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Together in Excellence

Examination of value conflict limiting conception of multicultural education in minority institutions in the US: Retention and graduation outcry

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Abstract

Studies have shown that in the last three decades of Historical Black Colleges' and Universities' (HBCUs') existence, they have played a vital role in the development of American society. Minority institutions have been successful with limited resources, discriminatory public policies and restrictive labels, unlike the majority of institutions. The purpose of this paper is to examine some concepts of multicultural education in minority institutions such as time, space, competition and other alternatives, and how they affect graduation and retention of African-Americans. Institutions must decide how to function in order to achieve academic excellence and compete in the global market. If minority institutions are to be successful academically, they must be able to function based on white middle-class values and skills. In choosing these priorities, the institutions cannot ignore middle-class skills and values unless a community wishes to put themselves at an economic disadvantage. This paper therefore concludes that HBCUs must decide on how to work together and not separately, in order to achieve more academic excellence, promote graduation and retention, and compete in the global market.

Keywords: Multicultural Education, African-Americans, Minority Institutions, Historical Black Colleges and Universities

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Introduction

Among colleges and universities in the United States, minority institutions rarely occupy their deserved status within the American cultural contexts. Studies show that in the last three decades, Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) played a vital role in the development of the American society through the collective achievement of African Americans. The success story of these colleges makes more sense when considered from the standpoint that they worked with limited resources, discriminatory public policies and restrictive labels; unlike the majority institutions that have full Government backing and support (AASCU Sallie May National Retention Project, 1994).

Presently, changing social and cultural dynamics have called for a re-examination of the 21st century education of HBCUs and minority institutions. The changing dynamics of social, cultural and technological opportunities, including technology, have also necessitated a call for a revitalisation of academic structures of HBCUs. In this paper, “minority students and professionals” are used interchangeably as “people of diverse race and ethnicity”, otherwise known as Hyphenated Americans.

Background

In 2000, minorities comprised approximately 30% of the population of the United States (US Census Bureau, 2000 cited in Nwadike 2007). By 2050, it is projected that the minority population will represent approximately 50% of the total US population, meaning ethnically and racially diverse people may no longer be a numerical minority (US Census Bureau, 2000, *op. cit.*). Whereas from 1988 to 1998, minority students’ enrolment in colleges increased by 62.2% (American Council on Education (ACE), 2001, cited in Nwadike 2007), reports show that in the last three years, graduation and retention of HBCUs have declined drastically. It is imperative also to know that enrolment statistics show a high drop-out rate among minority college students, especially among first-year students (Sleeter, 2001).

Various studies conducted from 1991 to 2001 (cited in Nwadike, 2010) show that low retention and graduation rates among minority students are reported to be the result of the following (although several of these factors would not apply to HBCUs):

1. academic unpreparedness;
2. financial difficulty;
3. absence of mentors and role models on campus;
4. lack of adequate social and academic support;
5. lack of diverse faculty and students;
6. absence of culturally inclusive instruction;
7. a racially hostile campus climate;
8. lack of professional networking and shared governance opportunities among administrators, faculty, staff and students;
9. lack of resources; and
10. lack of qualified instructors.

This paper is therefore an attempt to expose some handicaps contributing to the HBCUs' low graduation rates, thereby making necessary recommendations that could help address the situation.

According to some HBCU presidents, the debate over the role and relevance of Historically Black Institutions (HBIs), is again taking centre stage (*The Washington Post*, Sunday, Feb. 17, 2008). Despite their effectiveness, efforts to enhance (for example) Maryland's black institutions have been slow and exceedingly limited. As a result, HBI campuses continue to have very serious capital needs for renovation and/or replacement of existing old buildings, as well as new facilities and equipment. It is against this background that this paper seeks to examine the concept of multicultural education in minority institutions, as it relates to graduation and retention (Gay, 1995). This paper also examines some areas in which conflict between cultural values in an institution might make it very difficult to compromise and to accommodate strangers within such a cultural context (by 'stranger', the authors mean someone from another culture or ethnic group studying on an HBCU campus).

Each culture is based on different sets of assumptions and values about the world that may contradict others at some point. Dolce (1973:21) reports that the "ambiguity of the term multiculturalism tends to mask the existence of real conflicts among value systems". He concludes that "the lack of clear delineation of the consequences of multiculturalism is the reason for the widespread acceptance of principles" that do not completely support multicultural tendencies. All different cultures can and do encompass certain values that are antagonistic and opposing. Dolce suggests that existing differences can be resolved through compromise and acceptance of all differences between cultures.

