

Student retention of african american males education essay



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Today, in the 21st century, more than half of the students with dreams and aspirations of receiving a college degree or certificate leave higher education with their dream shattered. Retention rate for minority students and students with disabilities have always lagged behind their white and Asian counterparts, which is why the nation's most selective institutions remains inequitable. In this essay, the authors discuss the problems and issues of student retention facing the black male students in higher education. More specifically, they explore the challenges and problems in the areas of recruitment, enrollment, and retention the African-American males faced by educational institutions across the country.

Introduction

Student retention continues to be a major problem for most educational institutions. Even though colleges continues to spend money on a variety of programs to help retain students until they attain their academic and personal goals, the numbers still remain below the average rate, which is particularly true for African-American males. Demographic information indicates that most institutions have a difficult time retaining black males. Therefore, it is vital the educational institutions seek ways to improve retention rates for all students but especially African-American males. Retention rates should not differ significantly among different racial groups.

Entire communities can be transformed by education as it gives individuals the capability to dream. One major hindrance to this is the plummeting rate of student retention in the educational institutions in America. The purpose of the essay is to examine issues that affect the level of retention for African-

American male students attending institutions of higher education and the trends relating to retention/attrition intervention strategies.

Literature Review

The past decade has seen a steady increase in the overall enrollment of black students in higher education. Although there was a dramatic increase in enrollment at historically black colleges, there are still a number of African-American students enrolled in predominantly white institutions. Though such an increase of students is a cause for celebration, research in the retention rates shows an alarming trend. Only one third to one half of African-American students who enroll at such colleges leave with degrees (Bourne-Bowie, 2000). The number of students admitted or accepted into educational institutions is inconsequential if they do not graduate. Even students with strong academic backgrounds drop out at rates higher than that of European counterparts. Academic preparation does not guarantee that African-American students will persist until graduation. Significant research has been done on minority student retention and the factors responsible, and this has shown that persistence and academic success have as much to do with social interaction and social adjustment in the college setting as do variables such as socio economic background and academic preparedness. One significant factor is the interpersonal element of college life (Bourne-Bowie, 2000). Simple recruitment of students into schools does not make any difference if those students do not complete their studies. It is important to provide minorities with greater access to all different professions. Even though retaining students of all racial orientation is a major issue, the retention of minority students is a particularly important

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issue because of the marked disparity in attrition rates between white and minority students (Berger, 1992).

The African-American Male initiative (AAMI) that was launched by the City University of New York (CUNY) was one that was aimed at solving the acute problem of student retention at its 11 campuses. A similar program was set up by the University of Georgia also. There are mainly three objectives to these initiatives.

To identify the obstacles that are faced by the African American males in admission and retention,

To support these groups by devising programmatic interventions so that any obstacles can be mitigated,

To provide the financial support necessary for the initiatives (Bobb, 2006).

The efficacy of these initiatives is undermined by many factors. The targeted scholarships, recruitment efforts and the campus programs that were devised exclusively for the benefit of the underrepresented minorities have been dismantled or weakened considerably. Moreover, these initiatives exist in a system which is increasingly conservative (Bobb, 2006). From a statistical point of view, the average score for black men is not only bad in their own right but when compared to others like Asian and white students it is even worse. In a school in Atlanta where there is 100% black enrollment, the average SAT score among the students of the school was 721. The average score for White and Asian students in other schools were 1123 and 1155 respectively. The difference of 400 points on a test for 1600 points is

not ordinary (Bobb, 2006). There is also a discord between the Black community and the expectations of the American academic world. ' There is increasingly less common language, common assumptions and common understanding across the divide to effectively act on the objectives of the AAMIs' (Bobb, 2006).

One of the problems is that when such facts would have created a hue and cry earlier, there is not much response now as people have started to accept this fact. " The steadily worsening condition of the Black community is becoming part of the background noise in this country" (Bobb, 2006). This also results in poverty, health disparities and the rise of juvenile crime. For many people the familiarity with such day to day problems makes them recluses and preoccupied with solving their own problems than consider community contributions.

