



lastword

Why HBCU Graduate Persistence Is Important

BY ADRIEL A. HILTON AND PAMELA PETREASE FELDER

In 2014, many still doubt the importance of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and their role in combating exclusion, which continues to be the modus operandi in many traditionally White institutions (TWIs) in the nation's South.

According to Frank W. Hale, past vice provost and professor emeritus at The Ohio State University and editor of *How Black Colleges Empower Black Students: Lessons for Higher Education*, the failure of the majority of institutions in the South to fully acknowledge the rich contributions of HBCUs has caused irreparable damage.

Hale adds that HBCUs have consistently educated and graduated more African-American undergraduate students than TWIs. HBCUs originated for the specific purpose of educating African-Americans, possess distinct characteristics and varied historical traditions, and also make access feasible for those doctoral students who are typically excluded from TWIs. Ironically, TWIs are searching for innovative strategies to increase retention and graduation of African-American graduate students.

In *Expanding Postsecondary Opportunity for Underrepresented Students: Theory and Practice of Academic Capital Formation*, higher education researchers and faculty members examine strategies and perspectives on expanding opportunities for underrepresented students. The work focuses on the value of academic capital formation and identifies several key issues that influence underrepresented doctoral students who graduated from select HBCUs.

The authors identify family, the ability to build relationships with faculty during prior socialization experiences and during graduate school, and the commitment of HBCUs to graduate education as critical elements of student persistence. Not surprisingly, the book also points to a lack of adequate financial support as a primary barrier to pursuing doctoral education.

HBCUs excel in offering African-American students an environment conducive

to learning, as well as a sense of belonging and comfort. Allowing Black students to feel comfortable with who they are enables them to explore other areas of involvement within the institution, further embedding themselves into the culture and climate of the chosen institution, which ultimately aids in persistence and academic success.

In order for TWIs to develop successful retention, mentoring and support programs, they must learn what the contributing factors to a student's experience are by way of persistence and perceived barriers. They must ensure that all stakeholders are aware of the institution's vision and mission as it relates to retention, graduation and graduate school.

In addition, TWIs must continue to develop and implement strategies that are tailored to meet 21st century demands and that integrate peer mentors, faculty support and role models, funding and other resources essential to their graduate programs' overall success. A few suggestions are:

Provide increased resources and opportunities for students to receive grants, fellowships and internships to assist financially.

Provide adequate resources to reduce the time to degree completion.

Implement a well-organized mentoring program to improve the quality of life for students, with strong faculty involvement and resources that support research. Typically, students who enroll in doctoral study are pursuing specialized knowledge, and faculty are an important factor in the support and development of specialized knowledge.

Develop comprehensive advising strategies connected to outcomes, which address the needs and concerns of students prior to withdrawal or dropping out. Being cognitive of student needs and concerns will help reduce institutional attrition rates, and faculty support is imperative in facilitating post-degree completion experiences for doctoral students.

Provide opportunities for students to work collaboratively with faculty and other

graduate students in research projects, presentations and, ultimately, publishing of research projects. Faculty members must be actively engaged in research productivity themselves and supported by an institutional infrastructure in order to subsequently support a doctoral student's success.

Enhance student career and professional development through the implementation of mandatory seminars, workshops and job placement assistance. Professional development should be considered as a life-course process to address degree completion and success beyond degree attainment.

The 21st century will see a shift in population statistics. Minority groups are predicted to outnumber White populations by the year 2050, drastically changing the demographics in the United States. This means that minority students must be ready to enter professional positions worldwide through educational attainment.

As such, HBCUs must also be ready to do more to assist their students, not only in completing undergraduate programs, but doctoral degree programs as well. Strengthening the capacity of HBCU faculty to teach at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, facilitating advising and mentoring programs, and conducting research is essential to meeting the demands of 21st century higher education.

Enhancing faculty capacity and support and developing improved strategies to ensure effective student support and retention should be a priority of all higher education presidents and administrations. The success of underrepresented students will ultimately reap great rewards for our nation, as a whole, and further its contribution to global society. ▣

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