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National Survey OF Student Engagement Findings AT A Historically Black Institution

Does Student Engagement Impact Persistence?

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How can historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) improve student degree completion rates? To the credit of HBCUs, many students who otherwise would not have had an opportunity for college access and success have enrolled and graduated with degrees. In practical numbers, HBCU enrollment increased from 223,000 to 324,000, or by 45%, between 1976 and 2011 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Today, HBCUs enroll 9% of all African American men and women in American higher education, although they continue to enroll diverse populations. In spite of the increase in college-going rates, fall-to-fall retention, and six-year graduation rates, students at HBCUs lag noticeably behind students attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs). This may not be surprising given HBCUs commitment to access and success of underserved populations and students with diverse learning styles, backgrounds, talents, and learning differences.

The changing landscape of American higher education presents formidable challenges for many HBCUs, including increased competition in the market, especially from proprietary schools; decreased and rigid federal financial assistance, particularly firmer Parent Plus Loan requirements; and heightened measures of institutional accountability, primarily manifested through accreditation standards.

In fact, state and federal governments are increasingly mandating that colleges and universities improve the effectiveness of institutional stewardship of resources while providing quality education at a practical cost to students and families (Commission on the Future of Higher Education, 2006).

Yet, if HBCUs are to thrive, more must be done to improve the rates at which students persist to graduation, as retention and graduation metrics have become critical measures of institutional performance and accountability. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) helps measure the extent to which students are engaged in important personal learning and development domains, making it a widely used instrument to inform institutional quality (Gonyea & Kuh, 2009). Student engagement, which is connected to higher retention and graduation rates (Harper & Quaye, 2009), as measured by NSSE, should be an HBCU imperative given current persist-to-graduation rates at such schools. In this chapter, we explore the extent to which students are actively engaged in activities and experiences associated with NSSE. We are also interested in comparing students who returned and those who did not based on their level of engagement.

A GLIMPSE OF CURRENT RETENTION AND GRADATION RATES AT HBCUs

For the purposes of this chapter, we examined African Americans' degree completion rates at HBCUs. The data are organized into three categories: (1) retention rates, (2) six-year graduation rates by sex, and (3) overall graduation rates. These categories are also examined by institutional type (i.e., private and public HBCUs).

Overall, retention rates for first-year students who entered an HBCU in the fall 2011 cohort and returned the following fall challenge HBCUs to better create "staying environments" for students. As Table 4.1 shows, about three of five (62%) students who enrolled at an HBCU in the fall 2011 cohort returned fall 2012 for their second year.

However, when retention data are disaggregated by institutional type (i.e., public versus private institutions), a more holistic picture emerges. For first-year students enrolled in public HBCUs, the retention rates were modestly higher than for students attending private HBCUs (i.e., 62% versus 60%, respectively). At best, public HBCUs retained a minimum of 7 of 10 first-time students from fall 2011 to fall 2012. Specifically, nine public HBCUs can make such a claim: Elizabeth City State University (79%), Winston-Salem State University (78%), Fayetteville State University (76%), North Carolina A&T (74%), Norfolk State University (74%), Jackson State University (73%), Morgan State University (72%), Savannah State University (72%), and Bowie State University (71%). While private HBCUs

Table 4.1. A Comparison of HBCU Retention and Six-year Graduation Rates.

HBCU	Location	Type	Retention Rate %				Six-year Graduation Rates %		
			All	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
Alabama A&M	Normal, AL	Public	68	26	38	32			
Alabama State University	Montgomery, AL	Public	62	19	32	26			
Albany State University	Albany, GA	Public	67	31	42	39			
Alcorn State University	Alcorn, MI	Public	69	27	35	31			
Allen University	Columbia, SC	Private	61	20	23	21			
Arkansas Baptist College	Little Rock, AR	Private	41	0	8	5			
Benedict College for Women	Columbia, SC	Private	57	25	33	29			
Bethune-Cookman University	Daytona, FL	Private	64	23	25	24			
Bluefield State College	Bluefield, WV	Public	53	32	19	25			
Bowie State University	Bowie, MD	Public	71	27	40	35			
Central State University	Wilberforce, OH	Public	43	23	31	27			
Cheyney University of PA	Cheyney, PA	Public	65	19	26	23			
Claffin University	Orangeburg, SC	Private	74	34	48	44			
Clark Atlanta University	Atlanta, GA	Private	62	37	40	39			
Concordia College-Selma	Selma, AL	Private	50	5	6	6			
Coppin State University	Baltimore, MD	Public	66	12	18	17			
Delaware State University	Dover, DE	Public	60	29	36	33			

