Validation as motivation: A reference to help today’s students become tomorrow’s professionals

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Abstract  This paper provides an actionable framework for motivating underperforming students to become overachieving professionals. The validation-motivation model is reinforced by cases that include the existence of validation, motivation, cultural consciousness and sense of belonging. Current literature highlighting relative approaches to supporting African American and other minoritised students is utilised to strengthen the credibility of validation as motivation. The literature provides nuance to validation theory while presenting it as a practical tool used to spark motivation toward success. Implications of the material are provided, as well as recommendations for professional and educational leaders’ goals in supporting the future success of students. From theory, to practice, to outcomes, this document provides leaders with a brief yet functional outline for encouraging the student-to-professional transition.

KEYWORDS: diversity, equity, inclusion, validation, motivation, student success, professional success

INTRODUCTION
According to an abundance of recent academic data, today’s students are much more diverse than has historically been the case. The enrolment rates of students of colour have increased, along with employment rates for the demographic. This literature review communicates the importance of taking a validation-centred approach to supporting African American and other minoritised student populations in higher education, so they may flourish, thrive in their professions, and impact global change.1 2 The following paper provides characteristics of: (1) validation theory and the connection to student motivation;
(2) core concepts relative to validation; and (3) the specific recommendations and implications of professional development for the targeted demographic.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

This literature highlights existing studies, cases and outcomes, for leaders who struggle with understanding the application of validation as a tool for motivating students toward academic and professional success. A framework of validation and motivation will be utilised to view the population and argue the successful outcomes. The framework illustrates that when leaders apply elements of validation theory to the student population and include extrinsic motivators such as the potential outcome of earning an ‘A’ letter grade or letter of recommendation, successful short-term outcomes can occur. When applied over time, students may begin to embody the concept of success and no longer separate themselves from the possibility of success. This allows students to become driven by internal motivators no longer dependent on extrinsic incentives. The initial installation of self-validation (the belief of one’s worthiness) and motivation from the educational leader ultimately correlates to the future and long-term professional success of the student. The various cases shared will support the credibility of this framework. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework.

**VALIDATION THEORY**

Motivation efforts can benefit from an understanding of the validation theory developed by Rendón. Genuine validation contributes to individual success, all the way from the classroom to the boardroom. Corporate and academic institutions implementing culturally supportive characteristics give credibility and validity to the theory of validation. This theory emphasises the need to provide individuals of need with reinforced encouragement and interaction in order to increase their chances of success.

Many educational leaders posit that unintentionally failing to provide motivation through validation can leave a student feeling discouraged and defeated. This defeat can become habitual in nature and become present in one’s profession. Validation can provide a person the platform to bring their authentic selves to any environment when executed well. Imposter syndrome and low self-esteem can haunt many men of colour throughout their college years and into their careers. However, when components of validation such as cultural value, support and representation are present, self-esteem can be developed and utilised to navigate professional settings.

The void between students, staff and high-level decision-makers can be bridged through the implementation of student validation, fostering an accessible exchange and an equitable power dynamic for the
historically underprivileged in academia.\textsuperscript{9,10} Educators who embrace this perspective can significantly encourage the capabilities of first-generation college attendees, African American scholars and Latino learners, providing them with a sense of ease and self-assurance to navigate their college-to-career pursuits more effectively.\textsuperscript{11} In contrast to the conventional attributes of higher education environments, validation can afford nontraditional students a feeling of inclusion, recognition and esteem needed to take into their communities.\textsuperscript{12}

**FACULTY INTERACTION AND VALIDATION**

The magnitude of inclusive validation paired with socialising agents such as family and education settings can determine one’s trajectory. Fox\textsuperscript{13} engaged students in discussions about race within the classroom setting. The findings from these structured and managed dialogues on race and racism in the college environment were curated and incorporated into a resource to help educators conduct diversity-based discussions while ensuring that everyone feels embraced.\textsuperscript{14} There was a dedicated segment addressing the wellbeing of the often-underrepresented African American students. Fox\textsuperscript{15} advocated for students to collaborate with their peers from diverse backgrounds to foster a receptive and open-minded atmosphere. In contrast, shying away from diversity subject matters in the workplace can indirectly silence individuals who feel unseen, silenced and under-supported.

