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Abstract

In light of shifting African American student enrollment patterns at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), this study examines admissions and recruitment materials mailed to prospective students from 13 HBCUs. The material was analyzed using factors from the Search stage of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model. Results revealed variations in quality among public and private Black Colleges. The significance of these results, specific recommendations for recruitment, and implications for future research are also included.

Disciplines

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Comments

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On Analyzing HBCU Admissions and Recruitment Material

Shaun R. Harper

In light of shifting African-American student enrollment patterns at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), this study examines admissions and recruitment material mailed to prospective students from thirteen Black institutions. The material was analyzed and evaluated on the basis of timeliness and completeness. Results reveal variations in quality among public and privately supported HBCUs. The significance of these results, specific recommendations, and implications for further exploration are also discussed.

The founding of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) was principally responsible for the integration of African-Americans into higher education (Crossland, 1971). Before these institutions emerged, very little was done to recruit African-American students to Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). In fact, prior to the founding of Cheyney University, the first institution founded exclusively for the education of African-Americans in 1830 (nearly 200 years after the start of higher education in America), only 28 baccalaureate degrees had been awarded to persons of acknowledged Negro descent (Crossland, 1971). Today, HBCUs are credited with triumphantly recruiting and graduating a substantial number of African-American scholars and leaders.

In spite of Black colleges' historic success in aggrandizing the participation of African-Americans in post-secondary education, the enrollment patterns of African-American students have shifted dramatically in the past several years (Fleming, 1984; Hoffman, Snyder, & Sonnenberg, 1992; Renner, 1998). Whereas previous generations of African-American students naturally found their way onto HBCU campuses, contemporaries are now choosing to matriculate at institutions that were once inaccessible to African-Americans and other students of color (Wilson, 1994). Today, PWIs compete amongst themselves and with HBCUs to recruit and attract the nation's brightest, most talented African-American students.

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Admission Packers

For example, fifty years ago, "over 90 percent of Black [undergraduate] students (approximately 100,000 in 1950) were educated in traditionally Black schools" (Fleming, 1984, p. 7). According to Hoffman et al. (1992) these numbers dipped significantly to 18.4 percent in 1976, then again to 17.2 percent in 1990. Wilds & Wilson (2000) assert that in 1998, HBCUs only enrolled 14.4 percent of all African-Americans in higher education.

In spite of declining enrollments, there is an extreme paucity of research concerning the enrollment management functions of HBCUs. The dramatic turbulence and shift in enrollment at Black colleges over the past several years have been credited to the traditional criticisms of such institutions— inadequate resources, poorer facilities, and low-profile faculty (Fleming, 1984). Virtually no attention has been given to other possible factors which may influence the enrollment decisions of African-American students. Moreover, there is a dearth of information on the impact of pre-enrollment processes and marketing efforts of HBCUs. That is, what are HBCUs doing to attract African-American students? How effective, timely, and competitive are the marketing initiatives of HBCUs?

The purpose of this study is to analyze admissions and recruitment materials sent to prospective undergraduate students by HBCUs. In response to the lack of existing research on the quality of the efforts enacted by these institutions, this study seeks to analyze current practices employed by HBCUs in the development and distribution of materials created to interest students in matriculating at their institutions. More specifically, answers to the following research questions are sought: (1) how timely are HBCUs in mailing requested materials to prospective students; (2) how adequate and complete is the information; and (3) to what extent do Black Colleges conform to current ideas regarding best practices in Admissions and Recruitment materials? These questions and the analysis of HBCU recruitment literature are guided by previous research pertaining to college choice and institutional marketing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although little attention has been paid to how African-American students choose between HBCUs and other post-secondary institutions, scholars have developed relevant models of college choice for traditional-aged college students (Hanson & Litten, 1982; Jackson, 1982; Chapman, 1984; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The Hossler and Gallagher (1987) three-stage model places college choice into a manageable framework: (1) predisposition, the decision to attend college rather than working full-time or enlisting in the military after high school; (2) search, the process of learning about different institutions and their characteristics; and (3) choice, the stage when students choose a particular college or university.

Tables and Figures

Figure 1

The Hossler & Gallagher Model (adapted from Hossler & Gallagher, 1987)



Hossler and Gallagher (1987) contend that the search stage is most important to students because they are actively seeking, comparing, and evaluating information about various institutions. Moreover, it is here that prospective college goers ascertain what attributes they are looking for and which institutions offer them. This information is usually acquired through examining brochures and other literature from a wide range of institutions, interacting with recruiters at college fairs, and making visits to various institutions. Hossler, Braxton, and Cooper-Smith (1989) found that little research has been done on the search stage of college decision making. "Studies in this area could help admissions officers understand what students need from various information sources to make sound decisions about college" (Anderson, 1994, p. 29).

