

Where is my FEMA?

by Dr. David Rudder, Delaware Technical and Community College

There are numerous studies that state that chronic exposure to violence can have serious developmental consequences for children, including psychological disorders, depression, impaired intellectual development and school problems, truncated moral development, and pathological adaptation to violence, to name a few. Not surprising, students enrolling into our colleges, especially young black men living in poor areas, who are exposed to violence have difficulty focusing on school work or engaging in any of the other enriching activities that should be part of their college experience. As a result, community colleges need to realize they are facing new challenges in educating students now compared to a generation ago.

Imagine growing up in a neighborhood where you see the chalk lines that the police draw from a homicide, someone pulling out a gun, drug addicts and drug dealers that are a part of the fabric of your neighborhood. What if you knew multiple people in jail, abandoned houses that used to be occupied by neighbors, playgrounds filled with vials of crack, broken glass, and bullet casings, robbing kids from the joy of playing catch or swinging on the swings? What would you do if you were awakened in the night from the sounds of police sirens or gun fire, or had to go to school where you were forced to go through metal detectors? How can someone not go into a state of depression or suffer a weakened mental state, which results in alarming behaviors that are deemed disruptive and counterproductive for academic pursuits? How do students, especially young black males, cope in their violent surroundings, maintain their dedication to school and education, and look forward to the future?

As an academic counselor and instructor, I see how many young men are grappling with trying “to do the school thing” and finding a balance in their lives. Many of my students have little to no escaping the stressors of their daily realities. As a result, some of these men will have sporadic attendance, be disengaged in class, submit poorly prepared assignments, sit in the cafeteria or hang out in the gym for hours at a time. While most young black men first enroll at the College to be educated, they soon come to realize that one can get lost in the college environment, where independence reigns. Rather than having feelings of order and containment that exist in many public schools, the campus is now transformed into a place of solicitude where they are not looking over their backs, not being constantly reminded about the negatives in their world, not feeling an overwhelming sense to prove their bravado, or sense of worth. At the same time, community colleges represent an escape for many of these black males, so they do not fully explore or engage themselves in their full academic experience because they lack the appropriate survival skills to excel in this environment.

How do we deal with or address the mental well-being of our students so they can become focused to achieve unless we have the understanding and empathy with their day- to- day struggles? I’ve attended numerous conferences focused on retaining minority males in higher education, and there are two overwhelming themes. Students say, “We need to have faculty/ staff in our schools that we can relate to and who won’t judge us, and instructors who make our coursework relevant to our lives.” There has to be an enormous burden on students to stay focused and concentrate in a Pre-calculus or English 101 class, attempting to read an esoteric textbook that does not speak to their

reality and level of understanding and have their minds struggle to focus when they have competing thoughts of survival.

There is a disconnection between the institutions and the students they serve. Community colleges, or colleges in general, speak with the business community to learn what the trends are in the marketplace and the type of training that is desired for a potential workforce. When is the consumer (the student) asked in a meaningful way how the college needs to change or overhaul its efforts in order to support the success and retention of young black males? Many colleges lack access to resources and the willingness to fight for resources that would be necessary to sustain programs/initiatives that would help ensure the academic and social development of our black male students residing in distressed areas. Nevertheless, community colleges need to be places of safety so students can escape their mental trauma inflicted by neighborhood realities.