As rightly prophesized by the Pan-africanist educator and social scientist W. E. B DuBois, the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line. He maintained that " this was the problem of the Twentieth Century, the problem of the color line, a line that stopped black and other non-white skinned people from getting an even break from the social, political, and economic powers, controlled by whites" (Sanders, 2010). The Kernel Commission in 1968 reported that the United States was moving towards the formation of two societies that would be divided along the racial line. The question before the educators of the 21st century is whether the next century will also see such a divide (Bourne-Bowie, 2000).

In the state of Mississippi, African-American males lag behind females in degree completion. On a nationwide basis there is a 2: 1 ratio of African-American females to males who are enrolled in higher education. For the academic year 2006-1007, the high school graduation rate for African-American males was 59. 7% as compared to 76. 9% of African American females. In 2008, there were 8452 males enrolled in colleges as opposed to the 17595 females. During 2007-2008, community colleges reported that there was n enrollment of 10, 383 African American males as opposed to 23, 939 females. In order to examine the ways to increase the enrollment of African American males and subsequently their retention and graduation, the Mississippi institutions of higher learning established a taskforce in late 2008 (Mississippi Institutions of higher learning, 2009). The differences between male and female graduation rates can be seen in the following diagram.

(JBHE, 2007)

Higher education is like a gateway to economic empowerment for the communities to which students belong. “ All too often the wide-eyed optimism and enthusiasm that students bring to registration, dissipates, which results in departure from the institution prior to degree completion” (Wynetta, 1999). A 4 year degree requires more time for some students. The degree completion rate is only 40% for all 4 year institutions. This rate increases to 65% for 6 years. Less than half of the students who enter 4-year institutions complete the course within 9 years (Astin, Tsui, & Avalos, 1996). The record is even smaller in public universities where the degree completion rate is only 34% in 4 years and 40% in 6 years. Out of all the

students who enter a public university, only 41% complete a 4-year course within 9 years (Astin, Tsui, & Avalos, 1996).

However, the degree completion rates are even discouraging when considering African- American students. “ Only 19% of African American students complete the 4-year degree within 4 years, and less than one third (32%) of this group completes within 6 years” (Astin, Tsui, & Avalos, 1996). Only 34% complete a 4 year course within 9 years. The completion rate of white students is comparatively higher- 43% in 4 years and 47% within 6 and 9 years. The reason why this data is alarming is because the data used comes from historically Black colleges and universities (Wynetta, 1999). Post secondary education is pursued by African American students at predominantly white institutions and the completion rates are the lowest in these types of institutions (Nettles & Perna, 1997).

In the theoretical model of student retention that was developed by Tinto in 1975, colleges and universities were viewed as being composed of two interacting systems-an academic system and a social system. “ Student retention results from a combination of students’ entering characteristics, their commitment to the institution, their commitment to goals, and their academic and social experiences in college”(Wynetta, 1999). The core of the model is the process is the academic and social integration of the students into the campus environment. Even though there were variations in operationalizing the core concepts numerous studies have agreed to the importance of the integration of the Academic and social aspects into the institutional environment (Wynetta, 1999).

Academic integration has a strong positive influence on degree attainment and persistence only at the lowest levels of social integration. As a student's level of social integration increased, the importance given by the student to academic integration diminished. The reverse was true for when the level of academic integration increased, the importance of social integration diminished (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). It was also found that as the student's level of family education and commitment to graduation increases, the importance of academic and social integration decreases. This creates a problem because many African American students that are undergoing education now are either first generation college students or will be the first ever in their families to have completed their education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). This is attributed to a couple of causes. A college could be an intimidating place for young people especially if they are the first to go to college from their family. It could be like an alien planet for those especially from poor and lower middle class families (Chase, 1997). Students from minority families might not be prepared to live away from home or adjust to the life in a public research university (Leon, Dougherty, & Maitland, 1997).

