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ABSTRACT

This study investigated factors affecting the success of African American students at a large, predominantly white, Catholic commuter institution, with approximately 10 percent African American enrollment. The study examined how students perceived campus climate; environmental factors impeding success and contributing to success; the effect of students' perceptions and expectations of the university environment on their experiences; and knowledge and actions successful African Americans used to overcome barriers to academic success. Data for the study included longitudinal academic data for all incoming freshmen; focus groups; and one-on-one interviews with successful African American students and recent graduates. Quantitative analysis of the data indicated that for African American students, first semester grade point average was the main determinant of first-year retention; high school average, number of hours spent studying, and self-ratings of drive to achieve were the best predictors of grades in college. There were fewer quantitative differences between high- and low-performing African American students than among white students. Qualitative analysis of factors such as high school experiences, importance of family, on-campus support, faculty and administrators, involvement in ethnic/cultural organizations, and campus climate found that African Americans who persisted into their sophomore year were similar to those who did not; the primary predictor of retention was again first-semester grade point average. (Contains 25 references.) (SM)

AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION: PATTERNS OF SUCCESS

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African American College Students at a Predominantly White Institution: Patterns of Success

Although African Americans have made significant progress at the pre-college level since the 1960s, they remain underrepresented in higher education, in relation to their representation in the college-age population (Carter & Wilson, 1997). They also lag behind Whites in regard to performance and outcomes as reflected in retention, persistence, course grades, college experience, and graduation rates, even after controlling for pre-college characteristics (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Nettles, 1988). This suggests that there are factors affecting academic performance of African American students that have very little effect on White students (Prillerman, Myers, & Smedley, 1989).

Although considerable research has been devoted to studies of outcomes of college students, most of the focus has been on traditional White students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1992). Where there has been research on Black student achievements, researchers have tended to concentrate on public institutions (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Kobrak, 1992; Richardson & Bender, 1987). Despite more than thirty years of significant enrollment of African Americans at predominantly White institutions, there has not been enough systematic research into the factors that affect their experiences and outcomes. Also, research findings have not translated into any significant improvements in performance of these students.

There is growing recognition that instead of continuing to focus on performance gaps and under-achievement of African American students, more research needs to be directed at the students who overcame alienation and other barriers and successfully completed their college degrees (Hall & Allen, 1989; Freeman, 1997; Graham, 1994; Stikes, 1984). Changing the focus could help in the development of models of success, and could also lead to practical strategies

for improving outcomes of African American students (Padilla, Treviño, Gonzalez & Treviño, 1997). This study attempted to contribute to this body of research by focusing on the factors which contribute to the successful persistence of some African American students at a predominantly White private university in New York City.

Studies that have looked at outcomes of African American students at predominantly White institutions, and related models, have focused on one or the other of the following contributing factors: student background characteristics associated with socioeconomic status (Thomas, 1981); pre-college academic characteristics (Astin, 1982; Astin, Tsui, & Avalos, 1996; Tinto, 1993); institutional adaptation to diversity (Richardson & Skinner, 1991); psychosocial factors (Fleming, 1984; Nettles, 1988); and coping strategies (Prillerman, Myers, & Smedley, 1989). Studies have also emphasized the importance of financial factors (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995). Researchers have also pointed to the importance of involvement in academic and other campus activities for persistence of all students (Tinto, 1993). There is growing awareness that student outcomes cannot be based solely on the characteristics of students that lead to success. Instead they are the result of complex interactions between the student, the institution, and the external environment. The study attempted to integrate and account for the inter-relatedness of these factors.

Method

This study used a mixed-methods approach involving both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The institution studied is one of the largest Catholic universities in the United States, with an enrollment of more than 18,000 students. Undergraduates account for seventy-five percent of the total enrollment. Although the university is a commuter institution, the undergraduate student body is a traditional one. Seventy-six percent of the undergraduates

are full-time students. Their average age is 21.5 years. The average age of new undergraduates is 18.4 years. African American, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander students have been steadily increasing at the main campus during the past ten years, and now account for almost one-third of total enrollment. African American students account for approximately ten percent of the student population. Black Issues in Higher Education ranked the university among the top 50 predominantly White institutions granting baccalaureate degrees to students of color ("Top 100," 1998). As in most predominantly White institutions, the diversity in the student body is not reflected in the faculty. Only fourteen percent of the faculty members are African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, or African American, with the majority being Asian/Pacific Islander.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do African American students perceive the campus climate in relation to the University's mission?
2. How does the institutional environment foster or impede the achievement of African American students?
3. What are the critical factors that contribute to success among African American students, particularly in a predominantly White private institution?
4. How do the perceptions and expectations of African American students about the university environment impact their college experiences?
5. What knowledge and actions do successful African American students employ to overcome impediments to academic success at a predominantly White institution?

