

## Alumni Perceptions of the Educational Benefits of Their Graduate Degrees from a PBI

Rasha Elhage, Chicago State University, relhage@csu.edu

Olanipekun Laosebikan, Chicago State University

Kimberly Black-Parker, Chicago State University

**Abstract.** Much of the research on the benefits of graduate education for minority students has focused on Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Little has been done on Predominantly Black Institutions. This case study attempts to shed light on alumni perceptions of the benefits of their graduate education at a Predominantly Black Institution (PBI), Chicago State University. The researchers surveyed the accessible population of Chicago State University alumni who completed requirements for their master's and doctoral degrees between the academic years 2008 and 2018. Results indicate that perceived benefits fell into two categories: 1) personal benefits that accrued to the graduate and 2) enabling benefits that encouraged the completion of graduate study. Personal benefits included personal fulfillment, an enhanced knowledge of a profession or discipline, and advancement in a career including promotions and salary raises, while some enabling benefits included perceived program quality, the financial accessibility of graduate study at a PBI, and a supportive learning environment. Findings from this study of alumni can lend insights to effective approaches to teaching graduate students from diverse backgrounds.

**Keywords:** Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs); Minority Serving Institutions; African American graduate students; graduate education; educational benefits

### Introduction/Rationale

Graduate education in the United States in recent years has reached never before seen heights. Enrollments in master's, doctoral, and professional degrees have risen dramatically among all racial and ethnic groups including African American students. From 2000 to 2016, African American enrollment in graduate school grew by more than 100% from 181,000 to 362,000 (de Brey et al., 2019, p. 130). Minority serving institutions (MSIs), including Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs), have increasingly taken on larger roles in providing graduate education to students. PBIs in particular represent a growing share of the minority student, and more specifically African American student, enrollment in higher education. PBIs currently make up 3% of all postsecondary institutions yet enroll 9% of all African American college students in higher education (Jones, 2019). Though they have a significant impact in producing successful outcomes for minority students, PBIs have yet to receive much scholarly attention. They are a particularly significant locus of study in understanding educational access among African Americans because of their increasingly urban locations and the relative size of these urban populations (Parker et al., 2019).

PBIs were first recognized by the U.S. Congress with the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008. By definition, PBIs must serve a student body that is 50% low income or first generation and 40% African American and have an average educational and general expenditure that is low relative to those of institutions of higher education that offer similar instruction. (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2014). PBIs have a specific and unique focus on individuals of African descent who experience poverty, are the first in their families to attend college and attend under-resourced institutions.

The vast majority of the 156 PBIs in the United States are two-year colleges located in the South, Midwest, and East. Chicago State University (CSU), the focus of this study, is one of the relatively few that offer graduate level education. Though increasing in number, PBI graduate programs are relatively new. Currently, only five PBIs offer graduate and professional level programs. The growth of graduate education at these institutions was strongly influenced by the passage of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) in 2008, which included a provision for the development of master's degree programs at PBIs. The HEOA created the PBI Master's program grant which allowed PBIs to increase support for or establish new programs at the master's level for African American students in some of the following fields: mathematics, information technology, physical or natural sciences, computer science, and other related scientific fields (Hegji, 2017).

While sharing some similarities with other MSIs, but in particular HBCUs, PBIs have significant differences in history, mission, scope, location, and focus which make a study of graduate outcomes at these institutions a significant contribution to the scholarly literature. An understanding of what African Americans desire and value from their graduate education beyond the obvious goal of attaining a credential is instrumental for effective teaching and learning that responds to their needs. Also, a better understanding of key factors in graduate education for institutions serving student populations that are majority first-generation, low-income, and African American is needed to improve educational access and social and economic mobility.

### **Literature Review**

Much of the research on the benefits of higher education for higher education graduates has focused on undergraduate education. Here, the greater share of attention has been on the economic and non-economic or social benefits of higher education to the individual. Individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher are more likely to achieve a host of positive economic outcomes: greater salaries, greater lifetime earnings, employment, job safety, and successful promotions within their careers (Ma et al., 2016; Trostel, 2015). Socially, in comparison to their non-college peers, college graduates have longer life expectancies, are more likely to be married, be in better health, report higher rates of happiness, and are less likely to be jailed or incarcerated (Ma et al., 2016). Research suggests, however, that these benefits vary in significance to groups across racial/ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic status (SES) lines.

Challenging conventional thinking, Brand and Xie's (2010) study highlights that college education and the benefits thought to accrue with it are not driven by positive selection, where "individuals who are most likely to select into college also benefit most from college" (p. 273). Their findings instead show negative selection: those who are least likely to attend college benefit the most from it. As a disadvantaged group in college enrollment, women benefited more from college education than men. Similarly, Perna (2005) found that degree attainment for women, individuals from low SES backgrounds, and Blacks and Hispanics resulted in greater economic and non-economic payoffs. Women with degrees were more likely to have higher incomes, health insurance, and a lower likelihood of being on public assistance rolls. In a non-economic context, they were more likely to not smoke and to vote regularly. Similar results were found when race/ethnicity were taken into account. Blacks with some postsecondary education were more likely to receive a greater benefit in health insurance coverage, and perceived employment benefits. According to Perna (2005), differences in college enrollment have more to do with the perception of difference rather than the reality. A lack of knowledge or inaccurate knowledge on the part of individuals from low-income backgrounds, Blacks, and Hispanics are thought to lead to their underestimation of the benefits of college education. The implications of these findings are considerable. One clear need is for greater institutional level information on the benefits to degree attainment by race, gender, and SES. Research on MSIs is proving to be beneficial in addressing this concern.

