes” (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p. 164). “This difference” refers to the different meaning of making errors. If the assessment is formative then errors are
constructive and the students are willing to admit their errors. But if the assessment is summative then errors signal punishment (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p. 164). In the second module B the assignments have only a formative role.

In reality, whether the coursework is summative or formative is crucial for the participation rate. If the coursework is only formative—then the submission rate declines when other – summative – assessments seem to be more important to the students. In Figure 6, the submission rates of the ten assignments of my two modules are shown. If the coursework is summative, then the submission rate is constantly around 90%. But, if the coursework is only formative—then the rate constantly decreases. When we observed the first big decline for Assignment No. 5 the Mid-term week was close. The second big decline took place when the due date of my students’ final year projects was reached which was around Assignment No. 8. Their oral presentations of their projects were at the same time as Assignment No. 10.

In the literature it is clear why a formative assessment should be separated from a summative assessment. But according to my observation given the time restriction of my students the combination of formative and summative elements can increase their motivation to participate and so increase their learning from this method of assessment.

What is the opinion of the students according the summative role of coursework? In Figure 7, 81% of the students agree that they prefer to have assessed coursework as part of their final mark for a module. Even 38% of the students fully agree to this statement. Given these numbers summative coursework is wanted by the students. These findings are in line with the literature. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) recall a study of Starr from 1970 “that 90% of students from four departments preferred half of their marks to come from coursework” (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004, p.7). Even 40 years later and in a different country the student preferences seem to be unchanged.

An obvious reason for this could be that students made good experiences with these combinations in terms of higher average marks. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) summaries empirical studies where these effects were analyzed (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004, p.6). The main result is that “all combinations of coursework…with examinations produced better average mark rates than did examinations alone” (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004, p.6). My students made the same experience: 79% of the students agree to the statement that they got a higher mark on average when coursework was part of their final mark (see Figure 8).

Quality Assurance, Moderation Process and Marking

Whether continuous assessment fulfils the requirements on validity and reliability is contradictorily discussed in the literature. Race (1999) states that “there are concerns about validity and reliability of continuous assessment. For example, it can be difficult to detect unwanted collaboration. … it is hard, if not impossible, to detect every instance of plagiarism or copying” (Brown & Glasner, 1999, p. 64). He also argues that “lecturers continue to try to use the same continuous assessment process that worked quite well when student numbers were much smaller. This leads to reduced reliability of assessment” (Brown & Glasner, 1999, p. 64f.).
On the other hand, Gibbs and Simpson (2004) write: “higher average marks and student preference would not count for much if coursework were inherently less valid as an assessment – but it is not” (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004, p.7). They continue that “coursework marks are a better predictor of long term learning of course content than are exams” (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004, p.7).

From my point of view, Race (1999) is right that it is impossible to discover all possible plagiarism or copying. But when I mark the assignments my initial assumption is always that the students submit their original work. Similar answers could also be the result of group work that is not directly forbidden. Otherwise I need an evidence of plagiarism. According to the definition of validity I agree with Gibbs and Simpson (2004) that assignments are closer connected to the learning outcomes. Continuous assessment can raise the quality of students’ learning towards the learning outcomes.

Feedback

The standard feedback of the continuous assessment is the total mark the students achieved. But in contrast to the final year exam there are more possibilities for the students to get feedback. Firstly, the response time is much shorter. Usually the results are published one week after the submission. Secondly, during the tutorials the tutor summarizes the main problems of the students and shows them how to solve these. Thirdly, the students can ask questions individually after the tutorials, during office hours, or by email to get a personal oral feedback. To provide a written feedback as a standard would be appreciated but given the current student staff ratio this is not possible at the moment.

The majority of the students are satisfied with the feedback they got for their assignments. In Figure 9, 81% of the students agree to this statement.

Suggested Improvements

The decline of the submission rate observed in Figure 6 should be avoided. One possibility would be to change the formative role to a summative role. But given the high workload for the Year 4 – Sem 2 students this could be counterproductive. As Race (1999) states: “When students are under too much coursework pressure, their ‘want to learn’ is damaged” (Brown & Glasner, 1999, p. 64). Gibbs and Simpson (2004) suggest: “when lecturers introduced periodic peer-assessment of the problem sheets – as a course requirement but without the marks contributing—students’ exam marks increased dramatically to a level well above that achieved previously when lecturers did the marking” (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004, p.8). May be this assessment method can increase the rate of participation.

Alternative Methods of Assessment

What influences the learning of students most? The answer that appears first to teachers is in many cases teaching, like the syllabus, teaching material, lecture notes, way of delivery, etc. But actually, this is not the case. Since the 1970s research results are known that the way the students
are assessed influences the learning most. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) summaries these findings as follows: “Students described all aspects of their study…as being completely dominated by the way they perceived the demands of the assessment system” (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004, p.4). The influence of assessment is supported by the answers of my students. In Figure 10, the results show that 88% of the students agree to this statement. This means if we want to change and improve the learning of the students we have to change and improve our assessment strategies.