Faculty members need to interact with the students especially those that are freshmen. This creates a bond between the students and the faculty and will lead to a relationship between them. This could not only help them excel in their academic performance but will also create a rapport whereby students will be able to confide in their faculty members if they face any problems in their personal life. This can be done not only with the structured experiences in academic settings like classrooms, labs and work groups but also through informal contact with faculty outside these settings (Pascarella & Terenzini,

1991). “ Freshman-to-sophomore persistence was positively and significantly related to total amount of student-faculty non classroom contact with faculty and particularly to frequency of interactions with faculty to discuss intellectual matters” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). These kind of non classroom interactions are very important to retain students.

Culture is one factor that varies from person to person and a lot of diversity can be seen on campuses. When African -American students study at a predominantly white university campuses, there is bound to be a clash of cultures. The two cultures are their own culture and the institution’s culture. Culture is what is attributed to eventually lead to behavior (Wynetta, 1999). When people from Africa were brought as slaves to the United States of America centuries ago, they consisted of a myriad languages, customs, religions, and social political and economic institutions. These factors differentiated them and gave them separate identities. Even though centuries have passed, and the intra-cultural identity is less pronounced than what it was, African Americans still continue this tradition of separate identities (Levine, 1977). But even though they were so diverse, there were many similarities which perhaps helped them in sharing a fundamental outlook towards the past, present and future (Wynetta, 1999).

African-Americans as a matter of fact have many points of similarity but their culture itself is different from region to region. Even though their experience of effects of race is similar, the severity of consequence varies. Among other factors that accentuate the diversity between African Americans is the region factor, according to which they can be differentiated by those that were born and raised in the south and the north. “ The complexities of ‘ culture’ form a <https://assignbuster.com/student-retention-of-african-american-males-education-essay/>

foundation for understanding why institutions rarely address students' culture as a background characteristic for program development" (Wynetta, 1999). Institutions must take this factor into consideration and attempts by educational institutions can help in creating an environment that is not only tolerant to the various cultures but also evolves and learns from the diversity.

Institutions like people also have a culture. Institutions carry cultures that make them unique and distinguishable from other institutions. Culture in this context has also been defined as " a pattern of basic assumptions-invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration-that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (Roueche, Baker, & Rose, 1989). The competitive culture that can often be seen in the educational institutions is one which gives rise to academic excellence and critical thinking. It is therefore an indispensable part of the culture of such institutions. Even though notions like ' collegiality' and ' community' are gaining popularity in campuses, these institutions still promote autonomy. The success of such institutions depends on the collective efforts of the students and the faculty. Most of the work done here is completed in isolation. This kind of a competitive isolated environment makes it difficult for African American students because natural-forming mentoring relationships become difficult. It makes them feel uncertain about their academic skills and marginalized from the mainstream population (Wynetta, 1999).

The fact that these students enter such institutions with a strong heritage that has evolved over centuries is not the only issue. Some of the students enter college but are unprepared for the college level work. ' The low retention rate in public universities, the complexities of the cultural heritage that students bring to college, academic under-preparation, and information under-preparation are deterrents to students' degree attainment' (Wynetta, 1999). In addition to these deterrents, the importance of faculty-student relationships in the freshman year point to the importance of effective strategies to foster retention to degree completion (Wynetta, 1999).

Mentoring programs are gaining popularity in universities across the country. The group of students that this effort is aimed at is usually those that are minorities and academically unprepared. The underlying goal of the mentoring program is to enhance the institution's degree completion rates (Wynetta, 1999). In some cases, the institutions stress the involvement of graduate students as well as mentors, which is unfortunate because research literature stresses the importance of faculty-student interactions inside and outside class. The benefits for the students will be obviously the attainment of educational and professional goals but there are no benefits to the faculty that are involved. However, since the mentors who do participate in these kinds of programs are motivated by values than tangible rewards, they are committed rewards (Wynetta, 1999).