(To be continued)

HBCU	Location	Type	Retention Rate %				Six-year Graduation Rates %	
			All	Men	Women	Total		
Dillard University	New Orleans, LA	Private	68	22	35	31		
Edward Waters College	Jacksonville, FL	Private	54	19	29	23		
Elizabeth City State University	Elizabeth City, NC	Public	79	35	38	43		
Fayetteville State University	Fayetteville, NC	Public	76	28	33	31		
Fisk University	Nashville, TN	Private	85	56	53	54		
Florida A&M University	Tallahassee, FL	Public	80	31	46	40		
Florida Memorial University	Miami Gardens, FL	Private	70	39	42	41		
Fort Valley State University	Fort Valley, GA	Public	58	22	36	29		
Grambling State University	Grambling, LA	Public	69	22	38	31		
Hampton University	Hampton, VA	Private	65	53	63	59		
Harris-Stowe State University	St. Louis, MO	Public	44	7	9	8		
Howard University	District of Columbia	Private	81	57	66	63		
Huston-Tillotson University	Austin, TX	Private	57	20	29	25		
Jackson State University	Jackson, MI	Public	73	37	51	45		
Jarvis Christian College	Hawkins, TX	Private	55	10	17	13		
Johnson C. Smith University	Charlotte, NC	Private	72	36	46	42		
Kentucky State University	Frankfort, KY	Public	45	10	19	14		
Lane College	Jackson, TN	Private	50	-	48	36		

(To be continued)

HBCU	Location	Type	Retention Rate %			Six-year Graduation Rates %			
			All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	Total
Langston University	Langston, OK	Public	57	13	20	16	13	20	16
Le Moyne-Owen College	Memphis, TN	Private	50	2	13	8	2	13	8
Lincoln University	Jefferson City, MO	Public	36	20	29	24	20	29	24
The Lincoln University	Lincoln University, PA	Public	67	25	44	37	25	44	37
Livingstone College	Salisbury, NC	Private	48	18	30	23	18	30	23
Miles College	Fairfield, AL	Private	52	11	20	15	11	20	15
Mississippi Valley State University	Itta Bena, MS	Public	61	18	27	22	18	27	22
Morehouse College	Atlanta, GA	Private	82	55	-	55	55	-	55
Morgan State University	Baltimore, MD	Public	72	22	34	29	22	34	29
Morris College	Sumter, SC	Private	40	26	35	31	26	35	31
Norfolk State University	Norfolk, VA	Public	74	30	39	36	30	39	36
North Carolina A&T State University	Greensboro, NC	Public	74	35	50	42	35	50	42
North Carolina Central University	Durham, NC	Public	71	36	46	43	36	46	43
Oakwood College	Huntsville, AL	Private	76	30	43	38	30	43	38
Paine College	Augusta, GA	Private	52	26	21	22	26	21	22
Paul Quinn College	Dallas, TX	Private	44	1	0	1	1	0	1
Philander Smith	Little Rock, AR	Private	63	29	32	31	29	32	31
Prairie View A&M University	Prairie View, TX	Public	67	28	42	36	28	42	36

(To be continued)