The design of a module usually includes in-class and out-of-class learning time. As the in-class time is shaped by the teacher the allocation of out-of-class time is done by the students. Gibbs (1999) reports: “It was found out that not only did assessment take up the majority of students’ time out of class but this trend increased markedly over time. By Year 4 … almost all of this time was spent on assessed tasks with only 5 per cent of student time spent out-of-class activity unrelated to assessment” (Brown & Glasner, 1999, p.42f.). My students were asked a similar question about their allocation of time. As in Figure 11 shown, 93% of the students spend more time on assessed tasks than on unassessed tasks. Especially, 74% of the students spend more than 70% of their time on assessed tasks. But in comparison with the findings of Gibbs (1999) it seems that in Year 4 at my university the students behave less strategically and have wider interests in their studies.

Whether my students would like to see a bigger variety of assessment methods is analyzed in Figure 12. 90% of the students agree to this statement. What kind of assessment this could be is suggested in the remaining part of this section.

**Questionnaires during Lectures**

For my modules, I use an assessment method I called “Questionnaires.” Actually, they are more like short assignments with free-text problems than MCQ-questions. I pass the questionnaires during the lecture and the students have 10 to 15 minutes to work on the solutions. They can work in pairs or in small groups. Sometimes, group work is requested. The problems are closely related to the topic I talked about. Usually, the problems go a little bit further than the examples I presented. To solve the problems the students have to apply the same technique, but also have to think about adjusting the method to the given situation. Afterwards, I collect the answers and present the solutions immediately using interaction with the students. After the lecture, I check the answers of the students. I upload the results on our virtual learning platform, usually at the same day. The results of the questionnaires could count like bonus points for the normal assignments. Then they would play a formative and a summative role where the summative part is quite small because of very few points in total.

Even when the questionnaires are only formative, I could not observe the same decline in participation as I did for the assignments. On the contrary, the students ask me whether they are going to have a questionnaire today and were disappointed if I told them not today. These questionnaires are an example when formative assessment works. From my point of view, the prompt feedback is the key. The students are involved. They want to know whether they were right or not.

In the literature, similar experiences are reported with related ideas. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) refer to a method called “formative assessment workshop” (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004, p.19). Here
the students answered a MCQ-question test during class “followed immediately by a short remedial tutorial on the question. … 85% of the students reported wanting more such sessions” (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004, p.19).

In Figure 13, 98% of my students agree to the statement that the questionnaires are useful to support learning. This result motivates me to continue with questionnaires during lectures.

**Project-based Assessments**

At my university, the Year 4 students work on their “final year projects (FYP)” in Semester 1 and Semester 2. The students can choose a supervisor and the general topic. The particular project is usually allocated by the supervisor. After Semester 1, the students have to submit a draft version of their projects which is the base for a detailed feedback. After submission of the final reports an oral presentation is also requested. This kind of assessment is new for the students and some students struggle especially with the time management of such a long project. Other students enjoy the freedom and manage to become real experts in their fields.

Project-based assessments like the FYP are alternatives to exams and assignments. Actually, project work is closer to the reality students will see on their jobs. Biggs and Tang write that one advantage of project-based work is that learning outcomes of several modules can be assessed (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p. 226f.). “…Students have a chance to show that they can put it together and use it…” (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p. 227). Students’ preferences instead are not so clear. 48% of my students prefer to have more project-based assessments, but 52% of the students disagree to this statement (see Figure 14).

The different preferences may result from different experiences with their particular supervisor. Another reason could be that the students don’t know exactly what the supervisor expects and how their work is assessed. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) show an example of such a misunderstanding where “the students expected criteria to be concerned with low-level goals such as style and presentation while their teachers emphasized high level goals such as theoretical and conceptual understanding” (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004, p.20). Only a well-established feedback process “at multiple stage during an on-going project can reorient student effort in appropriate ways” (Gibbs & Simpson 2004, p.20).

In Figure 15, the results are shown whether my students are satisfied with the feedback they got for their final year projects. 73% of the students can agree to this statement, but the majority of them only slightly agree. Even 10% of the students fully disagree. So, it is not surprising that some students dislike project-based assessments, even if this method can support high quality learning.