Scholarly attention is growing around MSIs and their impact on student learning. Research highlights the nurturing environments of MSIs, and HBCUs in particular, as significant in increasing levels of student learning and engagement. Studies show that many MSIs provide black students with a welcoming environment inclusive of racial and cultural diversity, greater levels of student engagement both in and out of the classroom, and impactful faculty interactions (Boland et al., 2019; Espinosa et al., 2017; Flores & Park, 2013; Gasman et al., 2017). The significance of a positive campus climate to student retention and overall success cannot be overstated. Galotti et al.'s (2016) study of student perceptions of the academic climate of liberal arts institutions they attend found a strong positive correlation with student retention. Students who are comfortable in their institutions are likely to have the perception that "they can speak freely, approach instructors, and feel included as part of a learning community" (p. 42).

Campus environment and climate have proven to be significant in predicting student engagement for Black students specifically. As Jett (2011) identified, minority students are more likely to persist and report greater learning outcomes when engaged. Nelson Laird et al. (2007) found that high achieving Black students have greater levels of engagement on campus in comparison to their white peers at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI). However, this often does not translate into increased learning outcomes at PWIs due to feelings of alienation and isolation (Shappie & Debb, 2017). Many Black students at HBCUs find their academic environment to be just as rigorous as at a PWI (Seifert et al., 2006) and yet are able to excel as a result of the positive racial environments and protective settings that HBCUs offer (Shappie & Debb, 2017). These supports include positive and

meaningful relationships with peers and faculty. Research conducted by Seifert, Drummond, and Pascarella (2006) indicates that students at HBCUs interact with peers both in and out of the classrooms more often than counterparts at both research and regional institutions. Due to the historical nature of their mission, faculty at HBCUs have shown a greater propensity for developing culturally affirming pedagogical practices that validate the racial and ethnic identities of students who attend these institutions (Williams et al., 2021). Less clear are the practices of faculty at other MSIs including PBIs and HSIs who lack institutional missions and/or historical rationales for serving minority students (Hubbard & Stage, 2009).

Boland's (2018) content analysis of MSIs' Title III and V programs based on project abstracts indicates that one of the most espoused outcomes of MSIs is completion (graduation). MSIs, according to the American Council on Education (Espinosa et al., 2017), matriculate students at higher rates than the Federal graduation rate. Using data from a 2007 cohort of the National Student Clearinghouse, researchers found that up to 66% of full-time HBCU students, 52% of PBI students, and 40% of Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) students graduated, all of which are well above the federal graduation rate of 34%. Additionally, MSIs are believed to affirm the values and backgrounds of their students. They foster community and provide conducive environments for the success of their students, including financial access, faculty and peer mentoring, and enrichment programs (Conrad & Gasman, 2015).

There is compelling evidence at the undergraduate level that attending a MSI has positive economic benefits related to occupational status as well as income mobility. Strayhorn (2016) found that HBCU graduates, as compared to their non-HBCU peers, occupied higher status jobs, earned comparable salaries, and reported very little difference in job satisfaction. Espinosa et al. (2018) report found that income-mobility rates for graduates from MSIs were two to three times higher than for those from non-minority serving institutions. The report studied over half of the 700 MSIs in the U.S. More than 20% of the students sampled from these institutions were from families in the lowest income quartile. In addition, about 50% of the students in this sample were first generation college students. The average rate of mobility for students from all U.S. higher education institutions was 1.9%, but most MSIs exceed this statistic. Among MSIs, Hispanic Serving Institutions had the highest rate of income mobility at 4.3%; PBIs had the second highest rate of mobility at 3.5% followed by Asian-American and Native American/Pacific-Islander serving institutions at 3.3% and HBCUs at 2.8%. The return on investment or ROI for MSIs is higher than for non-MSIs. MSI students were found to have higher earnings when compared to their non-MSI peers (Boland et al., 2019). This finding held true 10 years beyond graduation and also across demographic differences including for both male and female students.

Unfortunately, there has been very little research on ROI or benefits of graduate education at MSIs. What research does exist is largely focused on HBCUs. The HBCU impact in graduate education is particularly notable in specific fields, like STEM. According to the National Science Foundation (2015), HBCU graduate programs enrolled 13.3% of all black graduate students in science and engineering

programs, 39% of all black students in agricultural sciences, and 32% of all black students in biology. Research also shows that the benefits that HBCUs provide to graduate students are similar in nature to those provided to undergraduate students. These include greater levels of faculty interactions and a welcoming environment inclusive of racial and cultural diversity, while ensuring positive academic outcomes including less time to degree completion and similar graduation rates as non-HBCUs (Anderson & Hrabowski, 1977; Fountaine, 2012; Hall & Clossen, 2005; Palmer et al., 2012). At least one study indicated that there were health benefits that accrued later in life that are attributable to attending an MSI (Colen et al., 2021). African American graduate students in particular have emphasized the affirming, caring, and nurturing environments of HBCUs in influencing their personal and professional development (Palmer et al., 2016).

