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The Dilemmas of African-American Men from Historically Black Colleges and Universities in Completing Doctoral Degrees from Predominately White Institutions

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Abstract

This paper examines the experiences of two African-American men in their pursuit of doctoral degrees from predominantly white institutions. It presents an overview of other studies that discuss the unique challenges experienced by African American students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs at these institutions. It also includes a case study that describes the struggles and difficulties of these two men, who completed their undergraduate degrees from two separate Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and completed their Ph.D. programs in separate Predominately White Institutions (PWI's). The authors share their thoughts on the factors they felt were instrumental to their success, such as overcoming social isolation, having caring mentors, and receiving financial support. The paper concludes by offering suggestions to doctoral programs and their administrators on recruiting and graduating African-Americans from their doctoral programs.

Introduction

Between 1997 and 1998 African-Americans received 2,066 doctoral degrees, an increase of 1.7% over the 1,253 doctoral degrees awarded between 1976 and 1977 (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). However, African-Americans disproportionately lag behind their White counterparts in completing their doctoral degrees. Of these degrees awarded in the aforementioned year, African Americans received only six percent of the total degrees awarded, with most of these degrees being awarded to African-American women. Of the doctoral degrees awarded to men, African-Americans received only 4.5% (824) of these (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Although these rates of completion may not be exactly correlated to the number of students enrolling in doctoral programs, they demonstrate the disproportionately low number of African-Americans completing their doctoral degrees.

Despite the dismal numbers of African-Americans completing doctoral programs, HBCUs are an integral part of higher education for African-American undergraduates. In 1997, HBCUs represented just four percent of all of the four-year public and private colleges and universities in the United States, yet they enrolled 26 percent of all African-Americans undergraduates at four-year institutions and produced 28 percent of the African-American bachelor degree recipients (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). The purpose of this article is to highlight the experiences of two young African-American men who obtained undergraduate degrees from two different historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and went on to receive their Ph.D. degrees from predominately white institutions. The authors present their experiences as case examples, that in conjunction with an exploration of the literature, can inform those working with African-American students about the additional dilemmas they may encounter in completing doctoral programs. Recommendations are also discussed based upon the experiences of the first authors.

Review of Literature

Since its inception, the mission of Historically Black College and Universities has been to provide educational opportunities for African-Americans who would otherwise be denied access to college (Redd, 2000). The majority of these institutions were founded in southern states in the mid-1800s, at a time when traditionally white institutions would not admit African-American students (O'Brien & Zudak, 1998). Recently, however, many HBCUs have shifted their focus to provide educational opportunities for people of all races who are unable able to afford the rising costs of higher education. As a result, many HBCUs are now more diverse than ever before. Nevertheless, more than 86 percent of the undergraduates enrolled at HBCUs are African-American (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

Recently, researchers have compared the experiences of African-American students that attended HBCUs to those students that have attended predominately white institutions. Studies have found that African-American students, who attend predominately white institutions, are more likely than those who are students at HBCUs to experience greater levels of social isolation, alienation, personal dissatisfaction, and overt racism (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Taking these factors into account, in conjunction with recent decisions to eliminate the use of affirmative action for admissions at public colleges in many states (Bakst, 2000; Finn, 2000), HBCUs in the future will play an even more important role in providing successful educational opportunities for African-Americans in the years to come.

During the first half of the century, graduate education for African-Americans was basically non-existent, with the exception of programs at a few schools such as Harvard, Yale and University of Wisconsin. It was not until the civil rights legislation of the 1950s and 1960s did graduate education for African-Americans improve. Blackwell (1987) reported that at no time between 1950 and 1969 did "the number of African-American Ph.D.s rise above 1% of all doctorate holders in the labor force" (p. 327). Do to the legislation of the 1960s and the 1970s, an increase occurred in the numbers and

proportion of doctorates awarded to African-Americans. However, the commitment to increasing educational opportunities for African-Americans and other minority groups lost momentum during the late 1970s through the late 1980s, as this country witnessed a decline in the number of doctorates awarded to African-Americans. In many ways, this parallels the general decrease in educational and social services to minority and at-risk populations. In the 1990s, African-Americans showed a small increase in the number of doctoral degrees awarded, nevertheless, the minimal number of African-Americans that complete doctoral programs has been a major cause for concern.