HBCU	Location	Type	Retention Rate %			Six-year Graduation Rates %		
			All	Men	Women	All	Men	Women
Rust College	Holly Springs, MI	Private	66	24	36	32	32	32
Savannah State University	Savannah, GA	Public	72	20	44	32	44	32
Selma University	Selma, AL	Private	38	46	44	45	44	45
Shaw University	Raleigh, NC	Private	39	19	30	26	30	26
South Carolina State University	Orangeburg, SC	Public	61	30	38	34	38	34
Southern University and A&M College	Baton Rouge, LA	Public	69	21	32	28	32	28
Southern University at New Orleans	New Orleans, LA	Public	61	14	19	17	19	17
Southwestern Christian College	Terrell, TX	Private	50	25	32	28	32	28
Spelman College	Atlanta, GA	Private	90	-	73	73	73	73
St. Augustine College	Raleigh, NC	Private	46	30	42	35	42	35
Talladega College	Talladega, AL	Private	39	28	24	25	24	25
Tennessee State University	Nashville, TN	Public	56	28	39	35	39	35
Texas College	Tyler, TX	Private	44	16	18	17	18	17
Texas Southern University	Houston, TX	Public	61	9	15	12	15	12
Tougaloo College	Tougaloo, MI	Private	79	46	53	51	53	51
Tuskegee University	Tuskegee, AL	Private	73	40	50	46	50	46
University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff	Pine Bluff, AR	Public	55	23	33	28	33	28

(To be continued)

HBCU	Location	Type	Retention Rate %				Six-year Graduation Rates %	
			All	Men	Women	Total		
University of Maryland Eastern Shore	Princess Anne, MD	Public	69	30	32	31		
University of the District of Columbia	District of Columbia	Public	51	17	15	16		
University of the Virgin Islands	St. Croix, VI	Public	-	-	-	-		
Virginia State University	Petersburg, VA	Public	65	39	47	44		
Virginia Union	Richmond, VA	Private	49	21	41	30		
Virginia University of Lynchburg	Lynchburg, VA	Private	100	-	-	-		
Voorhees College	Denmark, SC	Private	46	25	34	29		
West Virginia State University	Institute, WV	Public	50	20	22	21		
Wilberforce University	Wilberforce, OH	Private	78	45	27	33		
Wiley College	Marshall, TX	Private	51	21	10	15		
Winston-Salem State University	Winston-Salem, NC	Public	78	36	42	40		
Xavier University of Louisiana	New Orleans, LA	Private	65	41	49	47		

Note: Retention rates reflect the percentage of first-year students who began their enrollment in the fall 2011 and returned fall 2012. The six-year graduation rate represents students who entered an HBCU in the 2006 cohort as first-time students. Overall graduation rates are the percentage of full-time students who graduated or transferred out within 150% of normal time of degree completion. The HBCUs presented on this table were derived from the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (n.d.) List of Accredited HBCUs.

had slightly lower retention rates (60%), some of these institutions can be credited for retaining a minimum of four of five students: Spelman College (90%), Fisk University (85%), Morehouse College (82%), and Howard University (81%).

Six-year Graduation Rates

Based on the most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), for students entering an HBCU in the 2006 cohort, 32%, on average, graduated in six years. The six-year graduation rates at HBCUs fluctuate from as low as 1% to as high as 73%. By institutional control, private HBCUs graduated, on average, 34% of the students who entered school in the 2006 cohort. In contrast, an average of 30% of students who entered a public HBCU in 2006 graduated in six years. The six-year graduation rates between private and public HBCUs differed sharply. For instance, among private HBCUs, Spelman College (73%), followed by Howard University (63%), graduated a considerably larger proportion of students. This compared to Jackson State University (45%), Elizabeth City State University (43%), North Carolina A&T University (43%), North Carolina Central University (43%), and Virginia State University (42%).

ASSESSING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

As a backdrop, student engagement reflects more than the amount of time students spend in activities. Kuh (2009), for example, defines engagement as “the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (p. 683). In practice, student involvement entails the extent to which a student is actively immersed in educationally purposeful activities, practices, and experiences, such as co-curricular organizations; quality interactions with faculty; opportunities that develop student leadership; and experiences that enhance student learning and other desirable outcomes outside the classroom, laboratory, and studio settings (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Kuh et al., 1991).

