IMPARTING WISDOM:

HBCU Lessons for the K-12 Education Sector

Abstract

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are adept at enrolling, retaining and graduating low-income, first-generation, academically under-prepared students at higher rates than predicted. Given the challenges of the K-12 sector in narrowing educational disparities that are often grounded in racial and economic inequalities, HBCUs could serve as useful best practice models for K-12 educators, administrators and policymakers. This paper outlines six proven HBCU strategies that could be useful for contextual emulation in the nation's primary schools, including promoting high levels of student-faculty interaction, employing intrusive advising strategies, and developing a strong sense of identity.

Brian K. Bridges, PhD

Brian.bridges@uncf.org

Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have spent much of their existence—the first ones founded prior to the Civil War—doing higher education's yeoman's work by educating large proportions of low-income, first-generation, academically under-prepared—and originally, black—students. Despite having amongst the least amount of resources of college campuses, HBCUs continue to enroll, retain and graduate a student population that requires the most support. Research shows that HBCUs actually retain and graduate low-income, academically underprepared students at higher rates than expected when controlling for these factors (Flores & Park, 2014; Richards & Awokoya, 2012). Unfortunately, HBCUs are not often deemed a source of best practice by those who are not affiliated with them. Yet, their outcomes are clear: despite enrolling approximately nine percent of all African American students attending four-year institutions, they produce 16 percent of all African American bachelor's degrees and 27% of African American bachelor's degrees in STEM fields (FDPRI, 2013). Therefore, what lessons have HBCUs learned in educating large numbers of low-income, academically underprepared African American students that can inform the work of K-12 schools with these populations?

The education disparities that exist between African American kids and majority kids is well-documented. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress, the gaps between African American and White 4th and 8th graders in reading and mathematics have narrowed slightly since the late 1970s, but have been stagnant in mathematics since 1999 (Vanneman, Hamilton, Baldwin Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). The average freshman graduation rate for public high school students reached an all-time high of 81 percent in 2012, but for African American students it was only 68 percent (Kena, Aud, Johnson, Wang, Zhang, Rathbun, Wilkinson-Flicker, & Kristapovich, 2014). HBCUs have a documented history of success with many of the same students who often leave the nation's secondary schools ill-equipped to maximize their college experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These HBCU "best practices" can be employed to provide valuable instruction to K-12 school districts in improving the

educational outcomes of students from these disadvantaged backgrounds. This paper identifies HBCU best practices based on research findings into succinct strategies that can be implemented at secondary schools, and where appropriate, provides parallel examples of where the strategy is currently working in the K-12 context.

HBCU Best Practices

Promoting high levels of student-faculty interaction. Research has demonstrated the impact of students having meaningful interactions with their faculty and considerable research has proven that HBCU faculty engage with their students at high levels in the classroom, outside of the classroom, on research projects and in extracurricular campus activities (Bridges, Kinzie, Nelson Laird, Kuh, 2008; Flowers, 2002; Nelson Laird, Bridges, Morelon, Wiliams, Salinas Holmes, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Terenzini, Yaeger, Bohr, Pascarella, & Nora, 1997). If students connect with at least one faculty member, and therefore the campus, in a deep manner they are more likely to be retained and graduate. In fact, some research shows this is one of the most powerful factors in helping students--especially minority students--establish a fit with the institution, increasing their likelihood of retention and engagement (Levin & Levin, 1991). HBCUs do this extremely well and K-12 schools could learn from this model where ALL faculty are expected to and often go above and beyond to connect to students in non-traditional ways, outside of the classroom and with their families to encourage their success and show them that an adult authority figure truly cares about them and their future. At HBCUs, this strong cultural element pays off tremendously with students who often come from backgrounds where they feel most educators do not care about their success. The Small Schools Initiative is designed to mitigate the size of large high schools by creating smaller schools within schools, and one of the desired outcomes is to capitalize on high levels of student-teacher interactions.

Employing "intrusive advising". Called *proactive* advising by some, this strategy is deeply rooted in academic advising where faculty and staff help students clarify and coalesce

their academic goals (Earl, 1988). Intrusive advising is action-oriented and geared toward motivating students to seek help when needed and be proactively intentional about their success (Earl, 1988). All HBCU faculty and staff are encouraged to employ these strategies that may occasionally appear to be "butting into" the lives of students. One example of this in action is instead of a faculty member ignoring a student skipping class and never asking questions of them, an intrusive professor may call the student or actually go to their residence hall seeking answers as to why the student has repeatedly missed class. Anecdotal evidence abounds about HBCU faculty stopping students on campus to implore them to take charge of their academic lives. K-12 teachers can not only encourage promising students, but prod all students to achieve at higher levels. Teacher expectations have been shown to impact student performance so teachers play a critical role in helping students see their own promise and motivating them to work up to their potential (Schilling & Schilling, 1999). Many small independent schools market this type of advising as part of their competitive advantage, giving them the ability to directly engage with students who often slip through the cracks.