Some research studies written in the 1980s and 1990s examined the experiences of African-American graduate students in light of their declining enrollments in graduate and professional programs (St. John, 2000). These studies identified two key factors affecting African-American graduate students that do not impact White graduate students attempting to find their way within academe: social integration and experiences of racism.

Social integration refers to “people’s involvement with the institutions, voluntary associations, and informal social life of their communities” (Gottlieb, 1981 p. 32). Defour (1986) found that students who were more socially integrated into their academic departments were less likely to contemplate dropping out of school. However, such integration may not come easily for African-American students. Research has identified social integration as a significant problem with African-American graduate students. Allen (1982) surveyed the characteristics, experiences, and aspirations of over 400 African-American graduate students within predominantly white institutions. He reported, “African-American graduate students seem not to be thoroughly integrated into the social life of their respective schools” (p. 4). He also suggested that only 20 percent experienced a sense of belonging on campus while twenty-five percent of African American students stated they felt excluded by faculty from participating in faculty research. Fifty-one percent reported that their White colleagues sometimes avoided social interaction with them, and 34 percent reported that this occurred often. Consequently, a significant number of African-American students are having experiences that lead to marginalization and make integration and commitment to graduate education more difficult.

Other studies support this contention. In a study focusing on race consciousness and achievement in African-American graduate students at six predominately White colleges and universities (PWCs), Hall and Allen (1992) found that 45 percent of African-American graduate students felt that their professors sometimes avoided interactions with African-American graduate students outside of the classroom. One quarter of the students felt that faculty never involved African-American students in research projects and activities and over one third of students felt that their professors never offered African-American students’ opportunities to gain experience as teaching assistants or instructors. These findings are supported by Baird (1974), Duncan (1976), and Willie, Grady, and Hope (1991) that found minorities in White institutions reported a smaller percentage of mentoring relationships as part of their graduate school experience. Although these studies are largely measures of self-perception, they are indicators of the

isolation experienced by African-American students and suggest poor social involvement for these graduate students at Predominately White Institutions (PWI's).

Racism makes social integration within academe exceedingly difficult. Benjamin (1991) defines racism as “a process of justification for the domination, exploitation, and control of one racial group by another. It incorporates a set of attitudes and beliefs to support the dominant group’s discriminatory behavior” (p. xxvii). Racism is a painful reality of American society and has continued to be a major barrier to minority advancement (Blandin, 1994). Historically, studies reported experiences of racism as part of the African-American graduate students’ experiences. Allen (1982) reported that African-American graduate students perceived that some White faculty members behaved in a manner that indicated discomfort when working with African-American students. “This discomfort gets translated into an apparent reluctance to work with African-American students, as well as subtle discriminatory acts toward African-American students” (p. 10). Participants in Allen’s study provided several indicators of their perceptions of discriminatory acts: For example, several professors expressed surprise and disbelief regarding the writing abilities of competent African American graduate students. Participants also expressed the unavailability of faculty for them, who seemed to find ample time for white students. (p. 7). A more recent study by Pruitt and Isaac (1998) found that dissertation topics that focused on minority issues, which many African-American doctoral students wish to pursue, are often not well received in doctoral programs.

In his examination of factors that contribute to African-American graduate students’ decisions to forego doctoral studies at two predominately White institutions, Stanley (1990) found that experiences with racial discrimination were the most significant factors in decisions of African-American students to forego the pursuit of a doctoral degree. Given the number of non-academic obstacles presented at PWIs, there are still significant numbers of African-Americans obtaining Ph.D.’s from HBCUs. This suggests that racism, or the perception of racism, whether personal or institutional, has some influence on the completion of graduate degrees for African-American students. This phenomenon we call racism may not be intentional, but may be the discomfort of White faculty mentoring or working with African-American graduate students with whom they have limited experiences. Nevertheless, such experiences present barriers to African-American students in the pursuit of their doctoral educations.

The Future for African-American Doctoral Students at HBCUs

Due to the aforementioned barriers, many African-Americans are now choosing to pursue doctoral degrees at HBCUs. Between 1992-93 and 1997-98, HBCUs increased their number of doctoral graduates by 15.2 percent (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999). Two HBCUs ranked among the top 15 African-American doctorate producers, with the largest undisputed one-year percentage increase at Jackson State University in Mississippi (ranked 15th with an increase of 144 percent) and Clark Atlanta University (ranked fifth with an increase of 95.5 percent) (St. John, 2000).