### **Theoretical Framework**

There is a growing recognition of the value of MSIs in providing educational opportunities to underrepresented and low-income students. However, there have been very few efforts to theorize the impact of these institutions in leading to successful outcomes for students of color. Our study draws from Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) HBCU and institution-based theoretical framework for analyzing black college student success. Their HBCU-based framework provides an important lens through which to view black college student success at HBCUs and, as this paper attempts to show, success at other MSIs including PBIs. Arroyo and Gasman theorize that HBCUs offer greater access and affordability, supportive environments, and iterative processes and outcomes including achievement, identity formation, and values cultivation. The initial entry point to Arroyo and Gasman's framework is "relative institutional accessibility and affordability" (p.66). HBCUs, as the authors note, "welcome a diverse applicant population, including students from a range of experiences and backgrounds, through relatively accessible tuition and admissions policies" (p. 66). The next element described in the framework is a supportive environment that is central to black student success. Elements of this supportive environment include "opportunities for friendship with peers, faculty, staff and counselors beyond the classroom, engagement in extracurricular campus life including leadership development and a climate of academic development so that an individual can achieve feelings of progress" (p. 64). The last pillar of the theory is a reciprocal process within the learning environment that produces success; these processes include 1) a unique approach to identity formation, 2) values cultivation, and 3) achievement. The outcome of the reciprocal processes is a holistic form of success: graduation, career attainment, and civic contributions.

### **Methodology**

This study presents an answer to a single research question: What are alumni perceptions of the educational benefits of their graduate degrees from a PBI? In asking this central question about educational benefits of a graduate degree from a PBI, insights into the components of what works for successful teaching and learning of students of color can be attained (Hutchings, 2000).

This study was completed as a case study of an urban PBI, Chicago State University (CSU). CSU was founded as a teacher training school in Blue Island, Illinois, on September 2, 1867. Today, the university is a fully accredited public, urban institution located on the south side of Chicago. CSU serves a predominantly black population (70%) (Chicago State University, 2018). The university's five colleges—Health Sciences, Arts and Sciences, Business, Education, and Pharmacy—offer 36 undergraduate and 25 graduate and professional degree-granting programs (Chicago State University, 2018). CSU also offers an interdisciplinary Honors College for students in all areas of study and has a Division of Continuing Education and Nontraditional Degree Programs that offers extension courses, distance learning, and not-for-credit programs to the entire Chicago community. CSU is a mission-driven institution whose aim is to “transform students’ lives by innovative teaching, research, and community partnerships through excellence in ethical leadership, cultural enhancement, economic development, and justice” (Chicago State University, 2022, para. 4). The institutional character of CSU aims at supporting the educational, social, and economic mobility of racial minorities and their advancement in society.

A survey with a mixed-method design was utilized for this study, combining quantitative and qualitative data. Johnson et al. (2007) define mixed methods design as “the type of research in which a researcher combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches...for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration” (p. 123). Watkins and Gioia (2015) further elaborate that the “overall rationale for mixing methods is a better understanding of the inherent complexities of human phenomena” (p. ix).

The survey was administered to the accessible population of CSU alumni who completed requirements for their master's, professional, and doctoral degrees between the academic years 2008 and 2018. The identification of potential participants was accomplished by a review of data facilitated by the CSU Office of Alumni Affairs. A request was submitted to these offices to retrieve data, specifically last known email addresses, for CSU alumni who completed a graduate degree during the aforementioned time period. There were 3,700 alumni who successfully completed and earned a graduate, professional degree, or certificate from CSU from 2008 to 2018 (CSU, 2020). However, 700 of them did not have a valid email on record; hence, the survey was sent to 3,000 participants. Inclusion criteria was defined as any CSU student who successfully matriculated from a CSU graduate program (23 Master's Degrees, 1 Pharm.D, 1 Ed.D, 9 Graduate Certificates) between 2008 and 2018.

The researchers of this study developed a survey inspired by the Bachelor and Beyond Graduate Survey 2017 of the Institute for Educational Statistics (IES). Permission was obtained from IES to reformat the survey. The survey has relevant questions that relate to the central question of this study. Survey development was a collaborative and iterative process after which the final draft was reviewed and piloted to establish face validity. The pilot survey was sent to recent graduates after 2018 from various graduate programs and a number of faculty who shared their

feedback about the survey's content and format. Final changes were made before fielding it.

Data for this study was gathered using Qualtrics software. This system allowed for the dissemination and collection of survey responses. The researchers emailed the survey link to all potential respondents who held a valid email address, after which two reminders were sent. Collected data was used to conduct a quantitative and qualitative analysis.

### **Quantitative Analysis**

The study employed descriptive statistics to report percentages for the survey's discrete categories.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

The study employed thematic analysis following a six-step process: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Terry et al. (2017) define thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data" (p. 287).

The two most significant themes that were identified were 1) faculty relationships and 2) inclusive environment, which were in line with the quantitative results. Participants' statements about faculty relationships and inclusive environment affirmed students' perceived benefits in personal motivations, inclusive environment, and overall satisfaction as shown in the results section below.

## **Results**

The total number of respondents who completed the survey was 261, a response rate of 8.7%. Survey researchers have witnessed a gradual decrease in survey participation over time (Brick & Williams, 2013; National Research Council, 2013). Particularly, alumni surveys often have lower response rates than other types of surveys because of bad contact information and other reasons (Lambert & Miller, 2014). Furthermore, the response rate for web surveys is estimated to be 11% lower than other survey modes (Fan & Yan, 2010). While many researchers assume that the best way to obtain unbiased estimates/results is to achieve a high response rate, others are questioning the widely held assumption that low response rates provide biased results (Curtin et al., 2000; Groves, 2006; Keeter et al., 2000; Massey & Tourangeau, 2013; Peytchev, 2013). Research conducted by Fosnacht et al. (2017) suggests that their study "did not find that a 5% response rate or even a 75% response rate provides unbiased population estimates under all circumstances ..." (p. 262). Considering the above mentioned factors, the results of this study are regarded as valid for answering the research question.