**Discussion of Alternative Methods**

Beside the two presented alternative methods of assessment there are many other innovative methods. For example, my students suggest the following alternative assessment methods:
• Several in-class tests, each contributes about 10% to the final grade
• Mid-term projects
• Oral questions during the lecture, selection of students randomly
• Research on real-life problems
• More coursework that counts for large parts of the final mark
• Performance in the Tutorial
• Presentations
• Face-to-face tasks
• In-class assessment
• Group projects, group presentations

Also in the literature, there are many innovative methods proposed. The following list summarizes some suggestions of Biggs and Tang (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p. 217ff.):

• Presentations
  Student presentations
  Poster presentations
• Critical incidents
• Individual and group projects
• Learning contracts
• Reflective journal
• Case study
• Portfolio assessment
• Speeding up assessment procedures
  Peer- and self-assessment

  Group assessment
  Synoptic assessment
  Random assessment

• Rapid assessment of declarative knowledge
  One three-minute essay
  Short-answer examinations
  Cloze tests
  Concept maps
  Venn diagrams
  Letter-to-a-friend

• Rapid assessment of functioning knowledge
  Gobbets
  Video segments
  Ordered-outcome tests

To explain all methods in detail would go beyond the scope of this essay. The remaining part of this section would rather discuss the obstacles of innovative methods and why so few of them are used in reality.
First of all, we need to think about the different interests in assessment. Among others, there are the main groups of employers, parents, lecturers and students. These groups need to be convinced that innovations are needed. But all of them have reasons to prefer traditional methods:

- To start with the employers Race (1999) argues: “Employers…tend to remember assessment as it was when they themselves studied, and this can make them more reluctant to think about the benefits that may be linked to innovations in assessment” (Brown & Glasner, 1999, p. 59).

- For the group of parents Race (1999) states: “Parents too, however, may distrust innovations in assessment, especially if they believe that such innovations are made to save money” (Brown & Glasner, 1999, p. 59).

- To continue with the group of lecturers Race (1999) writes: “…it is not surprising that the assessment innovations which are most attractive to lecturers are those which can make their work more efficient” (Brown & Glasner, 1999, p. 60).

In Figure 12, an overwhelming majority of the students would like to see a bigger variety of assessment methods. But if I ask whether they prefer traditional and established methods of assessments, then also 71% of the students agree to this proposition (see Figure 16). One reason for such inconsistent findings is that students would be uncertain how to prepare. In Figure 17, 75% of the students agree to this reason. As Race (1999) puts it in a nutshell: “Anything new brings with it its own risk” (Brown & Glasner, 1999, p. 61).

Conclusion

Different assessment methods in higher education and especially at my university are discussed in this essay. The final year exam and the assessed coursework were used as examples. In comparison, the final year exam has more a summative role and the assessed coursework has more a formative role. To improve the formative role and the feedback process of the final year exam suggestions like to let students read comments on their exam papers were made. For the assessed coursework it is important to improve the participation rate if there are no summative components. Here, peer-assessment methods could be used. In comparison of validity and reliability of the two methods, for the final exam complex processes are installed by the university to assure both. For the assessed coursework, there are fewer regulations and some concerns about validity and reliability still remain. Even if the students prefer to have assessed coursework.

In the final section, alternative methods were discussed. First, I presented the approach of questionnaires during lectures to support interaction with students even in large groups. But also as a formative tool to give feedback immediately. According to the students this method is successful to support learning. A second method I proposed consisted of project-based assessments like the final year projects. This method is closer to the job reality and combines
several learning outcomes of different modules. Perhaps due to a bad feedback practice this method is preferred by half of the students, but also disliked by the other half.

Finally, I discussed some concerns about further innovative methods of assessments. Employers, parents, lecturers and students have some worries about being too innovatively and they still need to be convinced. But step by step the assessment system can be improved. The main objective of further research and changes in the system should be to avoid situations like the one described by Gibbs and Simpson: “Assessment sometimes appears to be, at one and the same time, enormously expensive, disliked by both students and teachers, and largely ineffective in supporting learning” (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004, p. 11). In Figure 18, it is shown that 65% of my Year 4 students are overall satisfied with the assessment process. My objective for my further work is to increase this percentage constantly.
References


UNI Academic Board (2010, June 9). *Regulations for the Conduct of Examinations*. 
Appendix

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Table 1 – Code of answers

Figure 1: The way the university assesses the students’ achievements
Figure 2: Hours spent learning

Figure 3: Hours spent designing
Figure 4: Hours spent marking

Figure 5: Satisfaction with feedback from final exam

Figure 6: Submission rate of assignments
Figure 7: Preference of coursework

Figure 8: Coursework included
Figure 9: Satisfaction with feedback from assignments

Figure 10: Way of learning

Figure 11: Assessed tasks in comparison to unassessed tasks
Figure 12: Bigger variety of assessment methods

Figure 13: Questionnaires support learning

Figure 14: Project-based assessment
Figure 15: Satisfaction with feedback from final year project

Figure 16: Preference of traditional methods

Figure 17: Uncertainty how to prepare
Figure 18: Satisfaction with assessment process
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