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Students Speak!

Understanding the Value of HBCUs
From Student Perspectives

Janet T. Awokoya, Ph.D. and Tammy L. Mann, Ph.D.

February 2011

Students Speak!: Understanding the Value of HBCUs from Student Perspectives

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Understanding the Value of HBCUs from Student Perspectives

Introduction

As higher education institutions continue to grapple with the challenge of demonstrating their value in the face of increased pressure to attract, support, and graduate their students, it is important to understand student perspectives; that is, what students themselves say they value in institutions of higher learning. This need to understand the student perspective is true for all institutions—not just historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). *Students Speak!* is timely in many ways because it provides a window into what students who are currently attending private HBCUs[1] have to say about why they chose their respective institutions and what they have valued most about their experiences on these campuses.

The value proposition of HBCUs in the educational experiences of African Americans has been well documented (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Gasman, 2008; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002). Researchers have acknowledged and celebrated HBCUs' rich legacy of supporting and producing social, political, and artistic leaders in U.S. society. First established as the only options available for African Americans pursuing higher education, HBCUs continue to enroll, retain, and graduate a demographically diverse student population, including students with exceptional academic ability and those who are underprepared yet desire to succeed and earn a college degree. Today, over 300,000 students at the undergraduate and graduate levels are pursuing postsecondary degrees at HBCUs. Although HBCUs account for 4% of all 4-year

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1   Includes private HBCUs that are currently members of the United Negro College Fund.

institutions, they produce 21% of all bachelor's degrees attained by African Americans (Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, 2010). Further, they produce 25% of all first-profession degrees (e.g., medicine, law, dentistry, etc.) awarded to African Americans.

In spite of this impressive track record, for more than 50 years, many within academic and political settings have questioned the need for HBCUs. Indeed, some have suggested that progress made to date on race-related social justice issues leads to the natural conclusion that we are past the point of needing institutions that have successfully served African American students as their primary focus. The term "post-racial" is often used to characterize the status of African American progress on this front. Many consider the fact that the United States overwhelmingly elected an African American president as proof positive that we have arrived at a place where we can look past race. While the country has certainly progressed in terms of its attitudes toward minorities, especially African Americans, the reality is that *everyday experiences* of individuals continue to drive how they perceive and act on those perceptions when it comes to making major life decisions, including where they will seek a college education. And those everyday experiences often reveal that issues of race persist.

Gaining perspective on what students have to say about why HBCUs are still relevant is important for reasons that go beyond the obvious benefit to the institutions themselves in recruiting and attracting future students. Very recently, a bright 16-year-old African American male found himself in the center of a media firestorm as he had to publicly defend his decision to attend a historically black university over prestigious Ivy League and highly selective public institutions. In a story in the online magazine *The Root*, which provides commentary from diverse black perspectives, the young man noted that "the criticism has been overwhelming" (Williams, 2010, p. 1). This high-achieving student had a clear sense of the factors that mattered most to him as he made his decision: remaining near home because he was entering college young, maximizing scholarship support, and selecting an institution with an excellent academic reputation in his major of interest. To address the barrage of criticisms he received, the young man posted a note on his Facebook page, explaining his decision with a special focus on academics and the nature of the campus environment he sought. At the end of the story in *The Root,* the young man stated, "When it comes down to it, the family feeling—I didn't feel that at other institutions, because I visited a lot of schools. And this is the only one [where] I felt like I was a part of something larger" (Williams, 2010, p. 2). This young man clearly made his decision based on his own experiences, goals, and needs, not idealized notions about where he would fit best. His experience offers important insight into the challenges that many students may face as they declare their intentions to attend HBCUs.

"When it comes down to it, the family feeling—I didn't feel that at other institutions, because I visited a lot of schools. And this is the only one [where] I felt like I was a part of something larger."

Nested within this context of social pressure to attend non-HBCUs, the purpose of this report is to identify and discuss factors that shape students' decisions to attend private HBCUs. This question has relevance for HBCUs and non-HBCUs because African Americans along with other underrepresented minorities are expected to increase their enrollment in postsecondary institutions as a function of their population growth. As institutions of higher education become more intentional in their efforts to seek input from students about what they value most about their colleges and universities, their efforts may enhance the possibility that more students will feel integrated and connected enough to fully engage in all aspects of campus life, academically and socially. According to researchers, such integration may in turn foster improvement in persistence and graduation rates, assuming that other barriers to completion (e.g., financial issues) have been addressed (Tinto, 1993). Finally, this report and its findings offer additional empirical evidence about what makes HBCUs special and unique in their approach to educating their students—from the students' point of view. Thus, the paramount goals of this report are (1) to identify the factors that contribute to students making the decision to attend a private historically black college or university and (2) to describe students' experiences on their respective campuses.