The following descriptive statistics help to illustrate the various characteristics of the survey respondents.

## **Demographics of Respondents**

### ***Gender***

Sixty-seven percent of respondents were females, 30% were males, and 3% preferred not to answer.

### ***Race***

Sixty-four percent of respondents were African American; 17% were White; 9% Asian; 4.6% Hispanic; 1% Biracial or Multiracial; 1% some other race, ethnicity, or origin; and 3.4% preferred not to respond. A further breakdown of the results by race and gender shows that 47% of respondents were Black or African American females, 15.7% were Black African American males, 10% were White females, 6.5% were White males, 3% were Asian females, 5.7% were Asian males, 3% were Hispanic females, and 1.5% were Hispanic males

### ***First Generation Graduate Student***

Fifty-two percent of respondents reported being the first in their family to obtain a graduate degree. A further breakdown of the results by race shows that 52% of the African American respondents were the first in their family to obtain a graduate degree, 39.5% of the White respondents were the first in their family to obtain a graduate degree, and 56.5% of the Asian respondents were the first in their family to obtain a graduate degree.

### ***Degrees Obtained***

Seventy-nine percent of respondents received a master's degree from CSU, 17% received a doctoral degree, and 4% received a graduate certificate. A further breakdown by race and gender shows that 6.5% of total respondents who received a doctoral degree were African American females, 2.7% were African American males, 1.1% were White females, 3% were White males, and 1.1% were Asian (males and females). When looking at the respondents who received a master's degree, 41.3% were African American females, 13.4% were African American males, 8.4% were White females, 3% were White males, and 7.7% were Asian (males and females).

### ***Returning Students***

Thirty-one percent of respondents were returning students who completed their Bachelor's degree from CSU and returned for their graduate degree, while 69% attended other institutions. A further breakdown of the results by race and gender of returning students show that 19.9% were African American females, 6.1% were African American males, 0.4% were White females, 6.5% were White males 1.1 % were Hispanic (males and females) and 0.4% were Asian (males and females).



## **Personal Motivations and Benefits**

### ***Factors in Choosing Field of Graduate Studies***

When asked about the factors for choosing their field of graduate studies, respondents could report multiple answers. Forty-eight percent identified that it was required for a career path; 41% checked the potential to increase earnings; 33% checked that it gave them the ability to contribute to their community via the chosen field; and 30% checked that they chose their field in order to change careers to best fit their personal aspirations. The response rate was lower for factors such as respondent's own aptitude in the field (25%), ability to balance work and family (16%), and increasing representation of gender/racial/ethnic group in a designated profession (16%).

### ***Main Reasons for Enrollment***

Respondents' answers show that one of the main reasons students enroll in the graduate program at CSU is its affordability (72% checked "best affordable"). Other reasons include CSU's status as a minority institution (17%), access to professional employment opportunities (17%), and the high ranking of the program (17%). Of the total survey respondents, those who checked "best affordable option available at the time" were 36.4% African American, 13.4% White, 5.7%, and 3.4% Asian and Hispanic.

Some participants' statements revealed that their main reason for enrollment was CSU's status as a PBI, while others referred to CSU's reputation and quality of programs.

- "After going to schools that were predominantly Caucasian or almost all Caucasian... I wanted to be with people of color..."
- "CSU changed my life. I initially attended a PWI. I was lost. At CSU I felt valued by my professors. They encouraged me so much. I wish I would have initially attended CSU. I might have a doctorate by now."
- "I chose to attend Chicago State University graduate program mostly because I have heard many great things about the program from my previous coworkers. In addition, I knew that I would be challenged and receive a great learning experience."

### ***Benefits After Obtaining a Graduate Degree***

Respondents' answers show that the greatest benefit after obtaining their graduate degree was personal fulfillment (64%), followed by advanced knowledge in the discipline (54%) and getting a new job (54%). Moreover, 42.5% reported improved leadership skills, 38.7% reported that they obtained a salary increase, 36.8% gained more credibility, 30.3% changed their career path, 29% enhanced their prestige, 24.5% felt increased job security, and 13.4% received a promotion.

Participants expressed additional personal benefits after obtaining their graduate degree from CSU such as feeling that their education was competitive with other reputable universities. Other statements revealed personal benefits of receiving high quality education.

- "My education at CSU is integral to the educator I am today. I credit my professors and the challenging curriculum for providing me with instruction that I feel rivals one from any Ivy League institution."
- "Upon entering my field, I was more prepared than most of my colleagues who had graduated from the same field."
- "My experience in CSU's MSW program was nothing short of fruitful. The professors were truly top tier. I'm currently obtaining a second Masters from (name withheld) and CSU professors are undoubtedly better."
- "Since I completed my certificate in 2012, I have been employed with a school corporation. I'm very satisfied."
- "Each professor that taught me had a great influence on my career path. I am eternally grateful that I attended CSU for my post bachelorette career because I gained an appreciation for new knowledge, different lenses to look at various topics."

## **Finances**

### ***How Graduate Studies Were Financed***

As noted in the previous section, 72% of the respondents selected CSU because it was the most affordable option available to them for graduate study. Participants stated, "CSU provides a service to the community through reasonably priced post-secondary education" and "CSU is affordable".

