

Graduation Rates at Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A Review of the Literature

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ABSTRACT

Extensive research has explored the graduation and retention rates of African American students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The performance of African American students in college and their performance at HBCUs were explored in the literature. Apparently, scholars have not been willing to address the concerns of the poor graduation rates of African Americans in the higher education system, especially at HBCUs. This article reviews the literature on these topics and discusses the necessity to address this issue.

Introduction

The research on graduation and retention rates of African American students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) is extensive, as is the research on the poor academic performance of African American students. Several concerns, however, can be found in the proliferation of research conducted on these topics. These include, but are not limited to: 1) the increased number of African-Americans enrolling into institutions of higher education

upon graduation from high school (NCAA, 1998; NCES, 2006), 2) the appallingly low rate of college graduation rate for black students nationwide (Cross & Slater, 2001; Alon & Tienda, 2005; JBHE, 2001), and 3) the significance of HBCUs in the educational pursuits of African-American students (Tobolowsky et al., 2005; JBHE, 1999; JBHE, 2001; JBHE, 2002; Rowley, 2000; Cross, 1993). There is limited empirical research available on psychosocial variables that may be contributing to the demise of the Black college student's performance in college.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to examine the graduation and retention rates of African American students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. This article reviews related literature and the significance of the need to focus on graduation and retention rates impacting African American at HBCUs.

Seven Factors Impacting Black Student Graduation Rates

JBHE (2002) identified seven factors that are believed to be possible explanations for the differences in Black student graduation rates. The seven factors are delayed enrollment, part-time enrollment status, self-dependent for college financing, having children or other dependents, being a single parent, lacking a high school diploma, and being employed full-time while attending college. These proposed variables continue to elucidate factors contributing to an external locus of control regarding poor performance of African Americans at the college level. A review of the graduation rates literature revealed inconsistencies with regard to internal factors contributing to these poor graduation rates. The literature was sparse regarding psychosocial variables that may be causal agents regarding the 22 percentage point discrepancy between graduation rates of African Americans and white college students (Cross & Slater, 2001).

The "Mismatch Hypothesis"

Research that evaluated the contributions of HBCUs in the performance of Black college students incorporated an alternative approach. Alon & Tienda (2005) examined the relationship between the graduation rates of Black students attending HBCUs and those students attending selective post-secondary institutions. The variable assessed was referred to as the "Mismatch Hypothesis." This hypothesis proposed that low graduation rates among Black students may be contributed to their need to attend colleges and universities where their academic credentials are better matched to the institutional average. Student school choice was promoted as a significant

risk factor for college failure by Black students (Tobolowsky et al., 2005; JBHE, 2002; JBHE, 2001; Rowley, 2000; Cross 1993). Stewart reports that HBCUs “offer students a solid education in a nurturing environment- one in which their intellectual ability is not automatically questioned and their presence on campus is not a part of an acrimonious debate” (Stewart, 1997, p.A24).

Lack of Empirical Literature

Notably absent from the empirical literature on graduation rates of African-Americans is research on psychosocial variables. A search utilizing the terms “psychosocial variables regarding Black college students” yielded approximately two results. The examination of the disproportionate number of Black college dropouts is much more prolific than discussions regarding the amelioration of this problem.

HBCUs Graduation Rate Tends to be Low

The graduation rate of African-American students at the nation’s HBCUs tends to be much lower than the graduation rate for black students at the nation’s highest-ranked institutions (Carey, 2004; Carey, 2005; JBHE, 2002). JBHE reports that at 23 HBCUs more than two thirds of all entering black students did not go on to earn a diploma. The lowest graduation rate in 1999 was at TSU in Houston where only one of every 10 entering freshmen went on to earn a bachelor’s degree at that institution (JBHE, 2001/2002). It was previously proposed that Black students were not capable of achieving academic success at selective institutions. Malveaux noted that low graduation rates for African-Americans are resulting from a lack of information for those who graduate from high school and perceived hostile environments on some college campuses (Malveaux, 2005).

