

# Perceived Importance of Role Models and Its Relationship With Minority Student Satisfaction and Academic Performance

David L. Tan, University of Oklahoma

*In his study of role modeling among Asian American and African American students at a predominantly White research university, the author found that although most minority students believed in the importance of a role model, many did not have one. Many also did not feel that their role models had to be from their own race. The author found no evidence that the presence or absence of a role model was related to academic performance.*

Although minority student enrollment at predominantly White institutions has increased dramatically, many minority students continue to face formidable cultural and transitional problems on these campuses (Allen, 1991; Astin, 1982; Fleming, 1984; Jackson & Swan, 1991; Thomas, 1981). One of the more important resources available in this transition is a role model, who can be a faculty member, an administrator, an academic advisor, a coach, or another individual the student looks up to and regularly interacts with (Davis, 1991; Sedlacek, 1987). A role model can be especially effective in assisting the minority student to develop a realistic self-appraisal and to deal with issues such as racial prejudice, stereotyping, and labeling. At the very least, a role model can act as a buffer for many social and psychological difficulties that the minority student faces on a predominantly White campus (Davis, 1991).

Research indicates that minority students, especially African Americans, who have role models on predominantly White campuses have higher educational aspirations (Fleming, 1984). Evidence suggests that good role modeling, especially with faculty, is related to better grades, higher persistence, and higher satisfaction with campus life (Davis, 1991). In fact, good role modeling with other members of the campus community, namely staff and students, is related to higher satisfaction for African American students on both White and Black campuses, although the correlation is not as high as in the faculty-student role modeling relationship (Davis).

In this study I explored the extent of interaction with role models among minority students on a predominantly White campus. However, I did not address issues related to mentoring, which involves a much deeper relationship. Specifically, this study examined (a) the perceived importance of role models to minority students, (b) the presence or absence of role models, (c) the perceived importance of having a role model of the same race, and (d) the relationship between perceived importance and the presence or absence of role models, student satisfaction, and academic performance.

## Sample

Undergraduate Asian American and African American students enrolled at a large, public, predominantly White research university in the Southwest were the target population. From a random sample of 222 Asian American and 259 African American students who received a questionnaire soliciting attitudes and opinions on topics ranging from political, social, and economic issues to academic and personal considerations, 35% of Asian American ( $n = 78$ ) and 25% of African American students ( $n = 66$ ) responded. The respondents' average age was 21; 51% were female; 98% were single; and 32% were freshmen, 23% sophomores, 16% juniors, and 29% seniors.

## Findings

A chi-square test of independence was used to examine the association between the importance of role models ("important" or "not important") and the race of the respondent (Asian American or African American). A role model was defined as a person (usually a faculty or staff member or an administrator) the student looks up to and tries to emulate. As Table 1 indicates, there was a statistically significant difference of opinion about the importance of role models, with a higher proportion of Asian Americans feeling that the pres-

**TABLE 1**  
**Student Assessment of Importance of a Role Model**

| <i>Student Variable</i> | <i>Important</i> | <i>Not Important</i> |
|-------------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| Asian American          | 91%              | 9%                   |
| African American        | 68%              | 32%                  |
| All subjects            | 80%              | 20%                  |

( $\chi^2 = 11.538$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ )

ence of role models was important (91% vs. 68%). When students were asked if they had at least one role model on campus, 61% of Asian Americans and 53% of African Americans said they had.

When students were asked whether the role model *had* to be racially matched, important differences also emerged. Not a single Asian American said that the role model had to be the same race, whereas 18% of African Americans said that role model should be. In both groups 27% responded that whether the role model was racially matched really did not matter (Table 2). This implies that there is room to maneuver as higher education institutions try to provide minority role models.

When students were asked if their role model was a member of their own race, the differences were again significant. A majority of Asian Americans (88%) had a role model of a different race. In contrast, African Americans were equally divided, with half having African American role models (Table 3). One reason for the lower proportion of Asian Americans with same-race role models could be that Asian American faculty, administrators, and other professionals were underrepresented on this survey's campus. African American role models were also limited but to a lesser extent.

In terms of the relationship between students' perception of the importance of role models and their levels of satisfaction with academic and social experiences on campus, I found no relation for either group. Nor did students with role models (regardless of whether they considered them important) have higher levels of satisfaction than those without role models. In addition, same-race role models were not generally related to satisfaction levels, with one exception. African Americans who had African American role models had a higher level of satisfaction with academic experiences but not with social experiences. Because of a low and shifting number of cases in the above analyses, these findings are preliminary rather than conclusive.

If indeed the interaction between role models and student satisfaction is insignificant, which intervening variables could be at play? In terms of social experience, one possible explanation, especially for Asian Americans, may be that they found social norms and values on campus to be consistent with their own. In a question that asked precisely that, Asian Americans reported an average of 1.89 and African Americans 1.57 ( $f = 10.59$ ,  $p < .05$ ) on a scale of 1 (no consistency) to 3 (lots of consistency). Another possible explanation is that students, especially Asian Americans, already felt they fit in the campus social environment, lessening the need for role models. On this question, Asian Americans reported an average of 2.46 and African Americans 1.81 ( $f = 27.69$ ,  $p < .05$ ) on a scale similar to the one above.