While pairing mentors with their protégés, there are a few things that could be considered. It would be more effective if mentors and protégés are of the same characteristics including race. " Similarities serve as a foundation for developing effective communication and trust, so that the relationship can

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be sustained over time” (Leon, Dougherty, & Maitland, 1997). It can help to sustain the bond among them for a longer period of time. This can be a problem in white institutions where there could be paucity for African-American faculty members. Such faculty members if any will be expected to be as productive as the other faculties and will not be able to devote more time to students belonging to the minority (Wynetta, 1999). In a qualitative study that was conducted in universities to discover the perspective among students of their adjustment towards the university, there were three general themes.

Student’s adjustment to the college process: this was a process that took almost one full year. When students entered colleges they did so with endless enthusiasm and high aspirations. Those who had prior educational experiences admitted that it was helpful to them while they got accustomed to the atmosphere. In spite of their diversity in their ability to embrace the reality about the challenges of the college they were very optimistic about their future at the university. The freshman year was a time of change when students were de-socialized from their innate culture and socialized to participate in a new one (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). This was a difficult process for the African American students because they were at the risk of academic failure as they had to take many distractions from studies.

Moreover since their friends and families existed in the worlds they belong they had to remain connected to them. Thus the de-socialization and socialization process seems to be having a potential to remain incomplete. Even students from minorities who were considered popular in the university had the following kinds of comments to make ‘ There is so much more to do

and so little time to get it all done. Things are getting better with time. I feel like I belong here, like I'll make it. Still, there are days when I still feel like a great big ball of confusion' (Wynetta, 1999).

Receptivity to having a faculty mentor: students were open to the idea of getting a mentor but were afraid of the costs involved. After being convinced that they would not have to pay they ended up being suspicious. With the exception of a very few students, the opinion towards having a mentor was welcomed and though to be a great help. While several earlier researches point out to the matching of mentor-protégé characteristics (Leon, Dougherty, & Maitland, 1997), " it was surprising to discover that the students in this study (African American, academically underprepared freshmen), across focus groups, felt that having an African American faculty mentor was less important than having a mentor in their career field". Their reasoning was that they could get the cultural connection by just going home. Students indicated that they did not receive positive interactions from their mentors, since not all African American faculties could connect with their protégé like the others.

Under-emphasis on race compatibility in attaining a mentor: there was a discernable difference in the perception of what was offensive and negative in northern-bound educated individuals and those with a strong southern culture. ' The demands on faculty time limit their ability to interact with students in a manner that matches students' expectations' (Wynetta, 1999). The impatience and lack of interest on the part of faculty members with whom they are expected to have a bond prevents such a bond from forming (Wynetta, 1999).

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Therefore all the parties involved have a set of obligations.

Student's obligation:

Students have an obligation to contribute to the mentoring relationship.

They have to be prepared and show appreciation for the mentor's efforts.

Instead of waiting for someone to notice their potential for success or their frustration with the institution, African American students have to be actively involved in seeking out a mentor.

The students also have the obligation to teach their mentor about their cultural perspectives. This requires the student to understand the mentor's culture and in finding effective means of communication (Wynetta, 1999).

Faculty's obligation:

Faculty members have to build an air of trust for the mentoring relationship to succeed. They should be able to cultivate a sense of confidence from the protégé and make sure that this level of confidence stays.

Faculty members should be able to devote enough time towards the student and not evoke a sense of neglect from the student.

Faculty should also develop a level of cultural competence so that they can participate in a cross cultural or uniraacial mentoring relationship (Wynetta, 1999).

Institution's obligation:

Policies and programs have to be developed so that the mentoring process can be formalized. Even though informal mentoring structures are better than nothing, this can result in arbitrary relationships and serve a select few only.

The danger of low degree completion requires a mentoring relationship for all African American students.

Faculty reward structures should reflect a preference to mentoring efforts by faculty members.

They must not be penalized or their career jeopardized for their participation in such efforts (Wynetta, 1999).