Literature review

Literature on multicultural education amongst HBCUs suggests that only two studies were found useful in improving recruitment, retention and graduation among HBCUs in minority institutions, during investigation of institutions' programmes. These documents include "Achieving Quality and Diversity" by Richardson and Fisk Skinner (1991), where case studies of ten universities were conducted. The second successful case study was "The Campus Practices for Student Success" by AASCU, and the Marketing Association (1994), which contains descriptions of programmes for student success in retention at 68 state colleges and universities in the United States. Evidently, these institutions are members of the Sallie May National Retention Project (1994). However, descriptions of these case studies were not structured around goal statements of the institutions, and other variables that could have allowed for a fair evaluation of recruitment, retention and graduation among HBCUs were missing from the case studies. This invariably made the case studies less than completely reliable.

An institution with an academic goal must have value priorities in order to function effectively and serve the academic population. A university might realize that it has unwittingly been discriminating against a particular group. The question becomes how the university administration would resolve such value conflicts. Multicultural studies, if adopted holistically, can indeed help to promote

transformation, and at the same time, improve retention and graduation of minority students. For the purpose of this paper, the researchers define 'multicultural education' as occurring when people from all cultures receive education that is more than learning the basic skills needed to survive; it is a full understanding of all types of areas of study.

In examining multicultural education, the paper explores some areas in which conflict between cultural values in a school setting makes it difficult to reach a compromise. For example, adopting democratic methods to resolve cross-cultural value conflicting issues like differences in time, space, and competition may work against reaching any form of compromise in a multicultural environment and setting (Darder, 1995).

Concept of time

What is our basic orientation in terms of past, present, and future, and what kinds of time limits are most relevant for the conduct of our daily affairs? The concept of time is eminently suited to a rational view of the world, unlike Africans who originally studied time through their shadows, sunset and sunrise, and as a result, don't take time very seriously. There is some truth in the idea of 'African Time', because some Africans don't keep to time in the way that Westerners tend to (Nwadike, 2010).

Thus, one of the factors that could lead to inter-cultural conflict involves time. Many cultural groups around the globe consider time as a lower priority in their selection of values than the dominant white Americans. Some cultural groups value social interaction and friendship more highly than being punctual, as seen in American culture today. There are some distinct differences between the way in which cultures observe and value time. Some cultures are time-oriented to a high degree. Some people will use phrases like "saving time", "investing time" and "wasting time", while others are preoccupied simply with "time" (as cited in Nwadike, 2007).

For an institution to function effectively in America; it must take a

position about the importance of time. "The key is not to be 'on time' but to be 'in' time. For people of Western Europe descent, time is oriented more towards being 'on time' than 'in time'" (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2002). Time factor should be consistently reinforced as a dominant American attitude by administrators and faculties at HBCU institutions.

Another example is tardiness. Will a school accept the excuse of a student who came late to class? When asked why, the answer could be something like the following: "I was having coffee with my uncle who I have not seen for a long time." Some American students might say, "I overslept," or "I forgot that I have to be in class today." (These examples are exact statements from students who came late to class when the authors taught in minority institutions.) No matter what the reason is; time might conflict with values of certain groups (Goshenour, 1993).

An institution cannot have it both ways: either punctuality is enforced or it isn't. If an institution or a faculty enforces it for one group but not for another group, this may prove disastrous. "You've got to keep up with the times" is an American expression which illustrates this association. The American cultural form of time is usually regarded as lineal, as in planning, progress, preventive measures in health and technology and orientation to the future, according to Goghman (2002).

Concept of space

Another concept that is related to time is space, a second kind of cultural form. The concept of using space shows important cultural differences observed in institutions. Living and working areas are treated differently by different cultures. For example, some cultures like the Chinese have a strong sense of territorialism, which is less highly developed in America and absent in some nomadic cultures (Kim, 2001). People from different cultures vary in how much space they perceive as needed between themselves and others. People from the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cultures tend to be more comfortable with less personal space than is generally desired by

North Americans and northern Europeans (Hall, 1966). For instance, if a person from a Middle Eastern culture stands as close to a North American as his/her culture dictates is acceptable, the North American is likely to feel uncomfortable because his/her space has been invaded. Likewise, the way in which some institutions or organisations designate space, dictating who sits where and how much room they are given, also shows a great deal about status, power and values in that organisational culture. This can result in stereotypes if it is not well handled. Spatial displacements of persons in face-to-face interactions are also noticeably and measurably different from culture to culture (Hall, 1966).

