Transitioning From the HBCU to Graduate Study at a PWI: Challenges, Rewards, and Pitfalls

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Session Overview

- Why this topic?
- Brief overview of research
- Our survey
- Testimonies from Transitioners
- Open dialogue
- Wrap up
Why this Topic?

- Part of our personal journeys
- Shared experience
- Several questions emerged
  - What are the experiences of Black students who went to HBCU and transitioned to PWI for graduate school? Were their experiences similar to ours?
  - How do these experiences influence our work?
  - What are the challenges, pitfalls and rewards for students who make the transition
- Personal epiphanies
- Both current institutions are beginning to wrestle with similar questions

Challenges for Black Students

- Black students, in addition to general stressors, experience additional stress because of their minority status in a predominantly white environment. This added and unique stress can have a negative effect on their overall experience.
- Black students feel they are often called upon to be representatives for their race.
- Black students at PWIs report feeling disconnected from their schools and programs.
- While the majority of studies have been done on Black undergraduate students, many that focus solely on Black graduate students support what is suggested by the undergraduate studies.

Conflicting Evidence

- Black students at HBCUs are significantly more engaged in college experiences and develop considerably more cognitively and personally.
  - Another segment of research suggests that there is no significant effect on Black students’ engagement or cognitive/personal development according to institutional type.
- Black students have more interactions with both white and Black faculty at HBCUs versus PWIs.
  - Other evidence suggests that there is no significant difference in the levels of these interactions between the two institution types.

Kim (2003); Pascarella et al (2006)

“Active engagement” – both in-class and out-of-class engagement – positively affects multiple student outcomes.

- Cognitive and intellectual skill development
- Collective adjustment
- Moral and ethical development
- Psychosocial development
- Positive self-image
- Persistence rates

Several comparative studies of HBCUs and PWIs suggest that HBCUs provide a wider variety of “culturally appealing” sources for Black student engagement, and can be more effective in positive development of student outcomes.

Positive Outcomes Associated with HBCU Attendance

• Several comparative studies point strongly to the idea that in spite of poorer financial resources, HBCUs create a better environment (academically, socially, emotionally, etc.) for Black students, in turn more positively affecting student outcomes for these individuals.

BLACK STUDENTS AT HBCUS

• Higher degree of connectedness and affiliation
• Greater sense of power on campus
• Have higher ratings in over-all self concept
• Spend more energy in academic pursuits
• Attain greater development intellectually in critical thinking
• Higher levels of cultural awareness


Black Graduate Students

• The student’s relationship with his/her program is central

• Black students at PWIs report feeling disconnected from their schools and programs. The greater the sense of disconnection, the less likely a student is to complete their studies.

• Black graduate students felt a sense of avoidance outside of the classroom from their white professors, as well as feeling that unintentional racism and social discomfort caused them to miss out on research and teaching opportunities.

Black Graduate Students

Ellis’ 3-Stage Model for Graduate Student Development (2001)
(Informed by Beeler’s 4-Stage Development Theory and Tinto’s Theory of Doctoral Persistence)

- Stage 1: Individual Isolation and Transition
- Stage 2: New Community Association
- Stage 3: Academic and Professional Integration

- All 3 models provided very little help when analyzing data collected from Black participants, in particular Black women.

- Four categories were major areas of concern for doctoral candidates:
  - Mentoring and Advising
  - Environment of the Home Department
  - Interaction with Peers
  - Research and Teaching

- Race played a vital role in all but 1 of the 4 categories (research & teaching).

Black Graduate Students

- When students could not find a faculty member within their department with whom they could work, they looked to outsiders (people from other departments or other schools) for unofficial support.
  - Black students are more likely to feel the need to look to outsiders for this support
  - May be especially true for Black females

- Black students connect with other Black students whenever possible.
  - One reason was that the Black students felt a sense of responsibility to their peers – there were so few Black doctoral students they would all need each others’ help.
Our Survey

- 53 responses
  - Various institutions including Hampton, Morehouse, Spelman, Virginia Union, Florida A&M, North Carolina A&T, Texas Southern, Howard, & Albany State
  - Students in the mid-60s through current graduate students

- 10 Questions about undergraduate and graduate experiences

Survey Questions

- How well do you think your undergraduate institution prepared you for graduate studies?
- What was the biggest challenge you faced during the transition from undergrad to grad school?
- What was the biggest 'no-brainer' in the transition? What caused you the least amount of trouble or anxiety?
- How were the cultures of the institutions different? How were the cultures of the institutions similar?
- What impact did those differences and similarities have on your overall experience at the PWI?
- What did you get out of your undergraduate institution that you did not get out of your graduate institution?
- What did you get out of your grad institution that you did not get out of your undergrad institution?
- What challenges do you believe you faced because of your decision to attend an HBCU for undergrad? What benefits do you believe you derived from your choice?
- How did these challenges and benefits relate to your decision to attend a predominantly white school for graduate studies? How did these challenges and benefits relate to your overall graduate school experience?
- What advice would you give an undergraduate student who is preparing to make the transition from HBCU to PWI?
How well do you think your undergraduate institution prepared you for graduate studies?