The majority of respondents (75.9%) financed their graduate education through loans (federal or private). Thirty-six percent financed their graduate education through personal/family earnings or savings; 29% through a scholarship, grant, assistantship, or fellowship; and 13.4% through employer reimbursement/assistance. A further examination of the results showed that 37% of respondents financed their graduate education via loans only; 3% via personal/family earnings or savings only; 3% via scholarship, grant, assistantship, or fellowship only; and 3% via employer reimbursement/assistance only.

### ***How Much Was Borrowed***

The results showed that respondents who borrowed \$100,000 or more in loans were the largest group at 19% of total participants, followed by 18% who borrowed \$10,000-\$29,999, 14% who borrowed \$30,000-\$49,999, 10.3% who borrowed \$50,000-\$69,999, 6.7% who borrowed \$70,000-\$99,999, and only 3.8% who borrowed less than \$10,000. Participants who reported not financing their graduate education through loans were 29%.

### ***How Much Is Still Owed***

The results show that 43% of respondents still owe all of the amount borrowed for their student loans, 25% still owe some, and only 8.4% owe none. Table 3 reports participants' results related to their finances.

### **Inclusive Environment**

#### ***Socioeconomic Background***

The results showed that 88% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their graduate program provided an inclusive and respectful environment of their socioeconomic background; 9% neither agreed nor disagreed; and 3% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their graduate program provided an inclusive and respectful environment of their socioeconomic background.

#### ***Race/Ethnicity***

The results showed that 87% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their graduate program provided an inclusive and respectful environment of their race/ethnicity; 11% neither agreed nor disagreed; and 2% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their graduate program provided an inclusive and respectful environment of their race/ethnicity.

#### ***Gender Identity or Sexual Orientation***

The results showed that 84% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their graduate program provided an inclusive and respectful environment of their gender identity or sexual orientation; 14% neither agreed nor disagreed; and 2% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their graduate program provided an inclusive and respectful environment of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

#### ***Religious/Spiritual Beliefs***

The results showed that 73% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their graduate program provided an inclusive and respectful environment of their religious/spiritual beliefs, 24% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 3% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their graduate program provided an inclusive and respectful environment of their religious/spiritual beliefs.

#### ***Political Orientation***

The results showed that 68% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their graduate program provided an inclusive and respectful environment of their political orientation, 29% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 3% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their graduate program provided an inclusive and respectful environment of their political orientation.

Participants' comments supported the benefits of the inclusive environment perceived at CSU. Faculty relationships were the factor that was most significant in supporting this inclusive environment. Sense of belonging and community were also reported.

- "I loved being a graduate student at CSU. I had amazing professors who supported my endeavors and I learned so much from them."
- "My experience as a graduate student was overwhelmingly positive. The Education department was extremely supportive and always available. The staff was very understanding and flexible with regard to school and family."
- "Great instructors, small class sizes created a great learning environment."
- "It felt good to be part of an environment where people got second chances and people are rooting for you to succeed."
- "The support, sense of community and belonging in my program contributed to my success".

## **Satisfaction**

### ***With Choice of Major***

The results showed that 88% of respondents were extremely satisfied or satisfied with their choice of majors or fields of graduate studies, while 9% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and 3% were dissatisfied or extremely dissatisfied.

### ***With the Quality of the Curriculum***

The results showed that 88% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt satisfied with the quality of their program's curriculum, while 7% neither agreed nor disagreed and 5% disagreed or extremely disagreed.

### ***With the Quality of Graduate Education***

The results showed that 88.5% of respondents were extremely satisfied or satisfied with the quality of the graduate education they received, while 5.75% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied and 5.75% were dissatisfied or extremely dissatisfied. Participants' comments concurred with the quantitative data as participants expressed their satisfaction with the quality of their graduate education.

- "My experience as a graduate student was overwhelmingly positive...The staff was very understanding and flexible with regard to school and family...The support and flexibility of the CSU staff helped me to complete my graduate studies on time and without interruption. The staff and students were more like family than colleagues. "
- "My experience was positive. It was a very intense program but the faculty was helpful and encouraging. The experience was life changing and CSU will never be forgotten."
- "I loved the fact that I was being taught by professors that looked like me."

- “Wonderful experience, great instruction, hands-on involvement with faculty and students.”

### ***With the Cost***

When participants were asked if the graduate education they received was worth its financial cost, 80% answered yes, while 20% answered no.

## **Discussion**

This project set forth to answer the question, “What are alumni’s perceptions of the educational benefits of their graduate degree at a PBI?” The results suggest that the perceived benefits fell into two categories: 1) personal benefits that accrued to the graduate and 2) enabling benefits that encouraged the completion of graduate study.

The content and range of the personal benefits revealed in this study confirm Arroyo and Gasman’s (2014) model of Black student success which defines the grand outcome of HBCU education as “holistic success” (p. 71)—a triumvirate matrix of gradation, career success and civic contribution. The enabling benefits of a PBI that were instrumental to the completion of a graduate program include perceived program quality, the financial accessibility of graduate study at a PBI, and a supportive learning environment with supportive faculty. Though measured at the end of the process in the case of graduates, these enabling benefits confirmed Arroyo and Gasman’s model in terms of the importance of the entry points of HBCUs and PBIs (“relative institutional accessibility and affordability”) and the supportive learning environment, which are enabling conditions for successful completion of graduate programs.