Institutions must consider these issues of time and spatial difference when dealing with students by establishing classroom rules and regulations for the students to sign and observe. Education about multiculturalism is highly recommended both in majority and minority campuses. For example, the outcome of teaching online classes to HBCUs students should be reassessed. Studies conducted on an HBCU campus reveal that some students from cultures other than the dominant white American culture and traditionally disadvantaged families absorb more information during face-to-face interaction (Nwadike, 2010).

Concept of competition

All institutions including colleges and universities want to produce students who can compete in the global market. This competition sometimes allows one student to succeed at the expense of another. A cross-cultural conflict in schools sometimes revolves around the degree to which schools encourage competition among students of different cultural background. The schools of dominant white America for example, value competition highly. Henry (1963) reveals some of the negative aspects of competition of the “witch-hunt syndrome”. This again was validated in Nwadike (2010) who noted that placing students of different cultural backgrounds and educational levels and development on the same platform that favours the whites (in this instance) amounted to a witch-hunt rather than competition. For example, in elementary schools in which the teacher

exerts control over the class by sometimes encouraging competition and carping criticism, the winner usually receives a reward.

Culturally, certain Native American groups, like the Cherokees, value co-operation and togetherness, and are offended by competitive activities that create a winner and a loser (Greenman & Kimmel, 1995). Any culture that does not value competition, whether majority or minority, might find their own cultural values violated in a competitive school or college. Most majority white institutions aspire to achieve academic excellence to enable them to compete in the world market (Casse, 1981).

Even today we still have a huge gap in the performances of black and white students in American schools. A theory to explain why African-Americans do not compete effectively in schools and colleges is Eurocentrism (D'Souza, 1998). Eurocentrism conveys the predominance and superiority of a culture that Americans inherited from Western Europe (D'Souza, 1998). It is a kind of cultural stereotyping that looks down on other cultures that are non-European and creates a kind of inferiority complex for the other cultures that are looked down upon. This affects their competitive abilities or concept of competition, especially when the competitor has such a racial superiority complex. This also explains why some students may not want to compete. This happened in Germany under Adolf Hitler. Advocates of multiculturalism and Afro-centrism seek to correct historical biases and open doors and windows to the world beyond the West. Cultural relativism dictates that since all cultures are equal, the relatively poor performances by one group must be due to the fact that they are being unfairly judged by the other group's cultural standards (D'Souza, 1998).

In the words of Carter G. Woodson, as cited in Nwadike (2010:69):

In history of course, the Negro had no place in this curriculum. He was pictured as a human being of the lower order, unable to subject passion to reason, and therefore useful only when made the hewer of wood and the drawer of water for others. No thought was

given to the history of Africa except so far as it had been a field of exploitation for Caucasians.

To interpret Woodson's theory, there has been unfair distribution of educational resources since the Civil War days.

The question remains, though: how do HBCUs students challenge the mainstream majority through education, increase retention and graduation rates and compete in a diverse world market?

Strategies

If HBCU institutions are to be significantly successful in attracting, retaining and graduating racially and ethnically diverse student populations and professionals, they must be able to meet the needs for safety, sense of belongingness and love, psychological, self-esteem, and self-actualisation that students bring to the campuses and workplace (Donnell, Edward, & Green, 2000 cited in Nwadike 2010:23). Other needs to address are self-fulfillment, self-esteem, security of identity, fair and equitable treatment in all aspects of living, and mutual respect. There is an effort to decrease attrition of racially and ethnically diverse students, colleges and universities through the implementation of comprehensive programmes that address students' diverse needs (Dumas-Hines, 2001 op. cit.). These institutions also need to consider supplying, on campus, academic and career advice, and assistance with various non-academic matters (Dumas-Hines, 2001 op. cit.).

