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Taryn Ozuna Allen, PhD
The University of Texas at Arlington

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California Dreamin' in Historically Black Colleges and Universities: The HBCU Transfer Guarantee Project and California Community Colleges

Taryn Ozuna Allen, PhD
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Community colleges represent the largest sector of higher education institutions (United States [US] Department of Education, 2011). Most recent data reveals there are currently 1,123 community colleges located across the country (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2015). In Fall 2013, these post-secondary institutions enrolled over 12 million students (AACC, 2015). The community college increasingly serves as a postsecondary pathway for a growing Latino population (Santiago & Stettner, 2013). In fact, when compared to other racial and ethnic groups, Latinos are more likely to enroll in community college immediately after high school (US Department of Education, 2008). Over the past 30 years, Latino enrollment in public two-year institutions across the country has increased from approximately 210,000 in 1976 to 1.9 million in 2013 (US Department of Education, 2014).

In California, the focus of this editorial, the California Community Colleges (CCC) enroll two million students on 112 campuses (CCC, 2015a). Most first-time Latino college students (65 percent) in California begin their higher education career on one of these campuses, compared to a University of California (UC), University of Southern California, (USC), private or for-profit institution (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015). Indeed, Hispanics represent the largest population (38.9 percent) of enrolled students in all CCC, followed by Asian students (10.8 percent) and African American students (7.3 percent) (CCC, 2015a). Despite these enrollment gains, recent data reveals only 30 percent of CCC Latino transfers enroll to a four-year institution within six years (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015). Further, when compared to other racial/ethnic groups, Latinos are least likely to transfer out-of-state for a higher education (Moore & Shulock, 2010).

This demonstrated transfer gap – or as Tierney and Rodriguez (2014) suggest, transfer failure – challenges one of the originally intended CCC functions as illustrated in the 1960 California Master Plan for Higher Education. As a result, Chapa and Schink (2006) suggest CCC may be hindering, rather than helping, future transfer students. Perhaps in response to the current transfer challenges confronting California higher education, the CCC Board of Governors recently approved a transfer agreement with nine Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) across the country.

HBCUs are defined as institutions established prior to 1964 for the purpose of educating African Americans, who were legally and socially excluded from other institutions (US Department of Education, 2011, para. 3). HBCUs are extremely diverse institutions (Gasman, 2013). “They are both public and private; single-sex and coeducational; predominantly Black and predominantly White; 2-year and 4-year colleges; research universities, professional schools, community colleges, and small liberal arts colleges” (Provasnik, Shafer, & Snyder, 2004, p. 1). The racial and ethnic composition of their students and faculty further demonstrates HBCUs substantial diversity (Gasman, 2009; Gasman, 2013), and their history of supporting academic success of diverse student populations.

This transfer agreement, named the HBCU Transfer Guarantee Project, could promote persistence and success among academically eligible CCC students who transfer to one of nine participating HBCUs beginning in Fall 2015. The purpose of this editorial is to explore the issues confronting CCC and HBCUs that led to this agreement and discuss the potential benefits for these institutions. It also offers recommendations for supporting the transition and persistence of Latino college students in HBCUs, as they are the anticipated majority of transfer students participating in this agreement.

California Higher Education

In 1960, the UC Board of Regents and the State Board of Education created a Master Plan for Higher Education in California. This plan, also known as the Donahoe Higher Education Act, accomplished four goals:

- Created a system that combined exceptional quality with broad access for students.
- Transformed a collection of uncoordinated and competing colleges and universities into a coherent system.
- Established a broad framework for higher education that encourages each of the three public higher education segments to concentrate on creating its own kind of excellence within its own particular set of responsibilities.
- Acknowledged the vital role of independent colleges and universities, envisioning higher education in California as a single continuum of educational opportunity, from small private colleges to large public universities (UC, n.d., para. 1)

The plan served as a blueprint for postsecondary education and created specific roles for the UC, CSU, and CCC.