### **Personal Benefits**

The primary personal benefit of the graduate degree completed at a PBI described by graduates was personal fulfillment. Graduates most consistently reported that completing graduate school was personally fulfilling and satisfying and a third suggested that the degree conferred prestige. This finding lends tentative support to Cokley’s (2002) claim that African American students attending HBCUs had a significantly higher academic self-concept than students at predominantly white institutions. Arroyo and Gasman (2014) highlighted the relationship between achievement and identity formation among students at HBCUs, and Harmon (2012) calls attention to a key benefit of MSIs in providing students with a means to develop their identities leading to self-worth. The psychosocial benefits from matriculating at a PBI appear to be among the most durable and important benefits of graduates. Hardre and Hackett (2015) determined that one of the most important reasons graduate students cited for attending graduate school was “to help me achieve my professional goals,” which was confirmed in this study. Scott and Sharp (2019) found that aspects of “cultural beliefs,” which include spirituality, communal responsibility and self-belief, were essential critical factors for educational success at the graduate level for African American males. PBIs fostered

those protective factors associated with positive mental health, including self-esteem, identity, and spirituality (Mushonga & Henneberger, 2020). This finding suggests that for graduate programs to successfully retain and educate African Americans, there should be attention given to providing the psychosocial factors associated with personal fulfillment from advanced study in addition to meeting the traditional concerns of providing a quality curriculum (King et al., 2019) Learning understood as mastery of content is insufficient on its own to completely meet the most noted benefit of a graduate degree to PBI graduates. Programs should strive to deliver content in a manner that results in the personal fulfillment of the student.

The second and third most often cited perceived personal benefits were the enhanced knowledge of one's discipline that was afforded by advanced studies and that the graduate degree enabled the respondents to advance in their careers. Enhanced knowledge is an expected benefit, though not the single most significant one for the respondents. Enhanced knowledge supports the goal of career advancement. The PBI, because of its accessibility, allowed respondents to obtain a new job, pursue their chosen career path, obtain a salary increase, experience greater job security, and receive a promotion. This result confirms a finding by Hardre and Hackett (2015) who found that competitive advancement in one's field was a major reason for attending graduate school. These factors associated with career advancement result in social mobility for minority respondents and confirm Hardy et al.'s (2019) findings that although HBCUs are comparatively under resourced, "HBCUs significantly outperform PWIs in providing upward social mobility to students" (p. 474). Graduate programs serving underrepresented students should strive to support the specific goal of social mobility through career advancement.

Another significant reported personal benefit of graduate school was personal development in the form of enhanced leadership skills. Over two-fifths (42.5%) of the respondents reported improved leadership skills as a benefit of their degree. This result corroborates Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) framework model which indicates that HBCUs place a "distinctive emphasis on formation of student identity," specifically in the area of leadership.

The final personal benefit was the ability of the respondents to contribute to their communities through the practice of their careers. One-third (33%) of the respondents indicated that they selected their field of study because it gave them the ability to contribute to their communities via their career. This result indicates the degree to which individuals attending PBIs have an innate desire to serve and build up their community through their life's work. Scott and Sharp (2019) noted in their study of African American men who possessed a graduate degree that some felt the weight of a "responsibility to be significant contributors within their community" (p. 52). This finding supports Boland's (2018) assertion that goals "including community and culture are often seen as the secret to how [MSIs] have been able to graduate a higher number of students of color. Infusing programs that prioritize student success through connections to community and incorporation of culture can lead towards increased quantifiable outcomes" (p. 14).

## **Other Enabling Benefits**

Each respondent reported receiving several personal benefits from completing their graduate studies at a PBI. Respondents also reported various benefits that served the purpose of enabling them to successfully complete graduate level work. These benefits support Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) discussion of the virtues of the accessibility of HBCUs for students of color. Baum and Steele (2017) found that African American college graduates were proportionally more likely than other ethnic groups to seek master's education, so simple accessibility to graduate education is a powerful enabling force provided by PBIs and HBCUs.

The first enabling benefit of a graduate education from a PBI is that graduates were highly satisfied with the quality of their programs. A large majority (88%) of the respondents agreed that they felt satisfied with the quality of their program's curriculum, and 88.5% reported being satisfied with the quality of their graduate education.

The second enabling benefit of earning a graduate degree at a PBI is its financial accessibility and its financial value. Cossa and Barker (2021) and Pyne and Grodsky (2020) found that finances (debt) were the most influential factor for African Americans to prevent enrollment in a graduate program. Three-quarters (75.9%) of the respondents financed their graduate education through loans, and nearly as many (72%) indicated that CSU was the most affordable option that they had to attend graduate school. This finding is consistent with that of Miller and Orsillo (2020) which indicates that 79% of African Americans complete graduate school with federal debt, and the median graduate debt of African American borrowers is \$51,250.

Nearly one-fifth (19%) of the respondents borrowed \$100,000 or more to finance their education while nearly as many (18%) borrowed significantly less, between \$10,000–\$29,999. Only 3.8% borrowed less than \$10,000, and the remaining borrowed between \$30,000 and \$99,999. The vast majority (96.2%) of the respondents borrowed \$10,000 or more to finance their education, but despite the costs and debt burden, 80% stated that they believed the education that they received was worth the cost. Pyne and Grodsky (2020) indicate that African Americans benefit more financially from graduate education than other racial groups: "compared to African American bachelor's degree graduates, African American master's degree graduates earned about 29% more per year on average, about a third more than the relative premium for white master's degree-holders" (p. 32). This finding suggests that the financial accessibility of PBIs contributes towards the economic mobility of African Americans. The implication of this finding reinforces the need of institutions of higher education to keep the costs of attending graduate school affordable as both a recruitment and retention strategy.