It is imperative for HBCU institutions to have meaningful and effective career planning and placement services, as well as work towards improvement of social and racially conducive climate on campuses and support cultural competency skills of academic advisors and faculty members (Dumas-Hines, 2001 op.cit.). There is a low retention of minorities in professional studies due to lack of mentors and generally unsupportive work environments, such as: lack of family support, lack of faculty support, lack of administrative and staff support, lack of self-motivation, and lack of appreciation for diversity (Dresser, 1996). All HBCUs should encourage both faculty

and staff to develop curricula and write textbooks for their students to use in their respective disciplines, thereby avoiding expensive foreign and over-loaded textbooks.

Effective strategic plans

There are many strategies for success in retention and graduation of people from different multicultural groups. These strategies include:

1. Develop and adopt a Multicultural Affairs and Students Success (MASS) centre. MASS is a concept that brings students of multicultural backgrounds together in a familiar learning environment and introduces them to programmes that are meant to integrate them into the larger society of multiculturalism. This exposure creates a learning environment when they eventually step out to the real world of multicultural educational environment. To justify the validity of MASS, a recent retention study revealed that ethnic minority students, low-income students, students with disabilities and students who are the first in their families to attend college are retained at higher rates after participating in this programme and services (*Hispanic Outlook*, November 2005). MASS programmes and services have had a positive impact on retention and graduation rates. MASS has a broad range of programmes that are available to help students in their first year.
2. A government funded programme could be designed to assist first generation students, low-income students and /or students with disabilities to successfully attain their academic goals. New Start Summer programmes in the US are designed to connect students to university life for six weeks before the semester begins, and include exchange programmes and short-term study abroad programmes.
3. Initiate pathways in an academic learning context for after-school activities and supporting students. For instance, personal academic advisors should select classes on behalf of the

students, and assist them choose information about scholarships, employment, and internship opportunities.

4. The institutions or colleges supported by government should provide resources for students, help them form study groups that should focus on leadership opportunities, and encourage them to attend evening study classes to improve their grades and performance.
5. College administrators should also make contacts and connections that lead students to meeting their major advisors in academic departments. These meetings should also be extended to the students meeting informally with their professors and/or deans over tea or coffee.
6. Create workshops that consistently provide students with time management skills, study skills, financial aid knowledge and how to select a major.
7. Create Peer Mentor (PM) students to connect with curriculum and extracurricular activities on campus. Peer Mentor students help other students in identifying relevant curriculum and extracurricular activities on campus that will integrate them into a multicultural educational context. PM students are usually knowledgeable in this area through training.
8. Form a strong Student Outreach Services (SOS) on campus to monitor activities, including the safety and security of students.
9. The Human Resources department should hire committed, qualified instructors and give them appropriate training in their disciplines.
10. Finally, for diversification to take place appropriately and without bias, the top administrators and faculties should have an open-door policy that allows students, faculty and staff easy access to the minority programme office. Most importantly, build differences by learning about multicultural education; ask

questions, develop mindfulness, tolerate ambiguity, develop flexibility, practise shared governance and avoid negative judgment. In pursuit of an operationalised, multicultural education programmes, educators should investigate and evaluate projected possibilities of a cultural variation system in which diversity would not be tied to social relations, especially if it has economic and educational disadvantages.

Conclusion

Historically Black Institutions must decide on how to work together and not separately, in order to achieve more academic excellence, promote graduation and retention, and compete in the global market.

According to several *Baltimore Sun* newspaper reports (2008-2009), HBCUs have low retention and graduation rates. In a multicultural education, students must receive the best practices in promotion of academic excellence to prepare them for the competitive world market. There are some successful programmes on the advancement of multicultural education used in some institutions of higher learning, which could be emulated. Some of the programmes reviewed in this paper call for commitment of resources, as well as collaboration with local and regional communities. Records also show that many institutions have initiated one or more of these activities that characterise best practices.

Since the purpose of this paper is to improve minority student retention and graduation, amongst others, at the historically black institutions, effective and workable strategies have been enumerated. To name a few institutions that adopted some of these practices: University of Arizona; University of Michigan; Washington State University; and Texas A & M. All these programmes have been found not only worthy in promoting graduation and retention, but also help promote integrity, diversity, civility, and collegiality. Engaging in a multicultural education does not suggest a total departure of one culture, but suggests that the institution will not be wholly part of *any* culture (Hess, 1994). People must understand that individuals in other cultures think, feel, believe, and appreciate differences among

cultures through education and communication. This understanding must permeate the thinking of college administrators, policy formulators and educators if racially diverse societies will exist without the usual tensions and apprehension associated with such communities.

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