   Promoting student engagement based on culture. Research has shown that the HBCU mission and practice of incorporating aspects of African American culture into campus rituals and the curriculum to promote student learning and connect them to the institution in impactful (Davis, 1991; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002). One powerful example of this working at the K-12 level is the Urban Prep Academies in Chicago, two all-African American male high schools that have sent 100% of their graduates to college for four straight years. Despite 85% of their students coming from low-income households, the commitment and mission "to reverse abysmal graduation and college completion rates among boys in urban centers" (http://www.urbanprep.org/about) has been powerful enough--when coupled with a strong and caring faculty and a curriculum rooted in the African American male experience--to counter the narrative about urban youth and instill in them a strong desire to succeed academically and matriculate in college.

This strategy can also manifest itself through the development of a strong institutional culture where there are clear expectations of what it means for the students to live their lives as a member of the community. The most powerful example of an HBCU doing this is Morehouse College, where there is even a ceremony that freshmen go through to indoctrinate them into what it means to be a "Morehouse Man." An excellent K-12 parallel to this can be found in the Knowledge is Power Program network of charter schools better known as KIPP. KIPP intentionally indoctrinates its students into its high-expectation, high-performance culture when they enter. These examples and this strategy are closely related to and intertwined with the next strategy.

Developing a strong sense of identity. HBCUs have been noted for cultivating higher levels of African self-consciousness in their students--over 80% of whom are African American, on average (Cokley, 1999). HBCU alums also exhibit a proclivity toward civic-mindedness, especially toward the African American community as they demonstrate higher levels of charitable giving, political participation and religious participation than African American college graduates who do not attend HBCUs (Freyer & Greenstone, 2007). The idea of being a proud KIPPster resonates with students and is part of the overall approach of connecting students to the institution and engaging them proactively in their own success. Every aspect of the KIPP student experience, from the five pillars to the curriculum and deeply committed teachers, aligns students deeply with the KIPP brand, helping them to unknowingly develop an identity as a KIPPster that helps them succeed in school.

Encouraging graduate school enrollment. HBCU students pursue graduate degrees at higher rates than African American students who attend non-HBCUs, which is why the top 10 schools that send African Americans on to earn PhDs in science and engineering are HBCUs (Upton & Tanenbaum, 2014). The theory here is that if students have a higher goal to work toward, they will work harder in their current academic pursuits. The corollary here are high schools that strongly encourage college enrollment. Once again, Urban Prep Academies in

Chicago--with four continuous years where all of their low-income, African American male graduates enroll immediately in college--provides an excellent example of a pervasive school culture that encourages matriculation at the next level. Another example is found in the KIPP Network of schools where they have built a program called *KIPP through College* and tags each entering class of students with the year they should enter college. This constantly reminds students to face their future daily, reminding them they have to do well in and finish high school to realize that goal. K-12 schools that adopt a similar culture could spur students to higher levels of achievement because they would have a long-term goal reliant on short-term performance.

The value of having the option to attend school primarily with students from the same race or culture. Research from UNCF's Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute demonstrates that one of the primary reasons students chose to attend an HBCU is because of a desire to find a sense of belonging in what they perceive as a welcoming environment (Awokoya & Mann, 2011). African American students who choose to attend HBCUs are often, but not always, motivated by the following interests: (1) to be in environments with people who look like them, (2) to be in what they perceive as non-racist environments and (3) to explore their cultural roots (Allen, 1992; Freeman, 1999). Additional research from the Institute reveals that low-income African American parents appreciate the option of having quality schools to choose from as long as they are in approximate neighborhoods (Bridges, Awokoya, & Messano, 2012). This approach will not work across all K-12 schools, but instances where a particular cultural element can be leveraged for the benefit of student performance could prove to be beneficial. Many charter schools employ this element. For instance, all boys or all girls' schools or those that primarily enroll students from one race. While some might consider these self-segregated schools, selectively setting up schools based on these criteria and allowing parents and students to choose these schools on their own can be powerful for families that do not often get to make these choices for themselves.