- 84% of respondents describe their preparation in terms of being extremely well, very well, strong, or well-prepared
  - 8% describe it as fair
  - 8% describe it as not adequate or not at all prepared

- What was the strength of that preparation?
  - 68% of the responses described relative to academic preparation
    - Several thought their undergrad work was more challenging (35%)
    - 20% - self-confidence and emotional development

What was the biggest challenge you faced during the transition from undergrad to grad school?

- Responses in the following categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of isolation/loneliness/lack of support (Adjusting to being a minority)</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative peer relationships (Social networks difficult to break into, disdain from peers)</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues with academics (Academic culture, unspoken expectations, writing, aggressive competitiveness of peers)</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues with faculty</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overt racism (Having to represent race)</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcoming negative stereotypes of HBCU</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-confidence</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What was the biggest 'no-brainer' in the transition? What caused you the least amount of trouble or anxiety?

| Self-confidence, personal commitment to succeed | 44% |
| Anticipated difficulty of curricula/Preparedness for the work | 28% |
| The experience of working with Whites | 15% |
| The ease of the institutional systems | 6.5% |
| Lack of preparation would cause anxiety | 6.5% |

How were the cultures of the institutions different? How were the cultures of the institutions similar?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HBCU</th>
<th>PWI</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less threatening atmosphere</td>
<td>Very threatening atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty more proactive in helping students succeed</td>
<td>Faculty less available, lack of feedback, more focused on research than on students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fosters atmosphere of teamwork and unity among students</td>
<td>Fosters competition between students, lack of camaraderie, no/little communication beyond the classroom with peers Every man for himself attitude, PWI more cut-throat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More conservative</td>
<td>More liberal – ex. faculty use first names</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More welcoming of differing views on race</td>
<td>Unwelcoming to issues of race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students more committed to academics (because realized it was privilege)</td>
<td>Students seem to take education for granted/aura of privilege</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poorer facilities</td>
<td>Better facilities and resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What impact did those differences and similarities have on your overall experience at the PWI?

- More aware of other cultures and issues of diversity
- Adapted to ‘new norm’
- Became less interested in engaging with peers outside of classroom
- Forced to create own network – both academic and social
- Better appreciated the HBCU experience
- The impact of the HBCU on formation was critical, believed they were representing the HBCU in their work

Challenges

- Negative stereotypes of HBCU academic preparation
  - self-esteem issues as result of battling the perceptions
- Lack of resources – social and academic
- Navigating white privilege
  - having to decide whether or not to assimilate
  - Facing the concept of white privilege for first time
- Belief that they ‘had to’ attend PWI to ‘boost’ resume and gain credibility in the workplace
- Not understanding the cultural practices of the PWI that are related to academic success ex. mixers, picnics, unspoken expectations of faculty
Benefits

- Exposure to a wealth of resources
- Broader perspective on different cultures (HBCU is protected bubble)
- ‘Validated’ education that opens doors
- Honed technical skills
- Sense of the ‘real world’ – not everyone is like me
- Exposure to a higher level of potential mentors
- Stronger sense of self-confidence for surviving

Testimonies of Transitioners
Sage Advice From Transitioners

- HBCU: maintain contacts, be proud of/confident in HBCU education, use skills learned (self-confidence, pride in heritage, how to build networks, self-respect and respect for others)
- Academics: Be prepared, study hard, ask questions, sit in front of class room, don’t be late, read materials before due, introduce self to professor first (white professors will think you are disinterested otherwise), take appropriate courses before attending, research the school before going
- Adapt to change: go with open mind, keep expectations realistic
- Racism: don’t speak for whole race, prepare for racism, respond with intelligence, demand respect for self, prepare to prove self, treat everyone with respect, don’t take everything personally
- Networks: find mentors, interact with broader kinds of people, participate in social activities, play smart, enjoy yourself

Recommendations for Graduate Schools

- Graduate schools need to
  - Recognize and respond to issues of isolation
  - Utilize similar techniques used for undergraduate recruitment and retention
  - Help establish mentoring relationships (informal and formal)
  - Linking doctoral candidates with Master’s students
  - Linking faculty/administrators with graduate students
Recommendations for Graduate Schools

- Graduate schools need to
  - Linking graduate students to on-campus and community organizations
    - Fraternities/sororities
    - Churches
  - Provide support for Black graduate students to attend conferences, etc. where they can network with other Black faculty, staff and students
  - Provide opportunities for displaying research on campus

Thank You!

- If you would like copies of the slides used in this presentation, please email us or check our websites:

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