Data Sources

Two primary sources of data were merged to form the basis for the quantitative analysis: annual surveys of incoming freshmen; and longitudinal academic data for these students. Focus groups and one-on-one interviews with a sample of successful African American students and recent graduates, were the primary methods of collecting qualitative data.

Quantitative Data

The sample was comprised of incoming freshmen who completed the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) national freshman survey between 1992 and 1996. Survey items covered a wide range of student background and personal characteristics: family background; academic experiences in high school; reasons for attending college; financial aid; choice of majors; choice of careers; expectations for college; self-concept; values; attitudes; and beliefs. Although the study was focused on African American students, data for White students were also extracted for comparative purposes.

Longitudinal files with the following admissions and academic data for each of the 1992 to 1996 freshman classes were constructed from existing student records:

1. Entering academic characteristics including: mathematics and verbal SAT scores; high school average; sex; major; and full-time or part-time status.
2. Academic data for each semester including: attendance status; major; semester credits attempted; total credits earned; cumulative grade point average; internal transfer status; and degree earned status.

Each year's freshman survey data was merged with the corresponding cohort tracking data. Linking of the survey data and longitudinal student data allowed for the identification of

predictor variables of academic success for African American students. An additional dichotomous variable (0,1) was created for retention of students in the study based on whether or not they returned to the university after one year. Two composite financial aid variables were also created - one for grants, and the other for loans. The data files for each year were merged into a master file and all personally identifying characteristics deleted from each record. The final sample consisted of 368 African American and 1880 White students, approximately the same ratio as in the student population. Chi-square and t-test analyses indicated that there were no significant differences in the means of key data elements over the five-year period, for each ethnic group. As a result the data could be combined for statistical analyses.

Qualitative Data

Potential participants for interviews were identified and personally contacted with the support and assistance of one of the few African American administrators at the university, and a student research assistant. Forty-five students and recent graduates from a cross-section of majors participated. This represented a fifty-five percent participation rate, far exceeding the rate generally achieved for ongoing institutional focus groups. The interviewing guide was broadly structured to prompt students for information about the following: high school experiences; significant people and organizations in their successful college experience; expectations of and reality of college; awareness of the university's mission; perceptions of the social and academic climate of the institution; and general levels of satisfaction with the college experience.

Ninety percent of the participants were juniors and seniors. The remaining ten percent were sophomores or recent graduates. About sixty percent were female, and forty percent were male. The main purpose of the interviews was to obtain the students' perspectives on the factors

contributing to their successful experiences. Students were very enthusiastic and supportive. Many welcomed the opportunity for their voices to be heard and suggested that the university should conduct similar sessions on a regular basis. Interview transcripts and field notes were the main sources of qualitative data.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed to identify the factors having the most effect on success of African American students, as measured by two widely used performance indicators, first year retention and grade point average. Appropriate statistical procedures were followed depending on the level of measurement of the data. Procedures included: frequency distributions; cross tabulations; chi-square analysis; t-test and non-parametric Mann Whitney U test of mean differences; correlation analysis; linear regression; and logistic regression. Linear regression was used to develop an exploratory model for grade point averages, a continuous variable. Logistic regression analysis was used to develop equations to predict the likelihood of retention, a dichotomous variable.

Separate correlation and t-test analyses were run for African American and White students to determine the similarities and differences in the predictors of retention and semester grade point averages for each group. Predictors were selected based on both theoretical and empirical considerations, and covered the following categories: pre-college academic characteristics; socioeconomic status; family structure; financial aid; self-concept; academic ability; academic performance; and campus climate. The latter was indirectly addressed by the inclusion of variables dealing with: reasons for selecting the university; students' goals and commitment; and students' views on issues related to racial discrimination; and allowing

racist/sexist speech on campus. All statistical analyses were done using the statistical package SPSS 8.5 for Windows 95 on an IBM PC computer.