Asian Americans suffered from a lower incidence of racial prejudice on campus, with 61% of Asian Americans and 86% of African Americans indicating they had experienced racism and racial prejudice on campus ( $\chi^2 = 10.28$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The lower incidence among Asian Americans may have lessened the potential impact of and need for role models.

**TABLE 2**  
**Student Requirement That Role Model Be of the Same Race**

| <i>Student Variable</i> | <i>Role model must be same race</i> | <i>Role model need not be same race</i> | <i>No preference</i> |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Asian American          | 0%                                  | 73%                                     | 27%                  |
| African American        | 18%                                 | 55%                                     | 27%                  |
| All subjects            | 9%                                  | 64%                                     | 27%                  |

( $\chi^2 = 15.298$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ )

**TABLE 3**  
**Racial Matching of Role Model**

| Student Variable | Role Model |                |
|------------------|------------|----------------|
|                  | Same Race  | Different Race |
| Asian American   | 12%        | 88%            |
| African American | 50%        | 50%            |
| All subjects     | 30%        | 70%            |

( $\chi^2 = 17.582$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ )

Another possible explanation for the lesser impact of role models among Asian Americans would be that fewer of them experienced transitional problems from high school, but there was no statistically significant difference in the two groups' responses to a question that asked about transitional problems.

In terms of academic performance and the presence or absence of a role model, *t* tests done within each group found no significant correlation for African Americans. A significant—and unexpected—difference in academic performance among Asian Americans did emerge, however. Those without role models had earned significantly cumulative grade point averages (GPAs) than those with role models (Table 4).

If the presence of a role model was not positively correlated to academic performance among Asian American and African American students, what other factors might be? Some precollege characteristics were correlated. For example, high school GPA explained 19% of the variance in college GPA, and high school rank explained 24%. Another possible explanation lies in the effectiveness of the role models themselves, which this study did not address. It is entirely possible that the role models chosen by students in this sample (a) were inappropriate, (b) were not used to the extent that they could meaningfully benefit students, (c) did not spend enough time with the students, or (d) were not allowed by the students to have a greater influence. Clearly, more research is needed to investigate the intricacies of role modeling from the viewpoints of both the student and the role model.

### Conclusion

Although 80% of the sample perceived the importance of role models, only 58% actually had

**TABLE 4**  
**College Grade Point Average by Presence or Absence of Role Model**

| Student Variable | Role Model | No Role Model |
|------------------|------------|---------------|
| Asian American   | 2.98*      | 3.45*         |
| African American | 2.79       | 2.84          |
| All subjects     | 2.90       | 3.13          |

\*significant at the .05 level

one. Despite some evidence that the presence of a role model was not related to satisfaction with academic and social experiences, nothing should be taken from the fact that minority students, especially the African Americans in this study, feel a lack of fit with the predominant campus culture.

Because of the low and shifting number of cases, it is premature to conclude that role models have minimal impact on student satisfaction and academic performance. Advising minority students is time consuming and complex. Some do a better job than others. Those who have been chosen by students as role models may lack the formal training, experience, skills, and time necessary to be effective. Those who are effective may be overburdened. Students just seem to know where to look! In coming years the burden levied on faculty members to serve as role models to an increasing minority population is likely to increase. Greater attention needs to be focused on recruiting faculty members who are willing to serve as role models and on training faculty to handle social and academic issues faced by minority students on predominantly White campuses.

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*David L. Tan is assistant professor of higher education. Address correspondence concerning this article to him at the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Collings Hall, Room 227, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73071.*

## Response to "Predictors of Success for Academically Dismissed Students Following Readmission"

*J. Richard Arndt, California State University, Fresno*

I found Hall and Gahn's research article "Predictors of Success for Academically Dismissed Students Following Readmission" [*NACADA Journal*, 14(1), Spring 1994, pp. 8-12] interesting and well done. However, as my responsibilities include monitoring our disqualified student readmission policy and interviewing disqualified students who want to be readmitted, I think that one very (if not extremely) important factor was not taken into consideration—the formal or informal readmission contract the student agrees to.

This summer I denied readmission to several students who had not improved their grades during spring semester and had not met with me monthly as they had promised in their readmission agreement. On the other hand, one young man recently told me he was graduating and thanked me for having "turned him around" and given him another chance after he had been disqualified. Certainly interpersonal interaction is difficult to define and quantify in a research project, but I think it is important to discuss. Hall and

Gahn did state that their "study, in part, has prompted the College to examine the services available to readmitted students and to explore alternatives that might improve their chances for success... [e.g.,] requiring a personal interview and follow-up advising."

In short, objective predictors of academic success are important but should not be the sole basis for readmitting disqualified students. That decision should be made by appropriate faculty, academic advisors, and administrators using their best subjective judgement, based, in part, upon factors studied by these authors and also upon each student's individual circumstances (e.g., family or personal problems, illness, inappropriate major, or lack of motivation).

*J. Richard Arndt is Coordinator of Advising & Testing Services. Address correspondence concerning this submission to him at California State University, Fresno, 5150 N. Maple Avenue, Fresno, CA 93740-0066.*