A widely used tool to assess student engagement is the NSSE. NSSE 1.0, which is composed of five scales (i.e., Level of Academic Challenge, Active and Collaborative Learning, Student-Faculty Interaction, Enriching Educational Experiences, and Supportive Campus Environment), measures the extent of student engagement as well as the degree to which colleges and universities facilitate effective learning environments among other institutional dimensions (Kuh, 2001).

NSSE RESULTS

The purpose of this research was to investigate NSSE benchmarks at a public HBCU in southeast North Carolina—a state with the predominant number of HBCUs nationally. It currently enrolls approximately 6,000 undergraduate students through a college of arts and sciences, school of education, and school of business and economics. All together, the institution offers 43 undergraduate majors. Two questions formed the basis of this research at an HBCU:

1. Was there a significant difference in the NSSE benchmarks between seniors who graduated and those who did not?
2. Was there a significant difference in the NSSE benchmarks between first-year students who were retained and those who withdrew prematurely at the HBCU?

METHOD

Participants

The total sample size was 2,831 students from the years of 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010. Over this period, the first-year, first-time combined SAT score, on average, was 852, with students in the 2008 cohort earning the highest combined SAT score (i.e., 865). The high school grade point average (HSGPA) ranged from 2.77 to 2.88, with an average HSGPA of 2.82.

Of the total sample, 72% were African American, 17% White, 5% Hispanic, 2% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 1% Native American/American Indian, and 3% other/unknown. In terms of sex, 77% were female with 23% male. There were 1,171 first-year students and 1,660 seniors included in the sample.

Measures

The NSSE benchmarks are measured on a 1–100 score to facilitate comparisons over time (NSSE, 2009). There are 42 items that make up the five NSSE benchmarks. The benchmarks are as follows: Level of Academic Challenge (11 items), Active and Collaborative Learning (7 items), Student-Faculty Interaction (6 items), Enriching Educational Experiences (12 items), and Supportive Campus Environment (6 items). The Level of Academic Challenge benchmark determines the rigor of coursework in terms of academic effort and higher order thinking (Pike, Kuh, McCormick, Ethington, & Smart, 2011). The Active and Collaborative Learning benchmark measures the degree in which students can reflect on

and apply their learning with other students (Campbell & Cabrera, 2011). The Student-Faculty Interaction benchmark measures students' interaction with faculty in and outside the classroom. The Enriching Educational Experience benchmark measures a variety of learning experiences and interactions students have in and out the classroom. Last, the Supportive Campus Environment benchmark measures the students' perceptions of the quality of their interactions on campus and the supportiveness of the university. Reliability coefficients indicate consistency among the NSSE benchmarks. Cronbach alphas range from 0.70 to 0.79. George and Mallery (2003) indicate 0.7 to be acceptable.

Two variables were employed: retained and graduated. The retention variable was used for the first-year students and the graduated variable for the senior students. A first-year student was coded as 1 (reenroll) or 0 (dropped out) and determined if the student was still enrolled at the university one year after taking the survey. Senior students were coded as 1 (graduated) or 0 (did not graduate), depending on whether the student graduated within one year of taking the survey.

Data Analyses

Separate analyses were conducted for first-year and senior students using Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS). Reliability analysis was used to test the consistency of the NSSE benchmarks. Independent sample *t* tests were used to compare the NSSE benchmarks for first-year students and seniors.

RESULTS

Overall, first-year and senior students who were more engaged in all five NSSE benchmarks persisted in school at statistically higher levels than their peers who prematurely withdrew. These are described below separately.

First-year Students

Independent sample *t* tests were used to compare NSSE benchmark scores for 1,171 first-year students who participated in the study. Of the 1,171 first-year students, 949 who were retained had significantly higher levels of engagement on Academic Challenge ($t[1095] = -3.57, p < .001$), Active and Collaborative Learning ($t[1162] = -3.47, p < .01$), Student Faculty Interaction ($t[1108] = -4.15, p < .001$), Enriching Educational Experiences ($t[1062] = -2.70, p < .01$), and Supportive Campus Environment benchmarks ($t[1039] = -3.90, p < .001$) than the 222 first-year students who prematurely withdrew from school after their first year, equating to an 81% retention rate.