For qualitative data, interviews were transcribed on to the computer. Transcripts were analyzed and coded to identify emergent patterns and themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Codes were developed for assigning meaning to words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, and for clustering related segments for drawing conclusions within the context of the research questions underlying the study.

Results of the Quantitative Analysis

Profile of the African American Student

Consistent with the literature (e.g., Nettles, 1988) African American students at the University had fewer financial resources as measured by parental income; lower levels of academic preparedness as measured by SAT scores (959 vs. 1049) and high school averages (83.4% vs. 85.4%); and lower levels of academic performance as measured by retention rates (79% vs. 86%) and grade point averages (2.8 vs. 3.1), than White students. Their graduation rates were also slightly lower than for other ethnic groups (60% vs. 65%). However, these rates were significantly higher than the national averages. Despite their lower performance levels, African American students rated themselves higher in regard to both intellectual and social self-confidence than White students. They also rated themselves higher on academic ability; expected to do as well in college; and reported higher career aspirations than their White counterparts. Many of the African American students have had very successful experiences at the University. African American students were more aware of continuing social and economic inequities between the races in society. A significantly higher percent of African American

freshmen reported "promoting racial understanding" as a life goal, considered racial discrimination to be still a problem; and expressed the need to maintain affirmative action in college admissions. Unlike the larger society, their fathers had the same level of educational attainment as fathers of White students, and their mothers were slightly better educated than mothers of White students.

Table 1

Significant Correlation Coefficients of Selected Variables and One-Year Retention

Characteristics	African American Students	White Students
Pre-college characteristics		
High school average		0.180**
SAT - mathematics		0.063**
SAT - composite		0.058*
Wanted to live near home	0.108*	0.057*
Self-concept		
Academic ability		0.101**
Mathematical ability		0.047*
First semester grade point average	0.245**	0.245**
Financial Aid		
Get job to pay expenses	-0.118*	
Grants		0.067**
Loans		-0.083
College should prohibit racist/sexist speech	-0.128*	

* $p<.05$ ** $p< .01$

Retention. Table 1 shows the results of correlation analysis for retention. Only coefficients that were statistically significant are shown. The results are very interesting. For African American students, first semester grade point average and wanting to live near home

were positively associated with retention. There was an inverse relationship between retention and students planning to get a job to pay expenses, and students who felt that the institution should prohibit racist / sexist speech on campus. These four variables accounted for a relatively small percent of the variation in retention, with grade point averages accounting for most of the variation.

The pattern was quite different for White students. In addition to first semester GPA, and wanting to live near home, positive significant correlation was found between first year retention and: SAT composite scores; SAT mathematics scores; self-rating of mathematical ability; self-rating of academic ability, and the amount of financial aid students expected to get from grants. There was an inverse relationship between loans and retention.

Table 2

Correlation Coefficients of Academic Characteristics and First-Semester Grade Point Averages

Pre-college academic characteristics	African American Students	White Students
High school averages	0.302**	0.502**
SAT - mathematics	0.224**	0.310**
SAT - verbal	0.248**	0.350**
SAT - composite	0.267**	0.369**
Hours spent studying	0.163**	0.207**

** $p < .01$

Grade Point Averages. Table 2 shows that the pre-college academic variables: high school averages, SAT scores; and hours spent studying or doing homework, were significantly correlated with first-semester GPA for both African American and White students, suggesting that high school preparation is an important determinant of college grades for both groups of students. A more detailed analysis of the data reveals that these variables explain a much greater percent of the variation in GPA for White students than for African American students. For

example, high school grades explain twenty-five percent of the variation in college grades for White students, compared to nine percent for African American students.

