

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

A Summary of:

“Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Their Aspirations and Accomplishments” (1999) Educational Testing Service. By Harold Wenglinsky.

Focus

- Early Childhood
- Primary School
- Middle School
- Secondary School
- ✓ Postsecondary
- Extended Learning

Overview

Most Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were founded during an era when African American students were barred from attending traditionally white, postsecondary institutions. Since the Civil Rights Movement opened the doors of traditionally white colleges and universities to minority students, some policymakers have challenged the continued existence of HBCUs, arguing that they serve no purpose in an integrated system of higher education. In fact, the Supreme Court decision in *U.S. v. Fordice* (1992) required states to “educationally justify or eliminate” all vestiges of segregation, including HBCUs. The study summarized here addressed this issue by assessing the educational benefits of attending an HBCU for both white and minority students. The researcher examined data on general undergraduate retention rates, retention in the fields of science and engineering (disciplines in which minorities are historically under-represented) and post-graduate aspirations.

POPULATION

Today, there are nearly 300,000 students attending 103 HBCUs across the country. On average, 13.1% of HBCU students are white and the vast majority of the remaining student body is African American. In terms of gender, the percentage of male students in HBCUs has decreased in recent years (from 47% in 1976 to 40.9% in 1990). The parents of HBCU students have significantly lower adjusted gross incomes than the parents of students at traditionally white institutions. This study looked at a database of students who took the graduate record examination (GRE) in 1993 and an Association of Universities/Association of Graduate Schools (AAU/AGS) database of graduate student completion (1989-1994). The GRE database of 351,017 undergraduates with aspirations to go to graduate school included 30,203 African Americans (10,669 attended HBCUs). The AAU/AGS database included 14,000 graduate students enrolled in 40 research universities between 1989 and 1994. Out of the 14,000 graduate students in the database, 284 students were African Americans and 34 had attended HBCUs as undergraduates.

Key Findings

This study compared undergraduate completion rates, post-graduate aspirations, choice of majors, graduate program retention and completion of students who attended HBCUs and traditionally white institutions.

Twenty-one percent of all African American undergraduates currently attend HBCUs, and 28% of all degrees awarded to African Americans are from HBCUs.

Using the GRE database of 351,017 students (30,203 African American), the researcher learned that:

- ◆ A higher proportion of African American HBCU students aspire to go to graduate school than African American students at traditionally white institutions. About 33% of African Americans who took the GRE in 1993 went to HBCUs, even though only 28% of all African American college graduates had attended HBCUs.
- ◆ African American males at HBCUs were more likely to choose a graduate major in science than their peers at traditionally white institutions (22% vs. 15%).
- ◆ African American females at HBCUs were more likely to choose a graduate major in science than their peers at traditionally white institutions (16% vs. 9%).

Using the AAU/AGS database of graduate students enrolled in 40 universities between 1989 and 1994, the researcher compared the retention and completion rates for African American HBCU alumni ($n=34$) and African American alumni of traditionally white institutions ($n=250$):

[HBCUs] better prepare Blacks for those professions in which they are most underrepresented. This benefit applies both to Blacks who would have attended a traditionally white institution and to Blacks who might not have attended any postsecondary institution.”

—Harold Wenglinsky, ETS Researcher

- ◆ By 1994, HBCU alumni were more likely to remain in graduate school or have achieved their PhD than alumni of traditionally white institutions (82% vs. 66%).
- ◆ HBCU alumni finished their PhDs faster (5.57 years) than their peers who had attended traditionally white institutions (6.14 years).
- ◆ HBCU alumni earned their PhDs at slightly higher rates than alumni of traditionally white institutions (21% vs. 18%), but the small numbers of African American PhDs in the database limited the significance of this finding.

The researcher found that African American students do not have more interactions with faculty at HBCUs than their minority peers at traditionally white institutions. African American HBCU students are also no more likely to engage in community service than minority students at traditionally white institutions.

Relative to traditionally white institutions, HBCUs do cost less to attend. According to the National Post-Secondary Student Aid Study (1989-90), the average student enrolled in an HBCU paid \$1945 in tuition annually compared to the \$3309 for the average student attending a traditionally white institution.

Program Components

HBCUs vary greatly in size, mission and funding. There are 103 HBCUs located in 19 states and the District of Columbia. About half (53) of these are private schools. Eighty-nine HBCUs offer four-year degrees and 24 offer two-year degrees and/or certificates. The average enrollment at HBCUs varies from 1000 students to more than 8000 students.

Historically, HBCUs have had two roles: preparing African American students for positions of leadership within their communities and preparing them for graduate and professional schools. The author of this study traces these two educational philosophies back to the teachings of African American educators W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington.

Contributing Factors

General Graduate Preparation

The researcher interpreted the data on retention and completion of graduate degrees to suggest that HBCUs prepare African American students better for graduate school, though he did not explain what aspects of the undergraduate experience at HBCUs specifically contribute to graduate preparedness.

Encouragement of Participation in the Sciences

HBCUs appear to be more successful than traditionally white institutions in preparing African American students for post-graduate work in the various fields of science, fields in which minority students are often under-represented.

Affordability

“The affordability of HBCUs . . . may encourage students, who might otherwise either attend a community college or no college at all, to attend a four-year institution.” This affordability issue seemed especially important for the minority students who chose HBCUs, since these students came from families with lower incomes than the comparable group of minority students at traditionally white institutions.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The author of this study analyzed information from the 1993 database of Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) test registrants and a longitudinal database of the American Association of Universities/Association of Graduate Schools (AAU/AGS) Project for Research on Doctoral Education. Though there was no attempt to match the comparison groups on educational achievement, the researcher did determine that the African American students who attended HBCUs in both databases come from lower socio-economic backgrounds than their peers in traditionally white institutions. Their parents had lower average incomes and fewer years of formal education.

EVALUATION & PROGRAM FUNDING

The evaluation was funded by the Educational Testing Service. HBCUs are funded by a mix of public and private funds as well as by student tuition.

GEOGRAPHIC AREAS

There are 103 HBCUs in operation today in the United States. They are located in AL, AR, DE, DC, FL, GA, KY, LA, MD, MI, MS, MO, NC, OH, OK, PA, SC, TN, VA, and WV as well as the Virgin Islands.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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