



MAKING THE GRADE:

Improving Degree Attainment at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

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HIGHLIGHTS:

- HBCUs are at the forefront of serving the needs of minority and non-traditional students whose success is crucial to our global and national future.

- Using six-year, first-time, full-time, bachelor's degree completion rates as the only measure of institutional performance does not address the unique role or longstanding mission of HBCUs.

- HBCUs enroll a large proportion of part-time, transfer, and low-income students as well as those who stop in and out of college due to life circumstances. These students' degree completion simply doesn't register on a six-year, graduation yardstick.

- Traditional measures provide little insight into what factors influence lower graduation rates, and what measures can contribute most effectively to higher rates.

- New, more comprehensive measures will assist HBCUs in developing meaningful action plans to increase academic achievement among low-income students of color.

“WHERE SOME HISTORICALLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS SEE RISK, HBCUS SEE OPPORTUNITY - A CHANCE TO RAISE THE EDUCATION LEVEL OF ANOTHER MEMBER OF SOCIETY”

- Dr. George Wright

HBCUS AND THE DIVERSITY CHALLENGE

America's increasing racial and ethnic diversity is both a challenge and an opportunity for our higher-education community. One third of the nation's population is now minority, according to the latest Census figures. Four states – Hawaii, California, Texas, and New Mexico – already have “minority-majority” status. These younger, growing minority student populations will be vital to the success of any national educational endeavor – and to our future economic well-being and security as a nation.

For more than a century, HBCUs have been in the forefront of educating African Americans (as well as increasingly Latinos) and other disadvantaged students, many of whom are the first members of their families to attend college. Often the students who attend HBCUs have been ignored by majority institutions because they are seen as a risk in terms of their ability to graduate from college. But where some historically White institutions (HWIs) see risk, HBCUs see opportunity – a chance to raise the education level of another member of society.

DEGREES OF SUCCESS

In the words of higher education researcher and UCLA professor Alexander Astin, “The major problem with the graduation rate as a measure is that it is usually a misleading indicator of an institution's capacity to retain its students. For example, if college A's graduation rate is 70 percent and college B's rate is only 40 percent, that does not mean that college A is better or more effective at retaining students. College A might actually be even less effective than college B at keeping students in college. It all depends on the kinds of students that the two colleges admit.”¹

Some HBCU students excel in high school, leading their classes in terms of academic achievement. But others – who have been failed, in part, by their neighborhood primary and secondary schools – come from low-income households, and are often the first in their families to attend college. HBCUs meet these students where they are, both intellectually and socially, and with a combination of emotional support and high expectations, adding significant value to their learning experience. Traditional graduation rate measures, which result in lower overall rates for HBCUs than for HWIs, simply do not reflect either the unique educational challenges or significant accomplishments of HBCUs. In addition, they provide little analysis or insight into what factors contribute most strongly to lower graduation rates, and which can most effectively contribute to higher rates of success.

Likewise, these measures do not capture the distance that students must travel in life to attain their degrees. HBCUs typically move their students past significant barriers of class (as measured by percentage of students receiving Pell Grants) and academic preparation (as measured by median SAT score) to arrive at graduation day. And, they do so with fewer financial resources.

HBCUs also enroll a much larger proportion of part-time students, transfer students, and those who step in and out of college due to life circumstances. These students' degree completion rates simply do not register on a six-year, first-time, full-time graduation yardstick.

We therefore recommend a new measure that contextualizes graduation rates – demonstrating the immense value these institutions add as they raise their students from a position of academic weakness to strength – and taking into consideration students' socio-economic status and academic preparation.²

¹ Alexander Astin, “To use graduation rates to measure effectiveness, you have to do your homework,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 22, 2004.

² Kim, M.M. & Conrad, C.F. (2006). The impact of historically Black colleges and universities on the academic success of African-American students. *Research in Higher Education*, 47(4), 399-427.

IMPROVING RETENTION AND DEGREE ATTAINMENT

Reconceptualizing the way that we measure graduation rates gives us a clearer picture of institutional performance.

At the same time, we must continue to develop innovative and dynamic strategies for increasing retention and degree attainment.