Table 3

Correlation Coefficients of Selected Variables and First-Semester Grade Point Averages (GPA)

Characteristics	African American Students	White Students
Self- Concept		
Academic ability	0.127*	0.339**
Drive to achieve	0.176**	0.148**
Mathematical ability		0.172**
Intellectual self-confidence		0.139**
Writing ability		0.117**
Financial		
Grants	0.178**	0.222**
Loans	0.199**	
Parents		-0.064**
Father's education		0.090**
Mother's education		.0.103**
Expectations		
Make at least a 'B' average		0.167**
Highest degree planned		0.068*
Graduate with honors		0.223**
Good social reputation	-0.111*	-0.089**

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Table 3 shows correlation coefficients between variables relating to self-concept, financial aid, socioeconomic status, and expectations for college, and first-semester GPA for African American and White students. Only values that show a significant correlation are included on the table. Some similarities and some differences are evident between the two groups. For African American students, variables that were positively correlated with GPA

included: self-rating of academic ability; self-rating of drive to achieve; and amount of financial aid expected from grants, and from loans. Selecting the university because of a "good social reputation" was inversely related. For White students, variables that were positively correlated with GPA included: self-ratings on academic ability, mathematical ability, writing ability, intellectual self-confidence, and drive to achieve; parental educational level; highest degree planned at any institution; expectations to graduate with honors, and expectations to make at least a 'B' average. The following variables were negatively correlated with GPA: expected financial aid contribution from parents; and selecting the university because it was the parents' wish or because of a good social reputation.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations of Significant Characteristics of African American Students

	Returned		Did not Return		
Characteristics	Means	Standard Deviation	Means	Standard Deviation	
High school average (%)	81.52	4.76	80.40	4.53	*
First-semester GPA	2.72	0.65	2.26	0.67	**
Wanted to live near home	1.86	0.84	1.64	0.87	*
Get job to help pay college expenses	3.08	1.01	3.38	0.99	*
Colleges should prohibit racist/sexist speech	2.92	1.15	3.28	1.03	*

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .001$

In order to validate these results, t-tests were run to compare the differences in the means of all survey and institutional data for the 292 African American students who returned versus the 76 students who did not return. The results validated the correlation analyses that African American students who persisted, had very similar characteristics to those who did not return. Differences in means were only significant for the five variables shown in table 4. For three of these variables students who returned for their sophomore year had higher means than the students who did not return. The variables were: high school grade point average (81.52% vs. 80.40%); first semester college grade point average (2.72 vs. 2.26); and choosing the university in order to live near home (1.86 vs. 1.64). For the other two variables, means were higher for students who did not return: expectation to get a job to pay college expenses; and strong feelings that colleges should prohibit racist and sexist speech.

In addition to these variables, there were slight but not statistically significant differences in the means of some of the remaining variables. Students who were retained seemed to be slightly better prepared academically based on their SAT scores and high school averages. A higher percent expected to graduate with honors, to be elected to an honor society, and to be elected to student office. These students had spent more time studying and being involved with student clubs while in high school. They also put more importance on "being very well off financially" and "becoming an authority" in their field than students who were not retained. Students who were not retained had slightly higher socioeconomic status as evidenced by parental income and educational levels, and higher reliance on parents for financial aid. They had higher expectations regarding the chances of getting a bachelor's degree; making at least a 'B' average; and being satisfied with college. They rated themselves higher on drive to achieve; intellectual self-confidence; academic ability; and leadership ability, and slightly lower on

mathematical ability. Despite the fact that they were from slightly higher socioeconomic status, they had spent more time working for pay.

Independent variables identified through correlation, chi-square, or t-tests, as being significantly associated with retention or grade point averages, were used to develop exploratory classification and prediction models. Logistic regression was identified as the appropriate technique for retention, a dichomotous dependent variable, while multiple regression analysis was considered more appropriate for GPA, a continuous variable.

Logistic Regression. This analysis was used to determine the relationship between a set of predictors and the probability of membership in the "retained ' or "not retained" group. The predictor variables were: SAT scores; high school averages; college grade point average; likelihood of getting a job to pay college expenses; family income; distance from home; and views on prohibiting of racist/sexist speech on campus.

Table 5

Results of Logistic Regression on Retention of African American Students

Variable	B	Standard Error	Wald	p	Odds Ratio
Constant	1.43	3.27	0.19	0.66	
First semester GPA	1.33	0.19	47.72	0.00	3.79
High school average	-0.02	0.04	0.19	0.66	0.98
Job to pay expenses	-0.37	0.20	3.48	0.06	0.69
Live near home	0.43	0.22	4.03	0.04	1.54
Prohibit racist/ sexist speech	-0.35	0.17	4.06	0.04	0.71

Three variables, "distance from home," "SAT scores," and "family income" were deleted from the final analysis. The model that excluded them predicted values better than the model that included them. Results of the logistic regression analysis are shown in table 5. The Wald and p statistics indicate that first semester GPA; wanting to live near home; and agreeing that the college should prohibit racist/sexist speech, contributed significantly to the regression model. GPA accounted for most of the variation, when controlling for the effects of the other variables in the model. The positive coefficient indicates that the odds of being retained increase as the GPA increases. Since the GPA is a continuous variable, ranging from zero to four, one-quarter of the maximum value was used as one unit of change in the independent variable (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 1989). For example, for every point increase in first semester GPA, for example from 2.5 to 3.5, an African American freshman's chance of returning for the sophomore year increases by 3.8 times, based on the odds ratio in table 5.

