

Invisibility Syndrome of African Americans in Educational Institutions

A Conversation with Dr. Anderson J. Franklin
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OWENS: You spoke today about the invisibility syndrome of African-Americans in educational institutions. Could you say a bit about what you mean by invisibility, the sort of literary references you spoke about earlier that relate to it, and what the invisibility syndrome might be?

FRANKLIN: Some of my thinking is inspired by Ralph Ellison's book *Invisible Man*. Invisibility essentially addresses the experience that people have when they are not, from their own perception, seen as a person of worth, when their talents are not recognized, their potential is not recognized, their capacity is not recognized in the variety of everyday life experiences, as well as over the lifespan. A student, for example, since we're talking about students, will feel that the teacher isn't really responsive to their answers the way in which they believe is respectful of them or of their orientation to the world. That begins to provide a certain feedback which suggests that what you think and who you are doesn't have value to the teacher. The student can have subsequent experiences like that, not only in the classroom but also outside of the classroom which reinforces this sense of disregard. For example, when people recoil or are anxious when they get around black men in general, they do so without really knowing who the person actually is. This is what I'm talking about when I say the person is made invisible by our beliefs about them.

OWENS: It seems that there is a combination of visibility and the stereotyping that's involved that you're speaking of – the reaction to black men on the street, for example.

FRANKLIN: That's what I call the paradox of invisibility in my book, *From Brotherhood to Manhood*, and in my writings. You are, in fact, visible but you're visible in terms of how the beholder sees you. They see you as more defined by the stereotypes or assumptions they hold about your race and ethnicity. You are visible in that sense, but not in a genuine sense that you would like to be seen.

OWENS: You speak also in your work and in your talk today about being captive to stereotypes. Could you expand on that?

FRANKLIN: When you find that you are constantly being perceived and treated in a singular fashion from one context to the next, in school, in the work environment,

and in some instances, in the community, both African-American as well as the white community, seen in terms of the public image, not your true self that can become personally frustrating and disillusioning. That public definition is very narrow and therefore stereotypical. The individual can find he is very much captive to how biased beliefs essentially define their social interactions and personal experiences.

OWENS: Keeping on campus issues, how do you feel that an organization such as AHANA, here at Boston College, contributes to this question? Either its resolution or not in building identity and community and things like that?

FRANKLIN: I think it's very important because, as I discussed from Beverly Tatum's book, *Why Are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, African American students sit together for social support but also out of a feeling the campus environment is alienating. They find a way therefore to become visible meaningfully by creating their own little social networks or social communities. That helps them get the necessary sense of support, both psychologically and emotionally, but also academically. Within that group you learn ways in which to navigate the academic and social experiences of the school. That is what makes AHANA important as an institutionalized office that addresses what is the informal process that happens on campus in terms of social communities created by African American students in isolation. AHANA is in the position to plug into those networks, to build community in a different way, in a more formal way than just the informal social networks that get created by students. If a program like AHANA is good at it, it is able to reach into and capitalize on those informal social networks and build on it as a way to create community.

OWENS: How important do you think the sort of robust exposure to the person he is both for African-American students and for non-African-American students in dealing with the question of healthy identity formation for all students?

FRANKLIN: I think we are still very far behind in terms of what the true goal is in forming a multicultural society that has clear social expectations and competencies in the development of identity and human capital. If we want to maximize the human capital among the African-American community, but also among the campus community here in a way that prepares the student body to deal with a pluralistic global society, then these different social networks that exist on campus among all student groups have to have a way of engaging each other.

OWENS: Part of my worry is that, perhaps, just letting people know that it's a diverse world out there doesn't actually force them to engage with that diversity. So is there something more that should be done on campus to really foster a substantive dialogue as opposed to a mere recognition, which may not be there already?

FRANKLIN: Absolutely. I think I've mentioned before that this past Spring, I brought to Boston College 20 community-based programs, which are working with

predominantly African-American, but other ethnic minority youth too, preparing them for a college education. They were brought here for the Nelson Chair Roundtable to network and exchange best practices. Each one of these programs has two major components. One is clearly an academic component that helps to enrich and supplement the academic skills and the college preparation of students. All of them had another component equally important, which was a social identity development curriculum. It was structured into their activities and a deliberate strategic addition to their curriculum. They don't separate the two. They see that in order for the young person to be prepared as a leader, certainly in the community, needs to be as prepared in their social character development, sense of responsibility as they need to be prepared in their academic knowledge. Perhaps we should put more emphasis on this too at Boston College.

OWENS: Another area is that of faith and religious traditions. What role do you think religion plays in the identity formation of African-American students on campus? Particularly in a place like Boston College, what could it do and what does it do?

FRANKLIN: Faith is a big part of the African-American community historically. That's one of the reasons why students and families place their students on this campus. The Catholic traditions appeal, not only intellectual tradition but also spiritual tradition and the rootedness that Catholicism and religion provides. Even if they're not Catholic, it's just what a religious and spiritual community provides that matters. For parents it is another way for their child to be grounded. If you put yourself into the thoughts of parents, there is a belief that spiritual and religious groundedness is important in preparation for future adulthood, career and professional opportunities as well as family life. This is an appeal of Boston College.

OWENS: How well do you think the Catholic Church and, especially as it relates to the campus here, deals with issues of race? From your perspective as a psychologist and expert on college life, has there been a positive contribution from the Church on this, or is this an area that needs some work?

FRANKLIN: Well, first of all, I'm certainly not an expert in the area of Catholic initiatives in interracial or racial objectives. I know that the Church was a participant in the civil rights movement, and certainly in social justice causes, here and around the world. How successful Catholic Schools such as Boston College have been in addressing racism on campus and else where I think is a question that needs to be not only asked but seriously explored by us too. Given the struggles of the past, the changes in the present, and the promise of the future, how much are we addressing what I raised in [the Catholic Intellectual Traditions] seminar about the preparation of African-American students as future leaders in the community, both intellectually, in terms of their social personal development, but also the spiritual centeredness that's the foundation of leaders? That is a question Boston College needs to explore.

OWENS: One last question, what advice would you give to incoming African-American students, men and women here at Boston College as they face a new semester and four years ahead of them? How should they deal with the kinds of questions that you describe so well in your work and write about?

FRANKLIN: One is to be clear about your goals. Why are you at Boston College in the first place? They need to focus on getting their education and be prepared to be persistent. They must learn to rely upon their personal resilience that has taken them through other areas of their life when they faced challenges if not adversity. So, be prepared for a new place, a different place. And remember the times when you have been successful in other new and different places and then draw upon those personal strengths that allowed you to cope and deal with a new and different place.

Second, don't isolate yourself. Find the significant others in your life, on campus, and elsewhere who share the same goals and the same vision for why you are at Boston College. Find those persons who can help you navigate the community here, but also can be that necessary support system, a safety net.