Other research proposes that graduation for African-Americans tends to be higher at the more selective institutions (JBHE, 2001; JBHE, 2002; Alon & Tienda, 2005). The NCES reports that the 7.2% of African American students that attend Harvard University are graduating at a rate of 97.3%. Although this rate is slightly below the overall average of 97.6% for the college, it slightly exceeds the 96.9% graduation rate of Whites (The Education Trust, 2006).

National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: Important Findings

What types of students are attending college? The U.S. Department of Education (USDE) provides a statistical profile of all undergraduate students nationwide. The 1999-2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study from which this information was derived claimed to

present a statistically accurate portrait of all 16.5 million students enrolled in postsecondary education at that time (USDE, 2001). These statistics are useful in providing a profile of the African American college student nationwide (JBHE, 2002; Cross & Slater, 2000; Carey, 2004; Johnson, 1997; Thornton, 2004; JBHE, 2001; Rowley, 2000). Some of the most important findings:

- Nearly 31 percent of all African American undergraduate students are above the age of 30. Thirteen percent are above the age of 40. There were 26 percent white undergraduates reportedly above the age of 30.
- Only 7 percent of black undergraduates reported receiving mostly A grades in college. More than 16 percent of white undergraduates claim to be A students. Nearly one half of all black undergraduates reported receiving mostly Cs and Ds compared to 30 percent of white undergraduates.
- Nearly 18 percent of African-American college students reported that they were married. Nearly 23 percent of white college students were married.
- 25 percent of all African-American college students have two or more dependents compared to 14 percent of white college students.
- More than 27 percent of all African-American college students reported that they came from families with incomes below \$20,000. Only 9.7 percent of white college students came from families with incomes of less than \$20,000. More than 58 percent of African-American college students had family income below \$40,000 compared to 28.5 percent of white college students.
- 43 percent of white college students have a least one parent who had obtained at least a bachelor's degree. Only 27 percent of African-American college students have a parent who graduated from college.
- Nearly 46 percent of all African-American undergraduate students reported taking remedial courses in college. Only 32 percent of white students took remedial courses.

Research Question

As a result of the identified gap in the literature, this paper addresses the following research question: Are there identifiable predictors present among African-American college students attending HBCUs that contribute to their poor graduation rates?

Research Method

A review of the literature was conducted utilizing keywords such as "African-American college students", "Black college students", "profiles of college students", "graduation rates of Black college students", and "psychosocial factors associated with Black college students".

Databases utilized included ProQuest Direct, JSTOR, ERIC, and EBSCO Host. The search resulted in numerous refereed articles, on-line resources, and books. As sources were reviewed, additional citations were found and explored for appropriateness. A table was created to summarize the salient themes relevant to this research.

Review of Literature

Researchers, educators, and African American families are concerned about the graduation rates for black students. There are quite obviously numerous reasons that students elect to attend institutions of higher education but fail to be successful. Some potential reasons include internal drives and motivation, financial status, academic preparation, and family support. Several rationales for the problems regarding the performance of Black college students can be found in the literature. Carey noted that “America’s colleges and universities have a serious and deep-rooted problem: far too many students who enter our higher education system fail to get a degree” (Carey, 2004, p.1). National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data reveals that nationally only 60 percent of college students are obtaining their diplomas, but even more troubling is that a mere 38 percent of African Americans are graduating from college (NCES, 2006). This figure indicates that over half a million collegians every year, disproportionately comprised of minority students are not receiving the credentials, skills, and knowledge necessary to be competitive in today’s high-skilled job market (Carey, 2004; JBHE, 2001; JBHE, 2002).

