

Historically Black and Predominantly White Higher Education Institutions: How Do They Compare?

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Literature on African-American college students indicates there are differences between historically Black and predominantly White higher education institutions. Allen (1992) states the assumption that historically White institutions "provide superior environments for Black educational development" (p. 29) is not supported by empirical evidence. For example, Fleming (cited in Allen) has illustrated that, on average, African-American students have higher intellectual gains while attending historically Black as compared to historically White campuses. Similarly, Allen's research reveals the disparity between African-American students' needs and the expectations of historically White institutions. Thus, predominantly White campuses may not provide a better educational environment than that of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

The purpose of this paper is to explore how different higher educational environments affect the academic achievement and level of satisfaction of African-American students. This paper will examine and compare historically White and historically Black institutions. In addition, personal and environmental factors which influence the success of African-American students will be identified. Finally, suggestions will be offered for ways in which student affairs professionals can work within their institutions to enhance the academic achievement and satisfaction of African-American students.

Academic Achievement and Satisfaction: A Comparison

When comparing historically Black and predominantly White institutions, the special mission of historically Black colleges must be acknowledged. Fleming (1984) states that the historical role HBCUs play is one of "helping black people move into the mainstream of American life" (p.1). According to Allen (1988), Black colleges strive to provide opportunities for higher education to students with financial or academic barriers that may otherwise prevent them from attending college. Hence, Black colleges tend to enroll more students who are academically under-prepared and financially disadvantaged. For example, historically Black

institutions have a higher proportion of students with weaker high school backgrounds and lower high school grade point averages. Thus, their goal is to "correct their academic deficiencies and graduate them equipped to compete successfully for jobs or graduate/professional school placements in the wider society" (Allen, 1988, p. 405).

Nevertheless, research indicates African-American students on historically Black campuses have higher rates of academic achievement than African-American students on traditionally White campuses. For example, Allen (1988) found that African-American students who attend historically Black campuses have higher college grade point averages than their peers who attend majority White institutions. Fleming (1984) attributes these findings to the fact that in "White colleges, the problems of an unaccepting environment act to thwart intellectual growth" (p. xii).

There are several environmental factors which may affect academic achievement. Fleming (1984) discovered that African-American students attending predominantly White colleges or universities reported they felt institutional abandonment, bias in the classroom, and isolation, which created a "hostile interpersonal climate" (p. 155). Allen (1988, 1992) also found African-American students at traditionally White institutions have a higher attrition rate and experience lower academic achievement than their peers at historically Black institutions. He asserts that this problem may result from the absence of remedial/tutorial programs and a lack of communication and interaction with white faculty and student peers. Historically Black institutions have a distinctive set of issues. Students at these institutions usually have lower socioeconomic status, lower standardized test scores, and weaker high school backgrounds and academic records. In addition, the quality of facilities and the size and range of faculty at Black colleges are not equivalent to those at historically White institutions. Black colleges do not typically offer as many majors, nor do they have as many advanced degree programs as their White counterparts (Allen, 1992). So, the educational environment at HBCUs may be limited in terms of faculty and resources.

When examining African-American students' satisfaction with their educational environment, research indicates that a difference exists between historically Black and historically White institutions. Allen (1988) found two-thirds of African-American students on Black campuses stated that campus activities were "somewhat" or "considerably" representative of their interests. On White campuses, only 38% of black students indicated similar feelings. Upon further examination of the responses, Allen discovered 26%

illustrate that the most serious problems seem to come from feelings of alienation and lack of support. Due to these issues, African-American students often feel the need to establish their own social and cultural networks. In contrast, African-American students at Black institutions report "feelings of engagement, connection, acceptance and extensive support and encouragement" (p. 39). Studies conducted by Epps and Fleming (cited in Allen) illustrate that African-American students at historically Black colleges "possessed positive self-images, strong racial pride, and high aspirations [and a] more favorable psychological adjustment than Blacks on White campuses" (p. 29). Research seems to indicate that African-Americans receive an education more tailored to their needs at HBCUs. These findings emphasize that African-American students, "like most human beings, develop best in environments where they feel valued, protected, accepted, and socially connected" (Allen, 1992, p. 39). Thus, historically Black institutions may provide the same type of developmental-educational environment for African-American students as historically White institutions provide for white students (Allen, 1992).