In pursuit of validation and a feeling of belonging, Fox’s\textsuperscript{16} examination of the interview data indicated that practitioners should exhibit qualities of dependability and trustworthiness, especially when dealing with students of colour, and foster discussions about privilege. These attributes and dialogues can be facilitated by highlighting shared human traits within the classroom. Per Fox,\textsuperscript{17} all individuals across the globe are part of a unified human family before they are introduced to the unsettling truths of racism, economic power dynamics and the clash of cultural and religious values. The objective of affirming the presence of diverse students and their perspectives on sensitive subjects can be realised when the instructor is unafraid to take the lead in these endeavours.\textsuperscript{18} The focus group within this class offered viewpoints that would inspire instructors of various backgrounds to actively undertake supportive measures in validating all distinctions within the classroom. The study confirmed that when a student’s social differences are validated, they aspire to provide validation for other groups, which is a great quality to have as a leader in one’s profession in the future.

**STUDENT MOTIVATION**

In recent years, scholars have aimed to pinpoint the key elements in cultivating motivation by encompassing aspects such as practising love, nurturing humility, advocating for hope-centred teaching, harnessing the power of humour, endorsing silence-based teaching, promoting critical thinking skills in students, and genuinely believing in their potential for achieving remarkable success.\textsuperscript{19} Research investigating diversity-related motivation matters concur on the necessity of employing approaches grounded in empathy, thoughtfulness and consideration.\textsuperscript{20} To address the needs of today’s students, the interplay between theory and practice necessitates open and honest communication supporting a healthy transformation into tomorrow’s professionals.\textsuperscript{21} Shih emphasised that humility is a two-way value in the student–teacher relationship and firmly held that it should be at the core of both methods and interactions. Healthy and reflective staff–supervisor communication is a product of a validating atmosphere nurtured in
the education setting and applied in one’s profession.

**Student motivation and validation theory**

Students who adapt and align with expectations, outlines and norms of an educational leader are likely to fare well academically. According to Milner, however, truly impactful educators are those who establish a connection with their students. Validating student differences by adapting to the norms shaped by their socialisation can inspire student interaction and involvement. Making small adaptive efforts such as attempting to recall the names and life experiences of students has proven to empower and provide a sense of belonging that students take with them into any setting. A validating environment also motivates active participation in campus life, provides practical skills, and gives students the belief they possess the abilities and tools to excel in society.

Furthermore, in addition to the deliberate efforts of instructors to validate students, Rosenthal and Jacobson illustrated that simply raising and communicating expectations to students can have positive effects on their performance. Rosenthal and Jacobson randomly selected students and informed them that they were expected to improve their performance based on their previous assessment results. The group of students who were aware of this expectation and believed in their own competence outperformed their peers. This was because the group that did not receive this expectation lacked the instructor-induced motivation or validation to perform better. This proves that when an instructor, mentor or supervisor simply communicates the belief that their understudy can be successful, the elevated standards inspire them to manifest the same successful beliefs, increasing successful outcomes.

### ADDITIONAL CONCEPTS RELATIVE TO VALIDATION

#### Positive representation

Representative positive imagery can help students cope with prejudgments, stereotypes and racism. Features such as supportive resources, campus organisations and affirmative imagery are avenues worth exploring in the endeavour to counteract negative stereotypes for students. As an example, Black, an African American faculty member and organiser of support groups for African American males, showed how representation yields enduring impacts on students. Black engaged with students and discovered that television shows featuring positive portrayals could counter the detrimental stereotypes surrounding Black males. Being both an educator and an author, Black comprehended ways his role countered adverse images and stereotypes encountered by his students. By revealing how negative labels and misrepresentations can overshadow positive designations, Black's presence ignited the professional potential of students navigating conventional, white-dominated professional spheres.

In today’s classrooms, issues related to shared identities encompassing race, gender, cultural support and understanding are critical factors influencing the sense of belonging. Some of the most immediate outcomes of faculty-content alignment are attributed to shared identity and authenticity. When students struggle to connect in environments where they statistically do not excel, it can impact their sense of belonging and deplete their sense of validation. Students who see themselves in other individuals can ease their campus and career connection process and prevent separation from the learning moment, thus fostering successful outcomes.

A term for characteristics such as disconnecting from the workplace is known as silently-quitting and may foster resentment, poor workplace environments, unmet goals and unhappiness.
Sense of belonging

The cultural and social development individuals undergo prior to college, along with the challenge of juggling multiple roles, will influence their capacity to adapt to the demands and responsibilities of a collegiate authority system. Hence, educational leaders should consider both the traits that students bring with them to campuses, which may be perceived as unsuccessful, as well as those seen as successful, when planning to support an underperforming student population. This consideration is essential because attributes that prove ineffective in an academic context tend to yield similar results in professional settings. This is seen in student employee settings where students face difficulties in their endeavours to maintain balance between their work life and their student life. When faculty overlook or neglect to address these role conflicts, students may experience a sense of alienation.