Multiple Regression. Stepwise regression, with .05 probability of F for a variable to be entered, and .10 probability of F to remove a variable, was used to develop a final regression model for first-semester GPA. The predictor variables were: high school averages; SAT verbal scores; SAT math scores; grants; loans; academic ability; wanted to live near home; hours spent studying or homework; and drive to achieve. The results are shown in table 6. The variables that satisfied the criteria for inclusion in the final model were high school average, SAT verbal score, the number of hours spent studying or doing homework, and self-ratings of drive to achieve. The p values shown in table 6 indicate that each partial coefficient (B) was significant after controlling for effects of other variables. This suggests that each predictor variable independently contributed to first semester GPA, with each coefficient indicating the amount of change that could be expected to occur in GPA for each unit change in the predictor variable.

Table 6

Results of Multiple Linear Regression on First Semester Grade Point Averages (GPA) of African American Students

Variable	B	Standard Error	t	p
Constant	-0.617	0.665	0.928	0.355
High School Average	0.021	0.009	2.365	0.019
SAT Verbal	0.001	0.000	2.541	0.012
Studying or Homework	0.087	0.026	3.410	0.001
Drive to Achieve	0.164	0.052	3.167	0.002

For example, the raw coefficient for high school average (0.021) indicates that in general, if all other variables are held constant, first semester GPA would be expected to increase by 0.21 for each ten-point increase in high school average.

Summary

The results of the quantitative analysis indicated that for African American students at the university, first-semester GPA was the main determinant of first-year retention. In addition, high school average, SAT verbal score, the number of hours spent studying or doing homework, and self-ratings of drive to achieve, were the best predictors of grades in college. The results also indicated that there were fewer quantitative differences among high- and low-performing African American students than among White students. This lends support to previous research (e.g. Prillerman, Myers, & Smedley, 1989) suggesting that there are other factors that affect performance of African American students on predominantly White campuses, than have no effect on White students. Some of the possible factors were explored in the qualitative analysis.

Results of the Qualitative Data Analysis

High School Experiences

Most students indicated that their good high school experiences were critical to their continuing success at the college level. They identified the following factors as helping to prepare them for college: rigorous curriculum; high expectations and support from teachers; and involvement in leadership and other activities. Students who had attended predominantly white high schools, felt an additional responsibility to stand out. One student said: " I attended a Catholic high school. There were very few Black students there. I made sure to stand out at everything." Most of the students who had attended public schools indicated that these were specialized high schools requiring an entrance examination for admission. These schools are atypical of high schools in the city and reflect the role of the parents in ensuring that their children had access to good high schools even if these schools were not in their communities.

Many of the students had Caribbean roots, and some had attended all or part of their high school in the Caribbean. They felt that the academic level was much higher in the Caribbean than in the United States. One student who migrated from Trinidad described his experience:

> I started my high school life in Trinidad. I had three teachers who pushed me constantly. When they found out that I was migrating to the United States with my mother, they sat me down and lectured me about the need to excel. The level of work in Trinidad was far in advance of that in the United States. I came here for my last year of high school. I went to an all-Black private school in New Jersey. I breezed through school and was the valedictorian

Students who had attended high schools in Jamaica, Barbados, Haiti, and other Caribbean countries had similar comments. Students indicated that regardless of the type of high school they attended, few, if any of the teachers were African American. Students gravitated to the few who existed. A recent female graduate who had attended a predominantly Black high school recalled:

> I had one male Black teacher who contributed a great deal to my success. I did not grow up with my father and was very impressed with a positive Black male image. He always told us that it was hard enough growing up as a minority without an education, and that we needed to make ourselves twice as good. He would not accept a 'B' and encouraged us to excel.