According to Dr. William Boone, associate provost and interim dean of graduate study at Clark Atlanta University, “Black colleges offer a uniqueness that is not found in other schools. Historically, we have opened doors to folks and they have come to us for reasons other than our academic programs” (St. John, 2000). The literature has supported that more African-American students are looking to HBCUs to provide doctoral education. Supporters of HBCU doctoral education states that HBCUs offer more teaching and hands-on care when compared to predominately white institutions. These advocates report that more focus and support is placed upon the student and developing a mentor relationship so the student can be successful in their academic/professional careers. This increase in focus upon doctoral education at HBCUs may suggest that African-American graduate students are not willing to risk the alienation some feel at PWI programs and choose to enroll in a more comfortable academic environment.

Critical Factors for Predominantly White Institutions to recruit African-American Doctoral Students

With the increased enrollment of African-American doctoral students in HBCUs, PWIs are also examining ways to increase the African-American “presence” in their doctoral programs. Steele (1999) provides three critical factors to recruiting a significant cohort of African-American students at a PWI. According to Dr. Steele (1999) decreasing social isolation, having African American faculty or faculty support, and providing appropriate financial support are key factors in this recruitment effort.

Many scholars recommend that graduate schools at PWCs should set up formal partnerships with HBCUs to help in the recruitment of African-American graduate students. By setting up formal partnerships, faculty at HBCUs and PWIs need to collaborate to ensure African-American students are successful in completing doctoral programs. This collaboration can provide African-American students with inside information about the doctoral program to which they are applying. Such a collaboration can also help provide students’ access to mentors.

Given the low numbers of African-American students, particularly males, completing their doctorate degrees, coupled with the difficulty of these students entering and completing their degrees, the following section offers the experiences of two African-American males students from HBCUs. The authors also discuss their successful completion of the Ph.D. degrees from separate PWI and offer suggestions in regard to the recruitment and retention of African-American students at PWI graduate programs.

The Experiences of Chance Lewis

Two major factors contributed to me successfully completing my doctoral program: 1) Overcoming Social Isolation and 2) Obtaining Financial Support.

Overcoming Social Isolation was difficult because it was prevalent in three separate arenas; the community, academic environment and lack of relationships with students of color.

During my time in my doctoral program the community was mostly white and less than 3% African-American. In the South, I was accustomed to numbers that were more evenly split on the lines of race. After the first two weeks of being in this community I was ready to return back to my comfort zone in Louisiana. However, I kept telling myself that I was in this community for a purpose and that was to receive my degree. One thing that kept me from quickly adjusting to this community were the times people would ask if I was an athlete. This was one of the hardest things I had to deal with and it motivated me to focus more on academics. Once I began to adjust to living in the community, I then had to adjust to being in a “majority-white” department. In my department, there was only one African-American faculty member. In classes I was many times singled out when issues of race would surface and would be asked how do African-Americans feel about a certain issue? At times I felt I was defending the entire African-American race, which was totally unfair. Also, many of my classmates thought I was in the program because the numbers of minorities were very low. All of this had a motivating affect on me as I continued to pursue my degree.

To aid in my social adjustment, I built strong relationships with other students of color and members of my church community. These relationships with other graduate students of color allowed us to have an outlet to discuss pressures of being a student of color. Also, we served as a support group for each another to ensure all of us would continue to progress toward graduation.

Colorado State University (CSU) and Southern University (SU) in Louisiana signed a formal agreement to allow CSU to recruit quality African-American graduate students for Master’s and Doctorate degrees. It was beneficial for me to pursue a doctorate degree at a university that had an understanding of my undergraduate program. This relationship made the adjustment easier because I was familiar with some faculty and there were other students from Southern University enrolled prior to my attending CSU.

Another important aspect of my decision to attend and complete graduate school was that I was awarded a fellowship. This allowed me to gain valuable experience in teaching especially on how to properly prepare lectures and to use the most effective methodologies of teaching. Furthermore, the research assistantships taught me how to conduct high-quality research that could be respected by my peers.