Table1. *Summary of Key Concepts from Literature Review*

Subsection	Key Concepts
Academic Preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor total high school graduation rates; national graduation rate is 68-71%; Black graduation rate is 50% • Inferior K-12 preparation for minorities • Minority students receive sub-par educational opportunities in high school; under-resourced, under-staffed, low expectations.
Economic Preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of adequate financial aid available • High student loan debt • Rising costs of higher education: tuition, books, and travel • Low financial support from their families • Increased working students
HBCUs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Success at nurturing environments • Orientation and retention programs for minorities at predominantly white campuses • Need for supportive environments • Degree of fit at the college; mismatch hypothesis

- Psychosocial variables
- High stress levels for entering college freshmen
 - Low belief about the value of college education
 - Poor self-concept as it relates to college competitiveness
 - Limited usage of available mental health services

Academic Preparedness

Academic preparedness, as defined in this review, represents the educational ability demonstrated by graduating grade point average, SAT or ACT scores, providing an estimate of the likelihood of the entrant's ability to be successful in college upon matriculation from high school. Statistics from the National Education Association (NEA) report that the national high school graduation rate is between 68-71 percent. The aggregated reports demonstrate that the graduation rate for Black students is 56 percent compared to the 75 percent graduation rate for Whites (NEA, 2004). A common criticism on college campuses is the lack of academic preparedness of college entrants as they matriculate from high school (Orfield et al, 2004; JBHE, 2002; Rowley, 2000; Malveaux, 2005).

Carey (2004) notes that some of the problem with low graduation rates results from lack of preparedness as students move from K-12 schools. Low income and minority student are far more likely to be educated in under-resourced, under-staffed schools that expect far too little of their students and get little in return (Carey, 2004; Alon & Tienda, 2005; Chipungu et al, 2000). School districts should be required to provide schools with the resources and academic programs necessary to aid with reducing the dropout rates and to support students as they attempt to obtain their high school diplomas. Orfield et al. (2004) explained that for graduation rate accountability to be of any significant value, school systems and state governments must report accurate graduation rate statistics as required in *No Child Left Behind* and then seriously enforce the graduation rate requirements.

There are numerous studies expressing concerns regarding the need for an improved K-12 educational system, especially as it relates to minorities and low-income students (JBHE, 2001; JBHE, 2002; Carey, 2004; Orfield et al., 2004). According to JBHE (2002), this is a significant predictor regarding college graduation. The NEA expresses awareness of problems with K-12, but the "Closing the Gaps" initiative has done little to ameliorate the educational problems in Texas. According to Carey (2005), successful undergraduates need the kind of strong preparation in K-12 education that urban, low-income, minority students fail to receive. JBHE (2002) disclosed that nearly 46 percent of all African-American undergraduate students reported taking remedial courses while in college.

Economic Preparedness

The primary definition of economic preparedness is the ability of a student to afford to attend college. The cost of college includes tuition, room and board, books, and travel. According to Carey (2004), the most important factor in achieving a high black student graduation rate is the availability of financial aid. Cross & Slater (2001) and JBHE (2002) noted that the most important variable for Black students remaining in college is financial support, summed up as having money. JBHE (2001) reported that a study by Nellie Mae revealed that 69 percent of African Americans who enrolled in college but did not finish expressed having left college because of high student loan debt as opposed to 43 percent of white students who cited the same reason.

Carey further explains that as these students abandon the higher education system unsuccessfully, they are now “burdened with large student loans that must be repaid without the benefit of the wages that having earned the college degree would have afforded these students” (Carey, 2004, p. 5). Of note is the disproportional rate of African Americans leaving the educational system in just such a predicament. The debt mounts due to the lack of financial support available from the families of these students. JBHE (2002) reported that 62.4 percent of all black students currently in college have no financial support from their families. As students accrue greater financial liabilities they are forced to seek financial support. The lack of outside financial support increases the need these students to concentrate on their work rather than on their studies (JBHE, 2002; Johnson, 1997). Many of the nation’s colleges and universities with high black graduation rates are among the schools with the highest endowments (JBHE, 2001).