Previous research indicates positive outcomes for African American students can be linked to the collaborative relationship between students and educational leaders who foster a sense of belonging. In a qualitative study, Harper and Nichols conducted focus groups at three racially diverse private institutions. They interviewed 39 African American males to gather insights specific to stereotypes, competition and social dynamics. The findings revealed that interactions within the same racial group were commonplace; however, these interactions were confined to individuals who regularly engaged in smaller subgroups. These subgroups experienced a sense of competition and perceived separation from other African American male groups, which seemed to hold different values, norms and beliefs. Such data challenge the oversimplified assumption that African American men are naturally inclined to integrate based solely on shared racial identity and demonstrate the existence of preferences within subgroups. Race relatability can be the initial connection motivator; however, the longevity of the connection is determined by the degree of sense of belonging and validation factors.

Cultural competence skills

Supporting African American, first-generation and other minoritised students involves recognising the influence of cultural norms, identity dynamics, student engagement and academic achievement. Further research on the interplay of culture, race, gender, sexuality and identity preference can enhance our understanding of these factors and inform professional development. Tinto delved into the causes as well as the prevention of student attrition in a study on college culture and retention. He concluded that complete cultural assimilation is not a prerequisite or necessity for graduation and post-graduate career success. Rather, the crucial solution lies in the student's ability to connect with the campus culture by actively seeking and securing membership in at least one academic community, committee or group. Given that students invest significant time in the classroom, Tinto posits that a supportive campus community motivating membership and interaction through validation is an ideal environment resulting in retention and post-graduate success.

Tuncel addressed the topics of cultural competence and student–teacher interaction with the aim of identifying ways future instructors could implement culturally responsive methods. Tuncel underscored the importance of teacher–student understanding, advocating for an empathetic approach to differences in perspective, along with demonstrating patience and respect for diverse cultures. When students are nurtured to receive patience and respect for their cultures, they will be motivated to demand the same treatment from future employers or seek work environments offering this
respect as a core value, pillar or principle. Tuncel proposed that a culturally responsive classroom can address current issues; however, sustaining this environment may pose challenges. Advocators of motivation by validation cannot control the atmospheres of other classrooms. However, students can request these accommodations for themselves. This type of courage is needed and valued in a professional atmosphere as well. Recognising the cultural impact on a student’s academic performance can offer valuable insights for educators focused on narrowing learning gaps for their students to strengthen their progression from college to career.

Self-defeating narratives
An imperative area of focus on the practice of providing professional responses to personal triggers in the class or on the job, could be beneficial to today’s students as well. In a recent mixed methods study conducted on 44 African American women from the mid-Atlantic region of the USA, spanning ages from 18 to 91, participants were given the opportunity to share their viewpoints on topics and behaviours of African American men. Within one focus group, a younger female suggested that men should focus on improving their emotional communication and triggers. Many women correlated attributes of manhood with qualities of leadership and the ability to provide for a family. Additionally, the study uncovered a link between a sense of stubbornness and men who exhibit strong-mindedness, often due to cultural norms shaped by a history of repeated attempts resulting in failure. The frustrations stemming from these failures can lead men to withdraw and choose not to try, fearing potential embarrassment. Embarrassment triggers emotions relative to inadequacy, therefore, rather than risking such embarrassment, they opt to save time and simultaneously reinforce the belief that they are consistently and deliberately denied opportunities by controlling powers. This combination of avoiding embarrassment while being too resolute to change ultimately leads to stagnation.

Additional manifestation of self-defeating isolation arises when faculty intimidation hinders the engagement of African American college men. Studies, programmes and resources can be developed to support both men and women of minority groups with working through personal triggers that arise in an academic or professional setting. Further self-defeating elements originate from the preconceived notions that educators and leaders may bring into the classroom. These presumptions give rise to stereotypes and can affect the dynamics between students, teachers, work study supervisors and future employers. For instance, if African American male students are treated in a manner that leads them to believe their contributions will only be perceived as products of dishonesty, it can discourage them from genuinely putting forth their best effort to overcome such preconceptions.

RECOMMENDATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
Arranging for an expert to lead workshops for staff on creating a supportive and validating learning environment for African American and other minority student populations is advantageous. The expert can offer sustained value if brought on to full-time staff to fulfil a full-time assignment. This administrative choice not only brings representation for African American and other minority students in the classroom but also saves expenses by avoiding the option for consulting with external experts. The recognition of the worth of qualified professionals of colour in administrative decisions demonstrates elements of validation theory. These professionals are not only
contracted for short-term solutions but are integrated for the enduring pursuit of equity. The values of an institution are often mirrored in its budget allocations and spending practices. Overworked and undervalued work conditions for staff of colour indirectly communicates the lack of value and validation of their skills and resources. Current educational leaders and corporate employers should allocate resources and funds towards the recruitment and sustained support of a permanent presence of African American and other minoritised staff and faculty.