According to the plan, UC institutions primarily focus on research and bachelors and graduate education as well as professional education (California State Department of Education, 1960). UC was to select their incoming freshman from the top one-eighth (12.5 percent) of high school graduate in California. The master plan also specified the purpose of the CSU institutions is to offer undergraduate and masters degrees (California State Department of Education, 1960). CSU was to choose from the top one-third (33.3 percent) of high school graduates in California. The purpose of CCC is to provide courses for the first two years leading to a bachelor's degree as well as vocational training (California State Department of Education, 1960). In addition the community colleges can offer remedial education. As part of the plan, CCC were to admit any student with the demonstrated ability of benefitting from instruction. California's commitment to the plan was to serve as the foundation for its future success (Johnson, 2010, p. 5).

Today, California colleges and universities receive less financial support from the state. Higher education expenditures allocated through the General Fund have decreased, which then increased tuition and fees as institutions strive to compensate for decreased state subsidies (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015). UC, CSU, and CCC institutions have raised their tuition over 100 percent in the last ten years (Moore, Tan, & Shulock, 2014). Tuition increases place a financial burden on students and families and can deter Latino students who tend to be more averse to debt (Cunningham & Santiago, 2008).

It is important to ensure a pathway to higher education for students, particularly Latino students, because Latinos represent the largest racial/ethnic group in California, yet they are less likely to earn a college degree (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015). California is lagging behind in educational attainment, which is creating additional challenges as business leaders seek workers with degrees and/or credentials (Committee for Economic Development, 2013). Inevitably, the responsibility to educate Californians rests on the "broad access" USC schools and CCC (Committee for Economic Development, 2013). After 55 years, the Master Plan no longer meets California's educational and economic needs, and as it stands, it is an inadequate framework for addressing the critical achievement gaps confronting Latino community college students (Johnson, 2010). The HBCU Transfer Guarantee Project creates an opportunity for CCC to partner with HBCUs and enroll students who may not have an in-state transfer option.

HBCU Transfer Guarantee Project

Nine of the 105 HBCUs are participating in the transfer project, which was signed in March 2015 (CCC, 2015b). These institutions include: Bennett College (North Carolina), Dillard University

(Louisiana), Fisk University (Tennessee), Lincoln University of Missouri (Missouri), Philander Smith College (Arkansas), Stillman College (Alabama), Talladega College (Alabama), Tuskegee University (Alabama), and Wiley College (Texas) (CCC, 2015c). Although bonded by their historic mission, the student enrollment varies across these institutions.

Between 2012-2013, the 12-month enrollment at these institutions ranges from 3,912 students at Lincoln University to 643 at Fisk University (US Department of Education, 2015a). During the same time period, Hispanic enrollment ranged from 71 students at Wiley College to zero students at Philander Smith College (US Department of Education, 2015b). In Fall 2013, Lincoln University reported the most transfer students (209 transfers), while Talladega College reported the least (five transfers) (US Department of Education, 2015c). Based on these data, it seems the total enrollment at these smaller, mostly private, HBCUs would certainly grow and benefit financially by accepting CCC transfer students.

CCC students who seek to transfer to one of these HBCUs must meet specific academic requirements. If they do, they are able to transfer to the HBCU this fall. The reported benefits of transferring from a CCC to an HBCU to include:

- Guaranteed Admissions and acceptance of classes
- Priority consideration for housing
- Consideration for transfer scholarships for students with a 3.2 or higher grade point average (based on funding availability)
- Pre-admission advising (CCC, 2015d, para. 4)

Additionally, the transfer agreement advances four additional advantages. First, transfer students can anticipate smaller class sizes as well as classes taught by full-time faculty, rather than teaching assistants (Wiley College, 2015). The current average student-to-faculty ratio for the participating HBCUs is 14 students to one faculty member (US Department of Education, 2015d). The student-to-faculty ratio ranges from 20 students to one faculty member at Talladega College to 10 students to one faculty member at Bennett College and Philander Smith College (US Department of Education, 2015d). Second, the project supports the national degree completion agenda (Lincoln University, 2015) and highlights the critical role of community colleges and HBCUs in achieving this larger imperative (White House, n.d.). Next, the transfer students are likely to be older, more mature and inclined to assume responsibility for their learning (Smith-Barrow, 2015) – traits that will only further promote their persistence and success upon enrollment. Finally, this agreement offers an opportunity to re-strategize recruitment efforts and heighten enrollment, which is a strategic priority for several of the participating institutions (Bennett College, 2012; Lincoln University, 2012; Philander Smith College, 2014).