Some students indicated that they had received support from White teachers, coaches, or peers, in high school. One student indicated that "I did not have any Black teachers. However, I had a Greek teacher who was very motivational and encouraged me to excel." For those who were involved in sports, coaches generally served as mentors, providing inspiration and support to them. Students were looking for a challenge and appreciated teachers who had high expectations for them. One student who attended a predominantly White Catholic high school pointed out that, "We were always being challenged academically to do our best. This had nothing to do with race. Teachers instilled involvement, family, and community. College was expected of all of us."

Importance of the Family

Students overwhelmingly credited family members, particularly mothers, with playing a very important role in their success at the university. Students seemed to draw strength and inspiration from their parents. For second-generation college students, attending college was taken for granted. One student said, "My parents are both college graduates. My three older sisters also have degrees. College was not a choice." Another student indicated that, "My parents have contributed to most of my success in college, because they are both college graduates. They have set the example for me by showing me that I can succeed as well."

Most students felt that they had to succeed for their parents' sake, to "make something of themselves," to achieve more educationally than their parent(s) had achieved. Many of the students understood and appreciated the financial struggles that their parents were making on

their behalf. Some students grew up without any father figures. They have tremendous love and respect for their mothers who they had watched work to support their household, and in many cases, at the same attend college to obtain a better education and a better life. A sample of typical comments are shared in the following quotes:

> Female senior: My Mom is definitely the most important and most positive influence in my college life. I did not live with my father. I was a latchkey kid. My mom made certain to check on my homework every day. She attended every parent orientation and PTA (Parents' Teachers Association) meeting. She was always pushing me to excel. She is working two jobs to help to pay my tuition. She did not attend college. I have to do well for her.
>
> Male student: I was surrounded by women while I was growing up. I had no father figure in my life. Whatever I am, whatever I will become, I owe it to my mom. She always told me that I have to be better than her. She was very strict with me. Now, I am thankful for all the discipline.
>
> Female student: Most of the students I know who strive to succeed are the first one in their family to graduate from college. They do not want to fail. Many like me are also from single-parent families. The ones who are not doing well are not too concerned about school, and feel that their parents can afford it. People who are pushed, do well. We try to do well for our parents. My mom graduated from high school. She works two jobs to send me to college. I don't want to waste her money.
>
> Recent Graduate: I was raised with my mother and grandmother. Both always pushed 'books'. My mother emigrated from Jamaica. She worked full-time and attended this university at the same time. For a long time her life was work- school – home – sleep. I would always see her studying late at night. She graduated from the Business School here. Despite her busy schedule she found time to provide me with cultural enrichment through plays, museums, and other activities. I understood from her that we can do whatever we set out to do.

On-Campus Support

Successful African American students credited the support that they received on-campus from various individuals with helping them to succeed at the University. These individuals included: African American administrators and faculty; a few nurturing and caring White faculty and administrators; and other successful African American students. Students expressed

appreciation for teachers of all ethnic groups who have high expectations for them and challenge them to do their best.

African American Faculty and Administrators

Students were disappointed, but not unduly surprised, at the low percentage of African American administrators and faculty at the university. For many, this was a continuation of their high school experiences. Students were appreciative of the fact that African American administrators and faculty fostered their achievement by providing a positive environment for them at the university and pushing them to excel. Many agreed with one student's comment that: "The majority of administrators who push us to excel are African American. " These individuals serve as role models, mentors, friends, facilitators, and in some cases, surrogate fathers. Students feel comfortable interacting with them and sought them out for advice, support, and assistance, often outside the confines of their official campus roles. Students felt comfortable interacting with these individuals and sought them out for advice, support, and assistance, often outside the confines of their official campus roles. These added service responsibilities for the few African American administrators and faculty, are very typical at predominantly White institutions (Washington & Harvey, 1989). The Associate Vice President for Advising and Retention, Director of New Student Orientation, and the Director of the Gospel Choir received special mention from many of the students who were interviewed. A recent graduate related how the Associate Vice President for Advising and Retention literally saved him from becoming a failure:

> I met my mentor by accident. He was director of HEOP (Higher Educational Opportunities Program). One of my friends was in HEOP and knew that I was having problems. He took me to see his counselor, and he became my mentor. Deep down in my heart I wanted to succeed but I needed someone to help me cross that bridge. As an immigrant from Africa, my mother could not understand my experience at school - that