Leadership development can also help African-American male students to integrate into the social ethos and equip them to engage them in the academic rigor of higher education. Although there has been a brief mention of this aspect in the literature of student retention, ' the intersection between college success and leadership development among college students remains understudied at best. " Leadership development, as a mechanism to ensure college success, can shape itself in many forms at higher education institutions" (Dabney, 2010). There are many areas where students can hone their leadership skills. These can be Campus-based organizations, residence halls, student government associations, peer-mentoring programs and other related opportunities. Culturally based student organizations that help in fostering a sense of belonging also help students in developing their leadership capabilities. There is also a positive

link between African American student retention and their participation in Greek-letter fraternities and sororities (Dabney, 2010).

The faculty, administrators and the student affairs practitioners must make sure that the African American students are provided with enough opportunities to hone their leadership skills by way of formal and informal professional development opportunities. The informal ways to improve their leadership skills could be by making them attend leadership conferences, brown-bag leadership luncheons, seminars and retreats offered by their schools and external organizations (Dabney, 2010). There are also many informal methods like casual conversations about the issue. It is also possible to develop their leadership skills by helping African-American male students resolve matters through conversations guided by Black identity development theory and student leadership theory as it not only facilitates learning but also helps in self-actualization. Some of these engagements should be culturally relevant and respect the leadership styles, practices and customs of African Americans. Thus when the retention strategies are multifaceted it can assist the students in developing a sense of social, financial and personal security that is also accompanied by academic competence. Colleges that are facing problems in retention and persistence among students must focus on culturally relevant practices and empower the students with the skills and insight that is required to succeed (Dabney, 2010).

Among the nation's colleges and universities, the lowest black graduation rates are at Carleton College in Minnesota and among the high ranking universities, the lowest black graduation rate is at the Carnegie Mellon <https://assignbuster.com/student-retention-of-african-american-males-education-essay/>

University in Pittsburgh. The reason for this is attributed to the curriculum that is heavily oriented towards science. There are a few possible reasons why the black graduation rates are strong in some high ranking institutions and weaker in top ranked schools (JBHE, 2007).

Favorable racial climate: in some colleges and universities the racial climate could be more favorable towards the African Americans. It is important to have a nurturing environment to have a positive impact on the retention rates. Brown university for example is one such university. As a marked contrast the University of California at Berkeley, is known for racial issues and low graduation rates.

Orientation and retention programs: many colleges with high retention rates have orientation programs in place that can help black students adapt to the culture of campuses that are predominantly white.

Geographic locations: geographical locations can also play a major part in the black graduation rates. Graduation rates in such rural areas are much higher than that in colleges and universities in urban areas.

Presence of black students in campus: the presence of black members in student bodies and campuses is also an important factor. Those that have a low percentage of blacks in the student bodies also end up having low black graduation rates. When there are lots of black students around it is bound to make the new arrivals feel at home.

Curriculum differences: while Carnegie Mellon is heavily oriented towards the sciences, there is a very low graduation rates because these are not fields

where African Americans have a presence. There is also a possibility that the black community are made to feel uncomfortable by certain faculty members who persist in the belief that African Americans do not have the intellectual ability to excel in science.

Inferior K-12 preparation: when there is a poor family college tradition, there is bound to be a high dropout rate. Apart from that family wealth and availability of financial aid is also a very important factor. According to a study by Nellie Mae, the largest non-profit provider of federal and private education loan funds in this country, 69 percent of African Americans who enrolled in college but did not finish said that they left college because of high student loan debt as opposed to 43 percent of white students who cited the same reason (JBHE, 2007).

Conclusion

It is not possible for any community to improve their standard of life without education. The African-American community in America has had to deal with a lot of prejudice in the past but it is up to the educational institutions, the families of the children and the children themselves to make sure that this prejudice does not seep into the future. There are many initiatives that can be adopted by universities and as in the case of the AAMI the initiatives must also be accompanied by the will to change. This change has to be from every individual involved in the program. The families must understand the importance that education can bring into their lives and be willing to support their children. The colleges and institutions must be willing to come up with innovative measures like mentorship to make sure that more students enroll,

stay and graduate from their institutions. And finally, students who are the main subject of this whole argument must not look at the hardships that they will have to go through but consider the positive impact that their efforts can have on future generations of African Americans.