Interestingly, the strategies outlined above are exactly those commonly seen in high performing middle and high schools. Each of these strategies can be adapted to different contexts to maximize success as long as continuous assessment is utilized to determine what is and is not working. The country's students deserve our best and we at least owe them the promise that we will try different approaches to assure their success. HBCUs have a culture of experimentation--another lesson for the K-12 community--and testing possible solutions to eliminate the country's persistent educational disparities does not indicate failed attempts at reform, but a willingness to get reform right.

References

Allen, W. (1992). The color of success: African American college student outcomes at predominately white and historically black colleges. *Harvard Educational Review, 62*, 26–44.

Awokoya, J., & Mann, T. (2011). *Students speak!: Understanding the value of HBCUs from student perspectives*. Fairfax, VA: UNCF, Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute.

Bridges, B.K., Awokoya, J.T., & Messano, F. (2012). *Done to Us, Not With Us: African American Parent Perceptions of K-12 Education*. Washington, DC: Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, UNCF.

Bridges, B. K., Kinzie, J., Nelson Laird, T. F., & Kuh, G. D. (2008). Student engagement and student success at minority serving institutions. In M. Gasman, B. Baez, & C. S. Turner. (Eds.), *Understanding Minority-Serving Institutions* (pp. 217-236). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Cokley, K. (1999). Reconceptualizing the impact of college racial composition on African American students' racial identity. *Journal of College Student Development, 40*(3), 235-245.

Davis, R. (1999). Social support networks and undergraduate student academic-success-related outcomes: A comparison of Black students on Black and White campuses. In W. R. Allen, E. G. Epps, & N. Z. Haniff (Eds.), *College in Black and White: African American students in predominantly White and in historically Black public universities* (pp. 43- 57). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Earl, W. R. (1988). Intrusive advising of freshmen in academic difficulty. *NACADA Journal, 8*, 27-33.

FDPRI. (2013). Analysis of data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics.

Flores, S. M., & Park, T. J. (2014). The effect of enrolling in a minority-serving institution for

black and hispanic students in Texas. *Research in Higher Education.* Retrieved

September 30, 2014 from http://download.springer.com/static/pdf/282/art

%253A10.1007%252Fs11162-014-9342-y.pdf?

auth66=1412308272_f4271aa67cd62f19c9158bf3c634e4bc&ext=.pdf

Flowers, L. (2002). The impact of college racial composition on African American students'

academic and social gains: Additional evidence. *Journal of College Student*

Development, 43(3), 403-4 0.

Freeman, K. (1999). Black college and college choice: Characteristics of students who choose

HBCUs. *The Review of Higher Education, 25*, 349–358.

Fryer, Jr., R. G., & Greenstone, M. (2007). *The Causes and Consequences of Attending*

Historically Black Colleges and Universities. National Bureau of Economic Research

Working Paper No. 13036.

Kena, G., Aud, S., Johnson, F., Wang, X., Zhang, J., Rathbun, A., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., a

Kristapovich, P. (2014). *The Condition of Education 2014* (NCES 2014-083). U.S.

Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC.

Nelson Laird, T. F., Bridges, B. K., Holmes, M. S., Morelon, C., & Williams, J. (2007). African

American and Hispanic student engagement at minority serving and predominantly

White institutions. *Journal of College Student Development, 48*(1), 1-18.

Noel-Levitz.

Outcalt, C. L. & Skewes-Cox, T. E. (2002). Involvement, interaction, and satisfaction: The

human environment at HBCUs. *The Review of Higher Education*, 25(3), 33 -347.

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of*

research. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Richards, D. A. R., & Awokoya, J. T. (2012). Understanding HBCU retention and completion.

Fairfax, VA: Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, UNCF.

Schilling, K. M., & Schilling, K. L. (1999). Increasing expectations for student effort. *About*

Campus, 4:2.

Terenzini, P. T., Yaeger, P.M., Bohr, L., Pascarella, E.T. & Nora, A. (1997). *African American college students' experiences in HBCUs and PWIs and learning outcomes.* University Park, PA: National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment.

Upton, R., & Tanenbaum, C. (2014). *The role of historically black colleges and universities as pathway providers: Institutional pathways to the STEM Ph.D. among black students.* Issue brief. American Institutes for Research: Washington, DC.

Vanneman, A., Hamilton, L., Baldwin Anderson, J., and Rahman, T. (2009). *Achievement Gaps: How Black and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress*, (NCES 2009-455). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.