The Experiences of Jeffrey Shears

The early experiences of arriving for graduate school were traumatic! Coming from a majority African-American student body to one where the African-American enrollment was less than three percent, was uncomfortable. Simply put, going from the being in majority to being the only one was an adjustment. To add to my anxiety was the realization there was not a supportive African-American faculty in my department. However, the greater contribution to my completion of the doctoral program was the faculty support that I received.

Although there was an African-American professor in my department, my mentoring relationships were with White professors. They recognized the isolation I felt being one of the few African-Americans on campus and offered me the support, encouragement, and the insight on how to navigate through the academic system. My personal experience supports much of what has been presented in that minority students fare better in graduate school if they have caring mentors. My mentors' support included offering academic advice, encouragement, and brutal honesty about my procrastination on completing the dissertation. In short, these professors went beyond just a professional commitment and I was able to establish a close relationship with them. Their support and encouragement was very influential to me in that; (1) it offered support and encouragement and assisted with the day-to-day struggles of graduate school (2) offered me a relationship with someone who had experienced a Ph.D. program (3) gave me honest assessment of my ability and academic areas I needed to address, and (4) offered me experiences in research and scholarship. Despite my initial anxieties of not having a supportive African-American faculty, my mentoring relationships in graduate school were superior.

Another important aspect of completing the program was the financial scholarship and graduate research assistantships that I received. It was an important decision in my choosing a doctoral program. Besides the ease of the financial burden, the experience of research and teaching was invaluable. It is also beneficial to graduate programs to have minority students teach classes because it gives undergraduate students access to African-American instructors. The ability to continue working in an academic setting while completing the dissertation was also instrumental in my finishing the program and was fortunate to be a research assistant during the entire process. Not only did these assistantships ease the financial burden, but also it taught me valuable research skills. Having a paid research assistantship while completing the dissertation gave me freedom from full-time employment and offered an environment which was supportive and motivating.

The experiences of the first two authors of this article in graduate programs are very similar. Although two case studies may not be entirely generalizable, many of their experiences are common among African-American doctoral students. These two successful graduates both underline several key factors that contributed to their success. These include the importance of, social support, faculty mentorship, and financial aid. Since these men share similar experiences, they offer recommendations for students and graduate schools.

Conclusion

In order to cope with the growing needs of the African-American community, and to help them attain better socioeconomic status, there is a need to increase the number of African-American graduate students. Graduate programs need to be diligent about recruiting and accepting African-American students ready for doctoral work. When examining African-American applicants, programs might need to ensure that accepted students are mature enough so as the issues addressed earlier will not deter them from

completion of the program. This is not to imply that African-American students should be held to stricter admission standards, but it is obvious that African-American students, due to the structural inadequacies of many institutional environments, need to be resourceful in establishing academic and social support systems in order to complete Ph.D. programs. Given this dilemma, schools should provide students honest portrayal of the difficulty of their programs, the school's atmosphere and the surrounding community. Schools should be completely honest in expressing that there exist few African-American students, professors, and support systems. That will lend respectability to the program and prevent some of the shock that can occur when one arrives for school not realizing the situation. Graduate programs also need to offer additional support for African-American students. These supports can range from establishing relationships with other graduate programs on campus for African-American students to be able to seek out quality mentorship experiences.

All students benefit from having adequate numbers of African-American students in the graduate program. Since apart of the graduate experience should include interaction with diverse populations in order to develop professional skills. Therefore, programs must find creative ways to assure that African-American students have opportunities for social engagement with other African-American students across campus. Since graduate programs are often small, African-American students from different departments can provide supportive connections. In addition, it is important for continued research in the area of minority recruitment and retention in graduate programs. Students and graduate programs need to understand that although graduate school may offer some additional challenges and experiences that may be different for African-American students, that African-American students will be successful with adequate support.

Recommendations

This case study has highlighted the experiences of two African American men who obtained their undergraduate degrees from HBCU's and their doctoral degrees from Predominately White Institutions. As many Predominately White Institutions seek to recruit and retain African American doctoral students in their programs, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. More empirical research is needed to understand the "non-academic" variables that impact African American doctoral students at PWI's.
2. Universities should strongly consider training for faculty members so they can learn to be sensitive to the needs of African American doctoral students as they seek to navigate the "ivory tower" of academia.
3. Universities should seek to establish mentor/mentee relationships with faculty members and African American doctoral students.

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