According to Hossler et al. (1989), high school students at different grade levels have different information needs during the search stage of the college choice process. Anderson (1994) argues that it is critically important for colleges and universities to have an awareness and understanding of the different types of information needed by students applying to their institutions. Thus, they must develop marketing materials, publications, and other recruitment pieces that provide appropriate answers to questions different students may have about the institution. That is, publications should be designed to respond to the specific needs, concerns, and questions of prospective students and their parents. Cantelbury (1989) (as cited in Anderson, 1994) found that only a few of the 123 publications mailed to his high school daughter focused on information prospective students and their parents would need to make an enrollment decision.

Citlik (1982) asserts that prospective students expect publications to provide information on academic quality, cost, career availability, financial aid, and campus support systems. Abrahamson and Hossler (1990) identified view books, catalogs, department brochures, residence life brochures, and information on scholarships and financial aid as common recruitment tools for enrollment managers. The authors noted exposure and name recognition; motivating students to inquire about the institution and its programs; and moving students "down the admissions funnel from prospective student to matriculant" as the chief goals of these publications. Furthermore, they submit that these types of publications must be written and designed for the type of student the institution seeks to enroll. For example, if an institution is trying to attract more African-American students, its publications should include information and images that appeal to the unique interests, needs, and concerns of African-Americans. Moreover, publications and marketing material should be mailed in a timely manner. In addition, the authors

Admission Packets

say individually crafted letters, though they require an overwhelming amount of time and staff, are most effective and should accompany marketing materials sent to prospective students (Abrahamson & Hossler, 1990).

The National Postsecondary Student Aid Study of 1990 (NPSAS) (as cited in Educational Testing Service, 1997) found that students choose to attend HBCUs for two main reasons: (1) their parents attended HBCUs; and (2) HBCUs are more affordable than PWIs. Of the 15 possible reasons offered to African-American students participating in the NPSAS, none were specifically concerning the impact of recruitment and marketing efforts of such institutions.

Figure 2

Reasons students choose to attend HBCUs

- The school has a good reputation
- The school offers a generous financial aid package
- The school has an interesting set of course offerings
- Parents like the school
- Parents had attended the school
- Students think they will obtain a better job by graduating from the school
- The tuition is lower
- The cost of living in the area is lower
- Students have friends attending the school
- The school is close to home
- Students can work while in school
- Students can live at home
- Students can live far away from home
- The school is good at placing students in jobs
- Students can finish the program quickly

Source: National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey of 1990

Since there were not options such as "the school aggressively recruited me to enroll" or "I was impressed by the quality of the material sent to me from the institution," one cannot accurately determine the impact of such variables. However, some variables on the instrument such as "the school has an interesting set of course offerings;" "the school is good at placing students in jobs;" and "the tuition is lower" could have been communicated through and influenced by publications and other sources of information from these institutions. It is conceivable that answers to these and other topics of interest to prospective students are found in the material mailed from admissions offices at HBCUs.

Table 1 Institutional profiles

Institution	Classification	Total Enrollment
Banneker State University	Public	5,667
Carver College	Private	2,502
Diggs State University	Public	4,993
Douglass University	Private	6,035
DuBois College	Private	2,889
Holley University	Private	3,100
King State University	Public	8,664
Marshall A&M University	Public	5,400
Mays State University	Public	10,306
Parsons State University	Public	6,313
Truth University	Private	879
Tubman University	Private	10,332
Wells Institute	Public	10,359

In terms of financial resources, HBCUs cannot compete with their White counterparts, Fleming (1984) contends.

"There are many reports of vastly poorer educational resources at Black institutions...[w]e can be sure that the poor resources of Black colleges must set some limits on what they can do for Black students" (Fleming, 1984, p. 150).

This would perceptibly impact the amount of resources HBCUs invest in producing recruitment material. The impact of resource allocation on recruitment initiatives could also vary among institutional type. According to Hoffman et al. (1992), the financial resource picture at public HBCUs generally looks stronger than their tuition-dependent private counterparts.

"The resources available at the public HBCUs appear similar to those available at other public institutions...[t]he situation at some private HBCUs shows weaknesses relative to other private institutions in maintaining high enrollments, funding levels, and staff resources" (Hoffman et al., 1992, p.14).

The following hypotheses emerged as a result of reviewing the existing literature: (1) based on declining African-American student enrollment at Black colleges during the past several years, HBCU publications and marketing materials do not appropriately respond to the information needs of prospective students and are not sent in a timely manner; and (2) because of scant resources, the recruitment literature of private HBCUs is of poorer quality than that of public Black colleges.