VALIDATION FROM STUDENT TO STAFF
Applying validation theory to scrutinise the interaction between students of colour and instructors yields significant implications. According to previously highlighted study findings and validation theory, African American students derive a strong sense of validation in terms of identity and academic competence. Leaders who consider avenues for validation for this student demographic in classroom environments may supply students with resources needed to navigate professional spaces.55 The presence of validation theory in this comprehensive review underscores the need of empowering marginalised students to become outstanding professionals.56 The ongoing application of validation theory can increase the success of the targeted audience in areas of employment rates and job retention.

ON-CAMPUS STAFF AND FACULTY INTERNSHIPS
One step towards enhancing the success of African American and other minoritised students, staff and faculty calls for the establishment of regularly funded internship programmes. Such programme development not only affords students consistent validation through representation, but also prepares them for success. Educational decision-makers must truly implement the diversity goals, values and principles outlined on their webpages and in published job postings. A leadership team that champions diversity, inclusivity and justice should take the time to familiarise themselves with the value, abilities and skill set possessed by able staff of colour who are passionate in supporting the validation of other minorities.

Creating programmes that fortify the existing skills and abilities of students will position students as qualified candidates for higher paid and higher-risk employment positions. This theory and study review aims to inform practice and advocates for state and institutional level leaders to utilise their influence to support a truly inclusive professional work environment for the future. Doing so may meet the escalating need for supporting the success rates of African American and other minoritised populations.

VALIDATION THROUGH MENTORSHIP PROGRAMMES
Professional development programming tailored to validate and support under-performing populations should establish and operate student–instructor mentorship initiatives. Research on culturally specific mentoring suggests that a personalised form of mentorship could be advantageous for academic and professional development and mitigate culturally specific barriers.57 Brooms and Davis discovered that peer-to-peer bonding and African American male student–faculty mentoring led to a positive and productive college experience. The participants shared that interacting with a responsible adult in their chosen professional field provided motivation for academic success, a sense of belonging, validation, and a shield against racial hostility on campus.58 This interaction could encompass
progress toward building a rapport with instructors and staff while securing credible references and letters of recommendations aligned with their career pursuits. This same suggestion can evolve into a fully funded and operational internship programme, solidifying a seamless transition from college to career and fostering upward mobility.

CONCLUSION
The framework and supportive examples outlined the application validation theory and motivation to African American and other minoritised populations. The framework showed how short-term success inspired by outside motivation and validation can warrant positive outcomes post graduation. This framework is valuable as it can be utilised as a reference for processes, procedures and programmes offering resources to underperforming populations. The framework is easy to digest, follow and implement, and can be applied to any existing process in academic or professional settings. The value of this framework is increased given the urgency of the need to prepare this population for employment and entrepreneurship. Considering the previous cases and review of literature, this conclusion serves as a call-to-action to fortify the bridge from college to career for African American and other minority populations.

In line with principles of diversity, equity and inclusivity, the previous recommendations held elements of validation theory and were delivered from a perspective of motivation. The reader was introduced to supportive studies, as well as the importance of the theoretical perspective so it may be applied to practice, tasks and roles within respective units of employment and academics. Applying this model regularly will serve students in areas of sense of belonging, cultural integration toward goals and the increase of intrinsic motivation when extrinsic motivators are absent. Ultimately, future professionals of colour as well as accomplished individuals who have experienced isolation in the past due to any of their social identifiers, may feel inclined to apply this model to their interaction with others who struggle with motivation due to lack of validation.

BARRIERS AND NEXT STEPS
Great plans may include great barriers. Therefore, a contingency for possible barriers will allow leaders to consider the roadblocks to avoid. One can avoid roadblocks by taking a custom approach to student matters rather than applying a validation-motivation framework to every problem. To reach the intended destination of student-staff success, leaders must consider other factors hindering success. The answer to their struggles may not be based in the lack of validation as motivation and may require further exploration. One clarified path of next steps could include staying motivated to expand the knowledge of various limiting factors via research and ongoing assessments. As terminology and norms continue to be updated, educators and professional leaders must update their knowledge to remain a credible resource. An example could be researching the impact of delegation as motivation. Understanding how empowering students with high-level roles can motivate them to take on bigger tasks would be the next best research direction to take following this document. This will warrant recommendations and offer insight to inform leaders’ implementation of delegation as motivation to serve as a catalyst for academic and professional achievement.

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