> of a young Black male going to a predominantly White institution. That aspect became difficult for me because it was not a part of her experience. I went to the Counseling Center, but found it very impersonal. I didn't want someone to feel sorry for me. I needed someone to help me focus.
>
> I was kicked out of one college of the university for poor academic performance. I tried to apply to another unit. My mentor tried to help me to apply. This built trust between us because I realized that he really cared about me. The transfer didn't work out, but I knew he had my interest at heart. I had to transfer to a community college to get my grades up. During that time I still came on campus to see my mentor. That was very important to me. When I returned, I got a 3.5 GPA. I just needed to refocus. Having someone to guide me helped me a lot.

An African American history professor was singled out as being very inspirational. Students indicated that he not only attended and supported many of their cultural activities, but also spent a great deal of time sitting and reading in the student center, accessible to the students. A few African American administrators and faculty served as role models, mentors, friends, facilitators, and in some cases as "surrogate fathers." They were described as "always being there for us;" "instrumental in our growth;" and "always pushing us to succeed." And, as one student pointed out, "Everyone can be a mentor. Some of our best boosters are the African American maintenance men and security guards. They are happy and proud of what they are doing, but they encourage us to make something better of ourselves."

White Faculty and Administrators

Some students had developed very positive relationships with White faculty members. In some cases, this had occurred after initial negative experiences due to cultural and other misunderstandings. One student described his experience with a White social sciences professor whom he had come to respect and admire:

> At first I hated her and withdrew from all her classes, because I felt that she did not like me. However, I signed up for an evening class, and who was teaching this course? This same teacher! She took the time to resolve issues with me and has had a very positive influence on me. She has really helped me, not only with my classes, but also with references and recommendations. It has been a very positive experience, after an initial negative one.

Involvement in Ethnic / Cultural Organizations

Students attributed part of their success and comfort level on campus with their active participation in a variety of campus ethnic / cultural and co-curricular organizations. As one student pointed out, "Students who are involved stay together, and are successful interacting with others."

A recent graduate attributed part of his successful college experience to his involvement in an African American fraternity:

> One thing that really helped was that I was in an organization, and was able to establish personal friendships. My friend who introduced me to my mentor also introduced me to the organization, Phi Beta Sigma. Involvement in the organization really helped me. You need a good grade to get in, but then you had to take on responsibility. In a fraternity you really became close.

A senior shared similar experiences:

> All of my activities and involvement have helped to keep me on a successful track. These include Alpha Peer Mentoring, which required a minimum GPA to get in. I believe involvement has been one of the keys to my success. . . As a result of my involvement, I have learned a lot and am also a lot more organized. I have learned how to balance academics, work, and organizational activities.

Campus Climate

African American students all had to deal with being in the minority in their classes, and on campus. Successful students had adapted to the academic climate on the predominantly White campus. Although they were initially intimidated, successful students had accepted being a minority in class as a challenge, and used this to push themselves more. Many seemed to feel that

they had a responsibility to dispel stereotypes about low performing African Americans by proving to others that they could excel. This theme of needing to "stand out" recurred throughout all the interviewing sessions. Some students felt that teachers expected them to represent all Black people, an additional pressure with which White students never had to contend. A sophomore discussed his observations and adjustment to being in the minority in class:

> I am generally called on as the representative of Black people in class. I make a conscious effort to excel. Other Black students did not participate to the same extent initially. Now there is more participation from the other Black students. I was considered a nerd in high school. I tried to be "cool" my first week here. However, as soon as I realized that other students were prepared, it got me motivated.

Although the university's mission statement, and more recently, its vision statement reflected an interest and concern for a culturally diverse university environment, most students interviewed felt that the current level of diversity was primarily due to the university's metropolitan location, rather than to any direct strategies of the administration. Some students felt that although the university often used statistics and success stories on diversity in discussing its mission and promoting the university to the public and prospective students, it was not doing enough to promote diversity and appreciation of different cultures on campus. For example, although there were many cultural and ethnic events on campus, these were generally sponsored and attended by individual organizations and their members. Administrators and faculty were rarely in attendance, nor did they take the lead in sponsoring seminars or other programs focusing on diversity. Students felt that the few cultural events that were not totally sponsored by student groups, were generally by invitation only and often only included faculty, administrators and student leaders. Students also expressed a need for expansion of curriculum offerings and classroom discussions on multicultural subjects, particularly since most cross-cultural interaction occurs in the classroom.