METHOD

Sample

Thirteen HBCUs were selected for participation in this research study. These institutions were chosen because of their strong and historic reputations as "Black Ivy League" institutions. The colleges and universities selected are among the most famous, recognized, and highly regarded Historically Black institutions. Moreover, these schools are almost always among the HBCUs represented in rankings, publications external to their institutions, and college guidebooks. In spite of the researcher's experience and familiarity with HBCUs, these institutions were selected exclusively on their reputations and the strength of their academic programs (as reflected in current rankings). Since these institutions are often viewed as "top tier" HBCUs, the researcher sought to examine the quality, timeliness, and completeness of the materials mailed to prospective students. Of the 13 institutions, six are private and seven are public. The average student enrollment figures at the private and public HBCUs in the sample are 4,289 and 7,386 respectively.

Procedures

After identifying the thirteen HBCUs, the researcher called the admissions offices of each institution to request an application and admissions materials. The actual nature of the request was not disclosed. That is, the researcher did not tell the person on the telephone that a research study was being conducted. Instead, HBCU admissions personnel were left to assume that either a prospective student or parent was interested in applying or finding out more about the institution and was calling to request the appropriate information. In an effort to acquire the same admissions packet mailed to actual prospective students, the researcher chose not to reveal the purpose of the request. An assumption was made that the institutions would "put on their Sunday best" if they were made aware of their participation in the research project.

Each of the thirteen HBCUs responded to the researcher's request by sending admissions information of some sort via U.S. Mail. The researcher kept a chronological record of the materials received and later analyzed them for completeness and quality. In order to maintain anonymity, fictitious names are given to each of the institutions selected for participation in this study.

Limitations

The most noteworthy limitation of this study is the inability to generalize its findings. Since only thirteen of the 108 HBCUs (12.4 percent) are represented in the study, it may be erroneous to assume that all or even most Black colleges have similar standards of quality for their admissions materials. It is conceivable that "top tier" HBCUs may feel less pressure to produce and distribute higher quality

admissions material; for them, recruitment may be more dependent upon reputation and a tradition of excellence. On the contrary, the recruitment material of less reputable HBCUs may in fact be of a different quality than those reflected in this study. Those institutions may see a need to be more competitive and innovative in their recruitment efforts. A larger, more representative sample of the 108 HBCUs would certainly make this study's findings more generalizable.

RESULTS

Timeliness

As shown in Table 2, admissions materials were received anywhere from two to 41 calendar days after the telephone request. DuBois and Parks State Universities had the fastest response times, while Douglass and Marshall A&M took more than one month to mail requested materials.

Table 2
Timeliness of Materials Sent

Institution	Calendar Days
Banneker State University	8
Carver College*	6
Diggs State University	8
Douglass University*	41
DuBois College*	2
Holley University*	5
King State University	8
Marshall A&M University	34
Mays State University	22
Parks State University	2
Truth University*	12
Tubman University*	23
Wells Institute	6

*Denotes Private HBCUs.

On average, materials were received within thirteen days with no significant variation among institutional type (12.57 days for public institutions and 14.83 for privates).

Completeness

No two packets received from the selected HBCUs were the same. Each institution included different types of material for prospective college goers and their families. The following ten items or pieces of information were sought when evaluating the completeness of the admissions packets: an application, view book, personalized letter, historical information, famous alumni, list of majors, cost, financial aid and scholarships, housing, and information about student life. Ten points were awarded to each institution for each component included in their packets.

An application for admission was the only item consistently provided by each of the thirteen HBCUs. Conversely, Diggs State University was the only institution to include a letter personally addressed to the researcher (prospective student). View books, highlights of famous alumni, and information regarding student life were only provided by private institutions. By far, the private institutions sent the most comprehensive and complete packets; hence their total scores. The mean score awarded to private HBCUs for completeness was 75, while the public institutions averaged 37.14 (see Table 3). Fifty of 100 possible points were the highest awarded to public HBCUs, while five of the six private institutions yielded scores of 80 and above.

Table 3
Materials Mailed to Prospective Applicants

Institution	Total Score	Application	View Book	Personalized Letter	History	Famous Alumni	Majors	Cost	Financial Aid	Housing	Student Life
Banneker State University	39	1					1	1	1	1	
Carver College*	40	1					1	1	1	1	
Diggs State University	39	1		1			1	1	1	1	
Douglass University*	30	1	1				1	1	1	1	1
DuBois College*	30	1	1				1	1	1	1	1
Holley University*	30	1	1				1	1	1	1	1
King State University	39	1					1	1	1	1	
Marshall A&M University	30	1					1	1	1	1	
Parks State University	30	1					1	1	1	1	
Mays State University	30	1					1	1	1	1	
Truth University*	30	1	1				1	1	1	1	1
Tubman University*	30	1	1				1	1	1	1	1
Wells Institute	30	1	1				1	1	1	1	1

*Denotes Private HBCUs.