Consider the case of Kentucky State University. Through a statewide initiative called Project Graduate, Kentucky State is identifying those students who are close to graduation but who have stalled in their pursuit of a college degree. Having tracked these students down, the school assists them in finishing their degrees. Of note, a large percentage of these students are African American men, a population that needs considerably more attention from the higher education community.³

At Jackson State University, first-year students take an entrance test to gauge their skills and educational needs through a program known as the College Basic Academic Subjects Examination (CBASE). After their first year, students retake the test as sophomores to measure their improvement. Identifying problem areas immediately among students has enabled the university to craft advising,

study skills, and remedial programming that better meets student needs. In addition, Jackson State has developed a curriculum-audit program that allows students and advisors to continually monitor academic progress.

Likewise, Prairie View A & M University's ACCESS program aims to cocoon students, freeing them from unnecessary distractions to learning, providing them with tutoring, and placing them under the watch of academic counselors who monitor their progress. The goal is to build student self-confidence and study skills that can sustain them throughout their college experience.

To fulfill a commitment to educational equity and to meet President Obama's national goals for higher education, it is essential that we educate more than just those students with impressive high school GPAs and high standardized test scores. We must also make a firm commitment to educating those, mostly low-income students of color, who are underprepared for college but aspire to high personal and professional achievement. These students are deserving of a quality education and we as a nation, will benefit from their contributions. It may be their education, but it is a future that we all share.

ACTION ITEMS:

CREATE A PERFORMANCE INDEX:

We must create a performance index that uses more comprehensive measures of institutional success. This 21st century index should also take into account the changes in the college-going population; today more students attend part-time, enroll at multiple institutions, and stop in and stop out to manage their lives. Moreover, the new index must consider the percentage of students receiving Pell Grants, SAT scores, and per student expenditures.

INVEST IN DATA COLLECTION AND TRACKING:

We need to invest in the technological infrastructure at HBCUs to more accurately report institutional success and track the individual progress of students at HBCUs.

DUPLICATE SUCCESSFUL RETENTION PROGRAMS:

Many HBCUs boast innovative and successful retention programs. To strengthen retention and graduation success, these best practices must be shared with and adopted by other HBCUs, and majority institutions.

³ Thurgood Marshall College Fund, *HBCUs Models for Success: Supporting Achievement and Retention of Black Males* 2006 < <http://www.tmcmodelsforsuccess.com/> >.

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CHANGE AND DIVERSITY AT PUBLIC HBCUS

America's 47 public HBCUs continue to grow and change as they work to achieve their core mission of educating African American, minority, and disadvantaged students.

- Enrollment: roughly 200,000 undergraduates, 29,700 graduate students, 4,200 first professional students attended public HBCUs in 2006-2007.
- Gender: 62 percent of undergraduates are women, an increase of 38 percent during the past 20 years (1986-2006). Male enrollment has remained essentially unchanged. Female graduate student enrollments stand at 71 percent.
- Race/Ethnicity – 2006: African Americans were 84 percent of the total population at public HBCUs. White students – 8 percent, Hispanic – 2 percent, Asian – 1 percent.
- Race/Ethnicity/Gender – Undergraduate: Black/Hispanic male enrollment increased over a 20-year period while White male enrollment declined. Hispanic/Asian female enrollments more than doubled. Black female enrollment increased as well, but White females declined to 22 percent of the female population.
- Race/Ethnicity/Gender – Graduate: Enrollment of Black males grew 65 percent and Black female enrollments doubled. Both Hispanic male and female enrollments increased as well. White graduate school enrollments declined over the 20-year period.
- Geographic Origin: 45 percent of students come from the South, 22 percent from the Northeast, 20 percent from the Southwest, and only 2 percent from the Northwest.
- Degrees: 14.2 percent of all bachelor's degrees earned by African Americans in 2006-2007 were from public HBCUs, 9.1 of all master's degrees, 11.7 of first professional degrees, 10 percent of doctorates.
- Financial Aid: 86 percent of all public HBCU students received financial aid in 2006-2007.

