

**National Impact: The Effects of Mentorship on the
Level of Retention for
African American Freshman Students Attending
Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

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ABSTRACT

The authors discuss the problems and issues of student retention and persistence, and in particular African American freshman students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities. More specifically, this article examines the challenging problems HBCUs are facing in the areas of recruiting, enrolling, retaining and graduating students. The review of literature addresses: (a) the gaps in research that indicates little empirical data is compiled during the first and second semesters freshman students enter and return to the universities and (b) offers relevant data focusing on numerous factors that contribute to the attrition and retention rates.

The purpose of the article is to examine factors that influence the level of retention for African American students attending selected HBCUs. The article will present information regarding the significance of the retention issue in higher education, retention issues of minority students at HBCUs, retention theoretical framework and assessing trends relating to retention/attrition intervention strategies.

Retention Issues

Retention is a major factor in an institution credibility and financial stability. A greater emphasis is being placed on retention and attrition in higher education in the United States. While the lack of persistence behavior and withdrawal are problems with undergraduates students in general, they are particularly so, for African American students. African American students complete college at one of the lowest rates of any student groups (Synder, 1999).

In recent years, national statistics has shown the average of 25% to 30% of students do not return to their first college for their sophomore year (Mortenson, 2003). In addition, six years later less than 50% of college-bound student students will have graduated (Branch, 2001; Astin & Oseguera, 2000 and Ashby, 2003). According to Tinto (1993), "institutions have come to view the retention of students as the only reasonable course of action left to insure their survival, and a growing number have turned their energies in that direction with renewed passion", (p.2). Tinto (1987) points out that over half of all entering students would leave before they complete their first years, a statistic that HBCUs continue to confront.

Data from the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) indicates the overall graduation rate of African American after six years is 38 % compared to 56 % for white students. It is estimated that American colleges and universities lose approximately 1 billion dollars a year from first- year attrition. The losses from increased earnings from not securing a degree for each cohort of students that drops out of college totals more than 4 billion dollars. Those most likely to drop out of college are the low income, minorities and first generation college students (Noel, 1991).

National statistics reveals that up to 40% of students are inadequately prepared for college (Boylan, 1995). Of these students, about 40% of white students and 70% of African American students drop out of college because of the lack of preparation, or because of a lack of academic and/or social support during their first if college (Tinto, 1975). To combat the sobering statistics, the State of Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board mandates all state-funded institutions provide development education programs that would curb the number of dropouts from Texas higher education institutions. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board in its *Closing the Gaps: The Texas Higher Education Plan* is divided into four areas (participation, success, excellence, and research) and details goals for these areas that higher education institutions must achieve in order to meet the needs of Texas's growing population by year 2015 (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2001). Determining what

predicators influences the retention of students, colleges and universities should be able to more effectively close the participation gaps and increase the retention of students (Williams, 2004).

Retention and HBCU Institutions

The retention of minority students is widely acknowledged as one of the most challenging problems in higher education. The national average retention rate of African American students is 45 % within 5 years as compared to 57 % for white students according to the Fredrick D. Patterson Institution (Rowser, 2001). The retention rates for freshman African American male students in HBCUs are lower compared to female students. In 2004, African American females comprised 59.3% of students attending four-year HBCU institutions compared to 40.7 % for males (Whigham and LaVeist, 2004).

HBCUs are limited in the area of research data on student persistence and retention. Factors that promote minority students' overall persistence in college have rarely been researched. Basically, current attrition and retention theories lack the understanding of various factors that influence the level of retention for African American students. Without the sufficient insight, researchers will be unable to develop a theoretical framework and identify predictors that influence many of the African American students' decisions to leave colleges and universities, specifically HBCUs.

The literature reveals enrollment, retention, student development and graduation of African American students is contingent on six factors:

1. Active recruitment
2. Flexibility of admission requirements
3. Availability of sound financial aid packages
4. Favorable institutional climate
5. Mentoring programs
6. Attitudes of the African American student (Terenzini and Wright, 1987).

There is a continuing conflict between African American and other minority groups and majority groups for increasingly scarce educational resources and opportunities, and persistence conflict over who shall be served" (Karabel & Halsey, 1977). History, race relations and group conflicts are major factors to be kept in mind in a review of African American attrition and retention in higher education.

It has been theorized that because of the history of oppression and discrimination in higher education, African American have adopted coping strategies for retention in higher education (Fordham, 1988). African Americans place a great deal of importance on social bonding and group cohesiveness. This "communal value" orientation is the

sentiment that "I am because we are and because we are, therefore, I am" (Boykins, 1994).

It is important to recognize HBCUs are connected to the issue of continuance in higher education for many students, in particular for African Americans. The sufficiency of data in the literature supports the contention that the HBCU environment is a useful one for African American students. HBCUs use their normal availability of support, encouragement and acceptance in their college environment to enhance the retention of their students.

Theories on Student Retention/Attrition

Tinto's Student Integration Model

Vincent Tinto, *"Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research,"* spurred more than twenty-five years of dialogue on student retention and persistence in higher. His work remains the dominant sociological theory of how students navigate through the postsecondary system.

According to Tinto (1993), "more students leave their college or university prior to degree completion than stay", approximately 41 out of every 100 entering freshman depart higher education institution without obtaining a degree. The first year of college has been identified as the most critical for student success. It is no secret that the majority of students who choose to leave college their first year of study. Most of the freshmen leave within the first two years of study. Understanding why students leave college involves a complex number of factors. Tinto's research found that most students leave voluntarily.

Padilla Expertise Model of Successful College Students

This model is rooted in qualitative research, it suggest that successful college students are, (by virtue of having successfully re-enrolled) those who are "expert" at being successful at a specific college or university. The student's knowledge is build upon two components: theoretical knowledge and heuristic knowledge. Theoretical knowledge includes principles and general theories of a particular system. Heuristic knowledge includes knowledge acquired experientially. Domain-specific facts are learned first. Experience usually teaches the student to rely on rules-of-thumb to perform task or solve problems (Harmon & King, 1985).

Astin's Student Involvement Theory

The Student Involvement Theory Model emphasize that factors important to college student development were synonymous to the factors important to college student attrition, in terms of the degree to which a student is involved in the institution. The amount of personal development realized and the effectiveness of the institution's policies and practices directly related to the level of student involvement.

Bean's Student Attrition Theory

This model is built on the theory of attrition based on organizational turnovers and models of attitude-behavior interactions. Bean postulates that student departure decisions to leave college are synonymous to adult's decision to leave the workplace. And is based on a complex interrelationship of non-cognitive factors that affects a student's decision to drop or persist, and environmental factors (including family and friend approval. Belief shapes attitudes and attitudes, in turn shapes behavioral intents.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, if education is the key to securing the future of any populous, then HBCUs must find a way to ensure African American students are successful in completing their program of study. The philosophical basis of a policy on student retention must be the idea that each institution in higher education should make every effort to retain their students who are capable of doing satisfactory academic work. HBCUs must work towards providing students with a meaningful learning environment, to empower students to become connected to the institution by developing a sense of belonging with the student body. African American students cannot simply enroll in HBCUs because enrollment does not always translate into degree attainment. Finally, the purpose of this article was to examine factors that influence the level of retention for African American freshman students attending selected HBCUs. Given the significance of a college degree, African American freshman student retention must be a priority for HBCUs. Effective intervention strategies for reducing low attrition and high retention rates must be developed, implemented and evaluated by HBCUs to changing the growing rates of retention at their institution. It is appropriate to acknowledge the critical role in higher education that HBCU institutions has played despite the many obstacles in the lack of resources and funding.

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