Allen's (1992) findings indicate that several factors affect African-American college student outcomes. African-American students' college achievement, social involvement, and occupational aspirations are affected by "the immediate surrounding social context" (p. 39). Student outcomes are based on two types of factors. The first is the students' individual characteristics: their intelligence, level of preparedness, personal ambition, and the amount of commitment and discipline they possess. The second factor relies on characteristics of the institution: academic competition, rules/procedures, available resources, relations with faculty, and support networks of friends (Allen, 1988). It is evident that many different elements, both personal and environmental, influence the academic and personal success of African-American students.

It should also be noted that some African-American students who attend traditionally White institutions can and do adjust successfully to their environment.

Implications & Possible Solutions

Student affairs professionals will continue to be challenged to find better ways to support the level of academic achievement and satisfaction of African-American students, especially at historically White institutions. Several different areas must be considered for change. Allen (1992)

indicates that the lack of academic success in higher education found among many African-Americans is due to inherent problems of Black oppression and subjugation which still exist in society today. The disadvantages African-Americans encounter in higher education are mirrors of the disadvantages they continue to face in the outside world.

There are areas over which student affairs professionals can have a direct impact to help break this cycle. Fleming (1984) suggests providing a more supportive community at White institutions. Several different things can be done to contribute to a more supportive environment. For example, increasing the presence of African-American faculty and staff who serve as mentors, friends, and role models for students is crucial. African-American students also need to be encouraged to become involved in leadership roles through extracurricular activities. Counseling services must be prepared to deal with the unique needs of African-American students. The curriculum should also be adjusted to include topics and courses which are more relevant to African-Americans.

Similarly, several barriers must be examined and removed in order to make traditionally white institutions more hospitable for African-American students. Admissions requirements which rely on culturally biased standardized tests should be changed. Faculties and staffs, which consist of predominantly White, middle-class males can be diversified. Given the high cost of financing an education, adequate financial aid, especially in the area of grants and scholarships, is essential.

Student affairs professionals may have an opportunity to influence policy decisions regarding many of these factors. Lower academic achievement and satisfaction among African-American students attending historically White institutions will not disappear if ignored. African-American students should not have to choose between superior resources at predominantly White institutions and better adjustment and higher academic gains at traditionally Black colleges. Instead, all institutions should strive to provide the positive aspects of both environments. Allen (1987) simply states: "Students should be able to find the qualities necessary to their success wherever they decide to attend school" (p. 31). As student affairs professionals, we need to begin to take make the changes necessary to ensure African-American students' satisfaction and academic achievement, regardless of the educational environment.

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Race Relations on College Campuses: Challenges and Responsibilities for White Persons

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Thinking and talking about race in the United States is something that is usually reserved for people of color; it's not White people who usually think about race, talk about race, or even initiate discussions about race (Frankenberg, 1993; Helms, 1992, 1993; Segrest, 1994; Terry, 1975). White people frequently wait for people of color to raise issues of race. Yet, a thesis of this article is that White persons consider more carefully and take actions regarding racial issues. At the heart of this discussion is that White people need to consider themselves as racial beings.

The 21st century is only a few years away, and demographers are saying that the racial composition of the United States will be dramatically different in the next century, even by the end of this century (American Council on Education and Education Commission of the States [ACE/ECS], 1988). Thus, professional practice in student affairs, leadership for the 21st century, and citizenship and personal integrity must include being more attentive to, more responsive to, and more inclusive of persons of color. Some of these changes will come about simply because the composition of society is changing. Others must come about, however, through intentional efforts to change the structures and institutions of society. This work must be done by many who are White, privileged, educated, and collectively hold power. It is incumbent upon White student affairs professionals to consider ways in which student affairs practice, higher education, and personal integrity can and should be transformed as we approach the 21st century.

There are many reasons why White persons should think and talk about race. First, race relations in this country are, at best, volatile and tenuous, and, at worst, bad and hateful. A current and powerful reminder of the state of race relations is the April 19, 1995, Oklahoma City bombing. One early hypothesis asserted that the bombing was domestic rather than international activity related to White supremacist efforts. This tragic event has the potential to cause White people and people of color to examine race relations in this country. Second, racial violence and harassment are increasing. Daily reports on television, in newspapers, and on college campuses describe incidents which have at their base issues surrounding race. Numerous