FINANCIAL AID STATISTICS

UNDERGRADUATES	Public 4-Year HBCU	Public 4-Year
% receiving financial aid	86%	76%
% receiving federal aid	59%	26%

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KENTUCKY STATE UNIVERSITY - PROJECT GRADUATE

Kentucky State University is participating in a statewide program that seeks out former college students who have enough credits to be near graduation but have never returned to actually earn their undergraduate degrees. Kentucky State has identified more than 450 students who qualify for the program; 120 are currently enrolled, including people who have not seen the inside of a college classroom in 30 years or more.

Kentucky State offers a host of services to encourage older students to complete their studies. School officials provide special counseling, a cost-free, streamlined admissions process, college credits for professional and work experiences, tuition assistance, and tailored class enrollments to gain the missing credits students need for graduation. For graduates, earning that elusive diploma can provide “relief and a fresh start,” according to a Kentucky State newsletter about the program.

In the 2008-2009 academic year, 25 students received their bachelor’s degrees from Kentucky State through Project Graduate. Of that total, 20 were African Americans and 5 White; 14 were men and 11 women.

A statewide survey in Kentucky determined that 60 percent of these students said they would not be enrolled in college without Project Graduate. More than 85 percent said that the top three incentives bringing them back to college were free applications, a graduation plan that included credit for past study and work, and one-on-one advising. “From that first meeting, it was very clear to me that as a university they were doing what they could to help Project Graduate students succeed,” said Melissa Benton, member of the 2009 graduating class, who returned to school after almost 30 years.

Arthur Box, a transportation engineer, finished his degree after first attending Kentucky State in the 1970s. “I know a degree gives me more earning power and credentials,” he said.



A STATEWIDE SURVEY IN KENTUCKY DETERMINED THAT 60 % OF STUDENTS SAID THEY WOULD NOT BE ENROLLED IN COLLEGE WITHOUT PROJECT GRADUATE.

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ACCESS – PRAIRIE VIEW A & M UNIVERSITY

Prairie View takes a systematic, holistic approach to creating a supportive, highly structured learning environment for incoming students who are at risk of dropping out, whether for academic, language, or other reasons. Its Academy for Collegiate Excellence and Student Success (ACCESS) has two elements:

• Prospective students take a seven-week summer camp that combines academics with service-oriented field trips and other challenging social and cultural activities. Each summer ACCESS class is between 100 and 120 students, which school officials regard as the ideal number for bonding as a unit while providing individualized guidance and tutoring for each student.

• ACCESS students who enter Prairie View in the fall live in the University College (UC) along with the 1,300 or more other freshmen. UC students live in special dorms and receive systematic academic support, individualized monitoring, and regular testing and evaluation.

As in the summer ACCESS program, University College provides a rigorous focus on the core competencies of math, reading, and comprehension – along with learning skills in problem solving and critical thinking.

“We are building strong learning communities,” says Lettie Raab, director of both the ACCESS and University College programs.

Prior to launching the ACCESS program in 1996, the retention rates at Prairie View ran in the 60 to 65 percent range. Between 1996 and 2007, the ACCESS participants averaged a retention rate of 77.5 percent. With the inception of University College, overall retention for incoming freshmen has increased as well. From 2004 to 2008, the freshman retention rate improved from 67.1 percent to 74.6 percent – a 7.5 percent increase. The ACCESS students and University College are an important part of that increase, according to Raab.

“WE ARE BUILDING STRONG LEARNING COMMUNITIES.”

-Lettie Raab

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FIRST YEAR ASSESSMENTS - JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

Jackson State University uses a variety of methods to assess their first year students. These methods include both curricular and co-curricular components to ensure freshmen students make a smooth transition to university life. The First Year Assessment Program focuses on student learning outcomes in the general education curriculum and then uses these data to continuously improve and enhance the effectiveness of the curriculum. Students are reassessed at the end of their sophomore and the senior years, providing constant data on their well-being and performance. Students are also individually counseled to determine both their social and academic needs, helping them to overcome the individual and interpersonal challenges many first generation students have during the first and second year of college. As a result of these assessment measures, Jackson State has raised its graduation rate from under 30% to over 43% and was recently cited by Washington Monthly magazine as the 22nd best university in the nation for providing a value-added education. ■

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