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

The significance of HBCUs in the educational experience of African American students has been well documented. In spite of their apparent lack of resources and competitive stature among selective colleges, HBCUs continue to provide a supportive social environment conducive to personal and academic development (Tobolowsky et al, 2005; JBHE, 1999, JBHE, 2001; JBHE, 2002; Rowley, 2000; Cross, 1993). Stewart reports that HBCUs “offer students a solid education in a nurturing environment—one in which their intellectual ability is not automatically questioned and their presence on campus is not part of an acrimonious debate” (Stewart, 1997, p. A24).

Colleges and universities that have been identified as having high black student graduation rates provide orientation and retention programs to assist students with transitions to the campus (Cross & Slater, 2001). Mentoring programs for black students are sometimes adopted on predominantly white campuses to provide transitioning students with optimal resources for success.

Alon & Tienda (2005) explored the “mismatch” hypothesis promoted by opponents of affirmative action, which predicts lower graduation rates for minority students attending selective institutions. The idea is that students would do better to attend colleges and universities

where their academic credentials are better matched to the institutional average. The literature tends to be contrary to this proposal. JBHE (1993) reported that on a nationwide basis, the black students that are attending the most prestigious colleges and universities are ambitious, academically astute, and are aware of the high value placed on the diplomas granted by these institutions. Consequently, once admitted, these students diligently pursue the prestigious diplomas until it is in hand. There was not enough evidence available to support the “mismatch” hypothesis. The belief is that the small percentage of black students that are unable to maintain the status necessary at the prestigious institutions are always able to opt out and transfer to a less competitive college or university at a later date (JBHE, 1993).

Psychosocial Variables

Studies on the social factors affecting black students may provide knowledge to enhance students’ development and to improve their intellectual development (Fries-Britt, 2000; Henderson et al, 2007). Proper curriculum instruction that would assist in shaping learning outcomes for students means understanding the ways in which students are shaped by their environment. Transitioning to college from high school can be anxiety provoking. Separation from familiar environments, primary support network, and areas of expertise can create a significant disruption in the lives of new college students (Malveaux, 1998). External stressors can be challenging for students as they attempt to navigate the new education process away from their support network (Malveaux, 2005; Constantine et al, 2003; Cokley, 2000; Carey, 2005). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) state that “what happens to students after they arrive on campus has a greater influence on academic and social self-concepts than does the kind of institution students attend” (p.184).

Although the research on the value orientation of black college students began during the 1960s, Thornton (1994) explained the importance of value awareness of black college students following their college graduation. The study demonstrated that black college students prefer religion and family to identity and career pursuits. Sadly, black students may be losing their drive to succeed in college. In general, students who believe that education is important for their later success are more engaged in school and receive better grades (Rowley, 2000).

Ford (1996) points out that poor academic achievement among African-American students often results in African-American students being characterized as having a poor academic self-concept. According to Cokely (2000), academic self-concept can be considered as how a student views their academic ability compared with other students. Duncan (2005) explained that interventions aimed at ameliorating psychosocial distresses would be beneficial in assisting African American college students to succeed academically.

Concluding Remarks

This article has presented the salient literature relevant to graduation rates of Black students at HBCUs in relation to additional variables that may be beneficial in identifying interventions for these poor rates. There are some gaps in the literature with regard to the amelioration of the well-stated problem of high dropout rates among black students at HBCUs. Empirical research is needed that examines the process of assisting students prior to point of no return. Several key implications include: 1) new knowledge about assessment measures that will identify the risk factors of entering students, 2) thoughtful creation, design, and evaluation of service delivery programs in areas of measured weakness for incoming students, 3) early and proper placement of students into the academic, social, and psychosocial assistance programs that will aid in the retention of each incoming student at the HBCU, 4) administrative support and promotion of programs that address the identified limitations and weaknesses of at-risk students, 5) ultimately encapsulation of each student ensuring successful outcomes for each entrant, and 6) successful completion of this research may provide a national model that can demonstrate the value of addressing the needs of students prior to matriculation to the campus.

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