The final enabling benefit of a graduate education at a PBI is the presence of a supportive learning environment and supportive faculty. Respondents reported that they benefited from an inclusive and intimate learning environment that supported success. Faculty were specifically mentioned as a key factor supporting the

respondents to complete their degrees. Of the respondents, 88% indicated that their program provided an inclusive and respectful environment of their socioeconomic background; nearly as many (87%) reported their graduate program provided an inclusive and respectful environment of their race/ethnicity; and 84% of respondents agreed that their graduate program provided an inclusive and respectful environment of their gender identity or sexual orientation. One respondent commented, "The support, sense of community and belonging in my program contributed to my success."

Many of the comments on open-ended questions on the survey indicated that the support of the faculty was a key factor in the positive learning environment. Cokley (2002) indicated that for HBCU students, the most important factor for success was the quality of student-faculty interactions. This also confirms the finding of Siming et al. (2015) indicating the importance of student and faculty relationships in overall satisfaction. Respondents' comments indicated an appreciation of instructors and intimate class sizes. Respondents stated:

- "Great instructors, small class sizes created a great learning environment,"
- "I love faculty, environment, class size, and flexibility," and
- "Great instructors, small class sizes created a great learning environment."

Other responses specifically noted the impact of a caring faculty:

- "I love being a graduate student at CSU. I had amazing professors who supported my endeavors and I learned so much from them," and
- "My professors really catered to my academic needs."

Another respondent perhaps best summed up the experience at a PBI by stating:

- "It felt good to be part of an environment where people got second chances and people are rooting for you to succeed."

In their study of regional institutions which include an HBCU, Orphan and Broom (2021) found that faculty who identified with their institution's mission were consequently able to see themselves in their students and exhibited a "normative and affective commitment" to the institution's mission and their love for their students (p. 188). The results of this project underscore the importance of the supportive learning environment as a benefit and supports Arroyo and Gasman's (2014) supposition that a "supportive environment is theorized to form the foundation of HBCUs' contributions to black student success" (p. 64). DeFreitas and Bravo (2012) also determined that the involvement with faculty was a factor of success for African American students. DeFreitas and Bravo (2012) affirm the link between student academic achievement and mentoring and involvement with faculty. CSU faculty create a rich learning environment which nurtures student success through their commitment to CSU's stated mission, their response to the societal need for upward mobility among members of the predominantly Black university community, and the deep, affective connections they have with the institution and their students. The confluence of these factors as a component of



successful teaching and learning can inform broader educational practices at other institutions.

When discussing the findings, it is important to acknowledge that the respondents/participants to this study represent a special population—one that is favorably disposed to the University “since their graduation marks them as having been successful” (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009, p. 178). Hadre and Hackett (2015) describe a pattern in graduate students reported satisfaction across their programs where “the highest scores (indicating most positive perceptions) being at Entrance to graduate programs, then a drop (of varying degrees) occurring at Mid-Point, and this being followed by somewhat higher scores at Exit (indicating somewhat more positive perceptions) near completion of the degree” (p. 465). The respondents in this study are students who completed their degrees, and a majority of them went on to pursue careers of their choosing. This study was cross-sectional and therefore only captures sentiment in a snapshot-in-time; sentiments regarding graduate education may shift and change over the span of a career.

### **Recommendations and Implications for Practice**

An essential concern for MSIs, as well as other institutions of higher education, is ensuring the “success” of its students, which is generally operationalized as retention and graduation. Understanding the nature and extent of the self-reported benefits that students of color at the graduate level received from PBIs can create spaces for the improvement of instruction and the delivery of academic programs to this group. There are several recommendations that arise from an analysis of these findings of a study of alumni which can improve educational practice; these recommendations are centered on the creation of educational experiences and environments that are conducive to academic success for graduate students of color.

1. Create educational experiences and curricula that support personal fulfillment as a component of academic knowledge acquisition. Much of the learning in higher education is driven by the creation of learning outcomes related to the mastery of the theory and practice of a field or discipline. These outcomes generally address the attainment of cognitive and dispositional goals relevant to the field; however, they are often mute about whether these goals ultimately result in a sense of personal fulfillment in the student.
2. Create educational experiences that support the attainment of enhanced knowledge that is perceived as such by students of color. It is integral that students of color not only receive knowledge of a discipline or a field but also that they perceive themselves as possessing enhanced knowledge. Evidence of the attainment of knowledge is expressed through grades; however, attaining a grade in a class is not the same as the subjective experience of feeling knowledgeable about a subject. Instruction should result in mastery of content as well as self-confidence in the attainment of that content.

3. Create an educational environment that supports the development of a positive academic self-concept among students of color. Students need to see themselves as scholars who can contribute intellectually to their fields within the broader academic enterprise. There are certain graduate university environments and cultures (Martin et al., 2015) that notoriously undermine the academic self-concept of students; these cultures include elements of belittlement, punishment and exclusion (Goodboy et al., 2015) and exhibit a high degree of instructional dissent which are particularly detrimental to students of color.

4. Create an educational environment that supports the development of a positive professional identity as a person of color within a field of study particularly in fields where people of color are severely underrepresented. Graduate students of color need to envision themselves as full and equal members of their professions; creating this vision themselves can be challenging when students don't see diversity in their fields in real life.

5. Connect academic learning concretely to students' future career and work. As this study reveals, many students pursue a graduate degree for the purpose of finding a new job, maintaining job security, or gain advancement in an existing career. These connections are frequently made in professional fields of study; however, in academic fields, explicitly showing connections between academic knowledge and the practical knowledge of the working world is integral to the successful matriculation of students of color.