Implications

The HBCU Guaranteed Transfer Agreement appears to address the transfer issues confronting CCC while strengthening HBCU enrollment and providing California transfer students with a pathway to a baccalaureate degree. Since the majority of the CCC students are Latino (CCC, 2015a), the next section offers research-based recommendations for supporting Latino transfer students who may enroll in one of the participating HBCUs.

The first, critical step in promoting a successful transfer of CCC students to HBCUs is to engage the students and their family members. Research shows Latino students tend to enroll in institutions close to home, which is a potential reason for them initially selecting a CCC. As these students begin their four-year experience, parents may be unfamiliar with college (Ceja, 2004) as well as the purpose and history of HBCUs (Ozuna, 2012). In addition, Latino parents may experience a variety of emotions – ranging from apathy to elation – when their student enrolls in an HBCU (Ozuna, 2012). To engage parents and families, HBCUs can consider hosting campus visits. This way, transfer students and their families can tour the campus, learn about valuable resources, and meet faculty and staff. This visit is also a prime opportunity to educate families on the unique, rich history of their institution.

Research on HBCUs reveals the supportive and helpful faculty members Black and non-Black students encounter in the classroom (Closson & Henry, 2008; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Palmer & Miramba, 2015). Latinos enrolled in HBCUs have described their faculty members to be approachable and available, even outside of office hours (Ozuna, 2012; Ozuna, in press; Palmer & Maramba, 2015). The current student-to-faculty ratio at the HBCUs can further support the personal interactions that foster student success. As transfer CCC students matriculate and begin classes, it is important to support the current faculty with professional development and support. Workshops focusing on transfer students, and specifically Latino transfer students, can inform professors of the distinct aspects of their transition experience. If class sizes are expected to increase as a result of this transfer agreement, additional teaching support (e.g., teaching assistants or educational technology) can further promote the instructor's effectiveness.

In addition, the HBCU partners can consider cultural means of supporting Latino transfer students. As the CCC students enroll, they may seek out opportunities to establish student associations, Latina sororities, or Latino fraternities that reflect their cultural heritage. Thus, it is important to support the needs of these organizations and educate staff and faculty members on the purpose and processes of Latino student groups (Ozuna, in press). HBCUs can also work towards including these new organizations in campus traditions and events to promote a sense of community (Palmer, Maramba, Ozuna, & Goings, in press).

Finally, CCC transfer students may have financial concerns about transferring to another institution and state. This apprehension is particularly present in the Latino community (Kim, 2004). HBCU partners can help quell those concerns with scholarship, travel support and on-campus employment opportunities. By offering financial support, the institutions are demonstrating their effort and care for their incoming transfer students, which can help promote access and persistence (Palmer, Maramba, Yull, & Ozuna, in press).

Conclusion

The innovative guaranteed transfer agreement appears to address the enrollment needs of CCC and HBCU partners and the educational needs for CCC transfer students. The influx of these students, many of whom are Latino, will inevitably influence the academic and social landscape of HBCUs, and it is important to assess the campus policies and programs to ensure they are responding to the needs of an emergent student population.

Taryn Ozuna Allen, PhD is an assistant professor of educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Texas at Arlington. Her research focuses on the experiences of underrepresented student populations as they transition to college, particularly Minority Serving Institutions. She earned her doctoral degree from UT Austin and bachelor's and masters degrees from Baylor University.

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