Seniors

For seniors, independent sample t tests were also employed to compare six-year graduation rates among 1,660 senior-level students from 2007 to 2010 who graduated as compared to the 581 seniors who did not persist to graduation within one year of participating in the survey during the same time period. In examining the benchmark scores, seniors who graduated had significantly higher levels of Academic Challenge ($t[1597] = -6.91, p < .001$), Active and Collaborative Learning ($t[1647] = -7.85, p < .001$), Student-Faculty Interaction ($t[1605] = -7.81, p < .001$), and Enriching Educational Experiences ($t[1570] = -8.43, p < .001$). This equated to a 65% persistence to graduation rate.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that HBCU first-year and senior students who persisted generally demonstrated high levels of educational effort (i.e., Academic Challenge); exhibited intense involvement in their academic tasks and collaborated with their peers frequently (i.e., Active and Collaborative Learning); interacted with a high degree of substance with their faculty members (i.e., Student-Faculty Interaction); engaged in robust educationally purposeful experiences that complemented academic endeavors (i.e., Enriching Educational Experiences); and interacted formally and informally with diverse students, building important interpersonal skills. This may not be surprising given HBCUs have a history of providing African Americans with supportive environments (Mitchell, 2013a) and experiences that inspire students' confidence (Chen, Ingram, & Davis, 2006).

HBCUs must redouble efforts to improve both retention and graduation rates. These metrics may be at the heart of new legislation related to the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act as "Congress is looking to accreditation to help assure that attending college ... is encouraged and that information is available to students and parents about outcomes such as graduation rates and employment and earnings for graduates" (Eaton, 2014, p. 1). At this point, the former may not bode well for most of the nation's HBCUs.

Given demands to improve retention and degree completion rates, Kuh (2011) opines that enrolling only well-prepared and academically talented students is the most likely enrollment model to assure student success; however, Kuh et al. (2005) and Keller (2001) make the case that because American higher education now enrolls a more wide-ranging spectrum of student backgrounds and talents such a proposition is problematic. In terms of HBCUs, limiting enrollment to only academically top-notch students deeply chafes against the historical and cultural fiber of such institutions and would be detrimental to their institutional livelihood.

Based on decades of research, however, student engagement appears to be a promising concept to improve student persistence (Kuh et al., 2005). This study reinforces such a claim.

PRACTICAL STUDENT ENGAGEMENT APPLICATIONS AT HBCUS

Based on the findings of this study, the implications are organized around five practical applications for student engagement for HBCUs: Academic Challenge: Promoting High Impact Practices; Active and Collaborative Learning: Focusing on Men of Color; Student-Faculty Interactions: Connect Faculty with Students Early; Educationally Enriching Activities: Invest in Experiences that Matter; and Supportive Campus Environments: Document and Share Aspects of Successful HBCU Environments.

Academic Challenge: Promote High-impact Practices

As Kuh and associates (2005) suggest, “Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality” (p. 177). It is not necessarily the depth and scope of reading and writing assignments as it is the extent to which the nature of the work expands students’ intellectual curiosity “and stretches students to previously unrealized levels of effort” (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 178). As HBCUs consider academically challenging more students, especially underperforming students, engaging them in high-impact practices could be the linchpin to their success, as many of these practices lead to deeper approaches to learning (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). Challenging students to synthesize ideas, apply theories, integrate ideas and diverse perspectives, and judge the value of information are beneficial to most students. These strategies can be particularly beneficial to underrepresented minorities, low-income, and first-generation students (Brownell & Swaner, 2009), students typically enrolled at HBCUs.