ANALYSIS

The results of this study confirm the need to look more critically at admissions and recruitment materials mailed by HBCUs to prospective students. From an aggregate perspective, materials from private Black colleges were far more complete, professional, and responsive to the questions prospective students may have regarding matriculation and campus life. These data contradict the hypothesis that public HBCUs would have better publications and other recruitment items than their privately funded counterparts. Although the funding picture at private HBCUs typically looks more grim than that of their public counterparts (Hoffman et al., 1992), the private colleges and universities represented in this study apparently invest more resources and care into the material used to recruit undergraduate students. Carver College was the only one of the six private institutions that significantly lacked information and material.

Each of the publically supported Black colleges failed to provide an adequate volume of information about their institutions, academic programs, and services. That none of the public institutions included view books, highlights of famous alumni, or information regarding student life merits attention from admissions personnel and those responsible for creating recruitment material at those institutions. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) assert that during the search stage of the college choice process prospective students determine the characteristics they are looking for and the institutions which afford them; prospective students would undoubtedly encounter difficulty in identifying such characteristics based on the materials mailed by the public HBCUs reflected in this study. In addition to admissions applications, Marshall A&M only included information about financial aid; Parks State only included information about cost; and Wells Institute only included a list of majors and academic programs.

Among other reasons, participants in the NPSAS of 1990 say they chose HBCUs because the schools were good at placing students in jobs (Educational Testing Service, 1997). Without information about famous alumni and other successful graduates, prospective students cannot accurately ascertain an institution's success at producing competent, highly regarded graduates; thus, the inclusion of such information is imperative. The chief goals of admissions publications (i.e. name recognition, motivating students to find out more, and moving students from prospective student to matriculant) as identified by Abrahamson and Hossler (1990), were left unmet by each of the seven public HBCUs.

With regard to timeliness, the results are predominantly positive. That materials from nine of the 13 institutions (69.2 percent) were received in less than two weeks weakens the hypothesis that admissions information from HBCUs is not sent in a timely manner. In spite of the general timeliness of material, mailings from two public institutions (Marshall A&M and Mays State Universities) and two privates (Douglass and Tuhsan Universities), which is the equivalent of 30.1 percent of the participating HBCUs, lingered for more than three weeks. Given the significance of the search stage mentioned in Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and the critical timing between the transition from search to choice, all HBCUs

should strive to have response rates similar to those of DuBois College and Parks State University. Prospective students and their families need to receive requested information in a timely manner in order to make decisions regarding enrollment; they could very easily choose another institution while waiting 34 or 41 calendar days for material requested from a particular institution.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Based on the results reported in this study, it appears that public HBCUs should strive to be more "private-like" in the development and distribution of recruitment materials. In spite of fiscal challenges, the private institutions apparently hold information sharing and quality publications in high regard. Additionally, all Black colleges should examine recruitment pieces from other institutions that are similar in terms of enrollment, geography, and student demography. Although this study focused exclusively on materials from HBCUs, Black colleges still face the challenge of competing with PWIs for African-American students. Therefore, it would be helpful to know what the competitors are doing and how they are marketing their programs and services.

Given their limited financial resources (regardless of public or private support structures), HBCUs must creatively find ways to market their institutions at a reasonable price. Since all HBCUs presumably cannot afford full-color, professionally printed view books, they should look into finding less expensive ways to provide information. Though fancy brochures and booklets are desirable, it is more important to provide the information that prospective students and their families need to make matriculation decisions. This information includes price, financial aid and scholarship opportunities, housing information, and majors, as well as all of the other variables examined in this study. The purpose of this study was not to assess the attractiveness of the material sent; but rather, the overall quality was determined by the amount of information included. In short, financial resources have very little to do with the completeness of the information mailed to prospective students.

It may be advantageous to qualitatively gather the perceptions of prospective students on recruitment materials received from HBCUs, especially those who decide against attending such institutions. Furthermore, current students enrolled at HBCUs could be asked to reflect on the impact recruitment materials had on their decisions to enroll. It may also be useful to duplicate this study, comparing HBCUs with PWIs that are similar in structure. It is here that one may more accurately ascertain the impact of admissions and recruitment literature on the matriculation decisions of African-American students.

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