Summary

Analysis of quantitative data indicated that African American students who persisted into their sophomore year were similar to those who did not return on most characteristics. For example, both groups of students had the same reasons for choosing the reason, had similar expectations for college and rated themselves the same in intellectual self-confidence, social self-confidence, leadership ability, and writing ability. Students who returned had slightly higher SAT scores than those who did not return. Students who did not return had slightly higher levels of parental income and education. These differences were not statistically significant. When variables were analyzed through correlation and a logistic regression model, the primary predictor of retention was first-semester grade point average. Correlation and multiple regression analyses indicated that high school averages, SAT mathematics scores, distance from home, planned participation in various financial aid programs, and drive to achieve, were significant predictors of academic performance, as measured by first year grade point averages. For White students, socioeconomic background, self-ratings on academic ability, mathematical ability, and intellectual confidence, were also significant predictors. In other words, students who were including expected proceeds from a job in their financial aid, and those who were more sensitive to any overt expressions of sexism or racism, were more likely to leave the university after the first year.

Regardless of economic status or parental education, students overwhelmingly credited their parents, and in particular their mothers, with contributing most to their successful college experiences. Many felt they had to succeed for their parents' sake. Many of the participants identified success as not only academic excellence, but also a love of learning, good work ethic,

striving for excellence in every endeavor, being involved, and giving something back to the community.

Despite being in the minority on campus, students interviewed felt that the availability of a variety of multicultural organizations and extra-curricular activities provided a level of comfort for African American students. Students had been involved in many activities in high school, and continued their involvement in college. Most students were actively involved in multiple organizations. Most students interviewed accepted the fact that they were in the minority on campus, but also felt the necessity of "standing out" in classes.

The majority of the students who were interviewed indicated that the transition from high school to college was much easier than they had been led to believe. The more successful students felt that their high schools had prepared them well academically and socially for college. Many felt that the university was not very different from high school.

The results of the quantitative analysis also indicated that first semester grade point average was the most important determinant of retention among both African American and White students at the University. Pre-college academic characteristics and self-concept, were also significantly correlated with retention for White students, but not for African American students. The results also showed that pre-college academic characteristics were predictors of college grades for both African American and White students. There were differences in other predictors. For White students, academic expectations; parental educational level; and academic self-concept variables including academic ability, mathematical ability, writing ability, intellectual self-confidence, and drive to achieve, were also predictors. For African American students, the other predictors were self-ratings of academic ability and drive to achieve, and grants and loans.

Implications

The results suggest that there are more distinct quantifiable differences between White students who persist, and those who do not, than between African American students who persist, and those who do not. This lends support to previous research findings that institutional climate and other non-cognitive factors are more important determinants of success for African American students than for White students (e.g. Nettles, 1988; Prillerman, Myers, & Smedley, 1989). Results of the interviews with successful African American students in this study indicated that at the university studied, the availability of ethnic and cultural organizations, and the "critical mass" of African American students helped to reduce the isolation and alienation, generally found on predominantly White campuses. In addition to the students' high self-concept and their own need to succeed, students felt an added responsibility to succeed for their parents' sake. As students in the minority on campus and in their classes, these African American students felt a need to stand out in class. Successful students accepted their minority status as a challenge, not as an impediment. In addition to their academic ability, these students have used a variety of coping strategies to help to be successful at this predominantly White institution. These strategies include: high self-concept; high aspirations; parental support and expectations; on-campus support primarily from the few African American administrators and faculty, and other successful African American students; and involvement in cultural and ethnic organizations. Although there is a need to increase the representation of African American faculty, administrators, and staff, sensitive and caring White faculty can also play a significant role in creating a nurturing environment for African American students.

The results of this study point to strategies that could be developed to support less successful students for whom the transition to college may be more difficult than for the students

interviewed. The results should be of value to institutional researchers, educators, and others who are seeking to understand the impact of diversity on student outcomes, and seeking to identify institutional and other factors that contribute to successful outcomes for some African American students. The results should also help to facilitate increased participation and achievement of African American students at these institutions, and help to identify institutional practices that facilitate or impede progress of these students.

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