Active and Collaborative Learning: Focus on Men of Color

Students in this study who were actively engaged in active and collaborative learning practices, including asking questions in class, making class presentations, and participating in community-based projects, were more likely to persist in college than their peers who were not as engaged in this benchmark. We argue that the findings should be disaggregated by gender, although we can make such a claim for other benchmarks, as it appears that many men of color learn differently and up to now current models have not had the desirable educational outcomes for such students, especially in terms of improving their retention and persistence.

Thus, better engaging men of color in active and collaborative learning could yield more ideal outcomes. For example, getting more men of color to utilize institutional safety nets and services—opportunities in which men of color appear not to engage—may be the sine qua non to their success and persistence.

At one institution, where men of color were academically underperforming, \$400,000 was invested in a male initiative to help reverse their declining retention and graduation rates. In its initial year, the initiative helped increase the retention rate of males from 67% in 2010 to 74% in 2011. Also, 82% of first-year men of color who participated in the initiative during the 2012–2013 academic year returned the following fall, which compares to 62% among all first-year males who entered the university during the same cohort (DeSousa, 2014).

Student-Faculty Interactions: Connect Faculty with Students Early

According to Kuh and associates (2005), talking about career plans, discussing ideas with faculty, receiving prompt feedback, working with faculty on research projects, and discussing class assignments and grades typify the Student-Faculty Interaction benchmark. Academic affairs practitioners and others can play a vital role in demonstrating the interconnectedness between student success and student-faculty interactions. The findings of this study support this claim.

In particular, faculty should be attentive to the “talent development” concept (Astin, 1993; Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008; Kuh et al., 2005), which encourages faculty and others to “work with the students they have, not those they wish they had ... [a] belief that any student can learn anything ... provided the right conditions are established for their learning, and [faculty] enact this belief by meeting students where they are—academically, socially, and psychologically” (DeSousa, 2005, p. 2). Strengthening the talent development concept at HBCUs will likely result in more positive results with regard to students’ retention.

Educationally Enriching Activities: Invest in Experiences that Matter

First-year and senior students in this study persisted at significantly higher rates when engaged in Educationally Enriching Activities. This benchmark reflects student engagement in experiences that complement learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom, studio, and laboratory, such as participating in internships, civic engagement, field experiences, and an array of co-curricular experiences (Kuh et al., 2005).

Student affairs practitioners should consider organizing student activity fees and other resources more effectively. HBCUs have longstanding traditions and customs that plausibly fall under this benchmark; however, given the current climate of scarce institutional resources, HBCUs must be intrepid enough to put

resources in opportunities that are more closely aligned with facilitating learning and persistence than merely bringing students together for modestly enriching activities. Admittedly, this may not be a popular recommendation; however, student activity fees and other resources must reach a wider number of students, with these fees organized around practices that create staying power and not necessarily perpetuate institutional customs that attract few students and are not connected to desired institutional outcomes.

Supportive Campus Environments: Document and Share Aspects of Successful HBCU Environments

In this study, first-year and senior students who persisted had high scores on the Supportive Campus Environment benchmark. While it is well documented that HBCUs provide supportive campus environments for African Americans and other students, HBCUs must be more intentional in documenting the specific aspects of the institutional environment that contribute to a more human scale milieu. Alternatively, are there other practices that better contribute to the unique supportive environments found at HBCUs? By documenting precisely which engagement practices are contributing to students' academic and personal success, HBCUs might improve persistence rates for students.

CONCLUSION

Since the emergence of HBCUs, these institutions have exhibited laudable staying power despite decades of criticism (Willie, Reddick, & Brown, 2006). Yet, higher education's current climate now demands more of them. Preparing today's generation of HBCU students (and future ones) will require these institutions to better engage students in educationally purposeful, compelling, and relevant curricular and co-curricular experiences—many of these experiences are reflected on NSSE. Its institutional utility was recognized in Spellings' (2006) "A Test of Leadership: Chartering the Future of U.S. Higher Education," which recommends its use widely in American higher education. We, therefore, recommend greater use of it at HBCUs in order to improve diverse populations' performance as well as to enhance institutional quality.

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