6. Create learning experiences that help students connect their field of study to the improvement of their communities. Many fields of study have some espoused commitment to improving the human condition or human society as a whole. Learning experiences should be designed to assist students in understanding how their field of study can specifically improve their communities of origin - not just society as a whole.

7. Make educational programs affordable. The affordability of a graduate educational program is a broader concern than teaching and learning, but ultimately affordability is as much an academic issue as it is an economic one. Faculty and administrators need to become very mindful of the cumulative impact of hidden and extra costs for a degree in conjunction with the high costs of a basic education. A common example of hidden costs are programs that require students to complete lengthy or time-consuming unpaid internships or practica, which can pose special burdens on graduate students; time spent in unpaid internships can preclude them from accepting or maintaining their paid employment.

8. Provide a supportive learning environment and faculty. Finally, college faculty and administrators need to provide an overall supportive learning environment. Faculty, in particular, need to connect with students at a personal and human level to create an environment where learning can happen.

## Conclusions

The results indicate that there are a myriad of mutually reinforcing benefits of attending a PBI for graduate work including the presence of high quality, affordable programs; a supportive learning environment; and personal benefits, such as personal fulfillment, giving back to the community, developing leadership skills, gaining career advancement, and obtaining advanced knowledge in a discipline. The dearth of studies on efficiency and success of graduate education obtained from MSIs, particularly PBIs, leaves many broad areas open for future study. Like HBCUs, PBIs produce a disproportionate number of graduate and undergraduate African American degree holders.

Studies of PBI alumni, such as this one, that reflect on the educational experiences that contributed to alumni educational success at the graduate level can inform the scholarship on teaching and learning in a powerful way. Investigating enabling conditions that enhance the success rate of people of color in their graduate studies at PBIs can serve as lessons learned for Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) in identifying and understanding the perceptions and motivations of minority students to pursue and complete graduate studies and increasing and enhancing opportunities for these groups. As Espinosa and Mitchell (2020) suggest, the understanding of educating minority students at MSIs “should be at the center of any agenda to educate a diverse citizenry” (p. 27). These implications are directed not only to universities but also to policy makers attempting to disrupt educational inequalities in higher education.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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Appendix

Table 1

*Participants' Demographics*

Gender	Percentage (%)
Males	30
Females	67
Prefer not to answer	3
Race	
White	17
African American	64
Hispanic	4.6
Asian	9
Others	5.4
First Generation Graduate Student	
No	48
Yes	52
Degrees Obtained*	
Master's	79
Doctorate	17
Graduate Certificate	4
Returning Students	
No	69
Yes	31

*Note.* Percentage does not add up to 100% because some answers are "select multiple."

**Table 2**

*Personal Motivation and Benefits*

Factors in choosing field of graduate studies*	Percentage (%)
Required for career path	48
Potential to increase earnings	41
Ability to contribute to the community via the chosen field	33
Change careers to best fit personal aspirations	30
Own Aptitude in the field	25
Ability to balance work & family	16
Increasing representation of gender/racial/ethnic group in a designated profession	16
<b>Main reasons for enrollment*</b>	
Affordability	72
Status as a minority institution	17
Access to professional employment opportunities	17
Highly ranked Program	17
<b>Benefits after obtaining a graduate degree*</b>	
Personal fulfillment	64
Advanced knowledge in the discipline	54
Getting a new job	54
Improved leadership skills	42.5
Salary increase	38.7
More credibility	36.8
Changed career path	30.3
Enhanced prestige	29
Increased job security	24.5
Work promotion	13.4

*Note.* Percentage does not add up to 100% because some answers are "select multiple."

**Table 3**

*Finances*

How were graduate studies financed*	Percentage (%)
Loans (federal or private)	75.9
Personal/family earnings or savings	36
Scholarship, grant, Assistantship, or fellowship	29
Employer reimbursement/assistance	13.4
<b>Amount borrowed</b>	
\$100,000 or more	19
\$70,000-\$99,999	6.7
\$50,000-\$69,999	10.3
\$30,000-\$49,999	14
\$10,000-\$29,999	18
Less than \$10,000	3.8
<b>Amount still owed</b>	
All	43
Some	25
None	8.4

*Note.* Percentage does not add up to 100% because some answers are “select multiple.”

**Table 4**

*Inclusive Environment*

Inclusive and respectful environment of socioeconomic background	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree or agree	88
Neither agree nor disagree	9
Strongly disagree or disagree	3
<hr/>	
Inclusive and respectful environment of race/ethnicity	
Strongly agree or agree	87
Neither agree nor disagree	11
Strongly disagree or disagree	2
<hr/>	
Inclusive and respectful environment of gender identity or sexual orientation	
Strongly agree or agree	84
Neither agree nor disagree	14
Strongly disagree or disagree	2
<hr/>	
Inclusive and respectful environment of religious/spiritual beliefs	
Strongly agree or agree	73
Neither agree nor disagree	24
Strongly disagree or disagree	3
<hr/>	
Inclusive and respectful environment of political orientation	
Strongly agree or agree	68
Neither agree nor disagree	29
Strongly disagree or disagree	3

**Table 5**

*Satisfaction*

	Percentage (%)
Choice of major	
Extremely satisfied or satisfied	88
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	9
Extremely dissatisfied or dissatisfied	3
Quality of the curriculum	
Extremely satisfied or satisfied	88
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	7
Extremely dissatisfied or dissatisfied	5
Quality of graduate education	
Extremely satisfied or satisfied	88.5
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	5.75
Extremely dissatisfied or dissatisfied	5.75
Cost worthy	
No	20
Yes	80