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Methods and Data

The current report stems from a comprehensive assessment that was funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and completed between May and December 2009. Data generated from the assessment were to be used to inform the work of UNCF's Institute for Capacity Building (ICB), an organization within UNCF's Office of Academic Affairs that focuses on building capacity at higher education institutions serving African American and other underserved students in six key operational areas. The assessment included a comprehensive survey; site visits to member institutions; interviews with presidents, chief academic officers, faculty, staff members, and students; and a series of focus groups. The research resulted in rich data focusing on the challenges and opportunities within the UNCF network of institutions. The findings presented in this report are based on 10 telephone interviews and 1 focus group involving students currently enrolled at a UNCF member institution. Both the telephone interviews and focus group were conducted during fall 2009.

About the Participants

Current students from UNCF member institutions were recruited to partici-
pate in a focus group or interviews. In all, 10 students participated in the one-on-one,
semi-structured interviews, and 13 students participated in the focus group. As noted-
earlier, the interviews and focus group took place between May and December 2009. All
telephone interviews were conducted by the same researcher. A semi-structured inter-
view protocol, with identified probes, was used to guide interviews with each student.
Students were selected by each institution. Guidance was not provided about a par-
ticular type of student to select, though most institutions selected students who were
advanced in terms of their years of study at the institution. Confidentiality was main-
tained by assigning pseudonyms for participants' names and institutions. Table 1 lists
the demographic information for the 10 African American students who participated
in the interviews. The only type of demographic data captured for the focus group was
the school of origin. Across focus group and interview participants, 41% of the UNCF
network was represented.

Table 1: Demographics of Interview Participants					
Name	**Age**	**Gender**	**Major**	**Classification**	**Residency**
Simone	22	Female	Sociology	Senior	Off Campus
Jennifer	24	Female	Psychology	Senior	Off Campus
Charles	21	Male	Business	Junior	Off Campus
Kyana	22	Female	Psychology	Senior	On Campus
Chante	19	Female	Marketing	Sophomore	Off Campus
Tamara	21	Female	Elementary Education	Senior	Off Campus
Karl	22	Male	Business Administration	Senior	On Campus
Robert	22	Male	Mass Media and Communication	Senior	On Campus
Jamal	20	Male	Marketing	Junior	Off Campus
Nathan	21	Male	Biology	Senior	On Campus

Data Analysis

All qualitative data were converted to text files. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim, in their entirety. As the first step in the analysis, all transcripts and notes were read in their entirety; transcripts were read while listening to the interview audio to ensure accuracy. Then the text files were uploaded into Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software package used to organize, manage, retrieve, and code data.

Data were first coded using deductive and inductive strategies. Deductive codes, drawn from previous studies, were used to capture factors and experiences that have been found to influence the college experiences of students attending HBCUs. Inductive codes captured experiences that were significant to the participants themselves, which, at times, were not accounted for in existing literature (Maxwell, 1996). We looked for patterns among the codes both within and across participants' data.

In the second iteration of coding, the codes were collapsed. This process involved discussions with colleagues to determine which codes were most relevant and contributed greatly to the research questions. Next, a constant comparison analytic approach was used in which "each incident in the data is compared to other incidents for similarities and differences" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 79), both within and across participants.

As a final step in codifying these data, we arranged the patterns into broader preliminary categories and placed them on matrices. Collaborative discussions with colleagues were used to examine the validity of the patterns identified and categories developed. Murphy (1980) argues that feedback from a neutral colleague is helpful in uncovering biases, identifying discrepant data, and sharpening arguments that research-ers steeped in the analysis may not readily see. The final steps of data analysis involved determining themes to further explain the phenomenon.

Findings

The data from this study corroborate existing literature about what students value most about their experiences on their respective campuses and shed light on factors that influenced their decision to attend a private historically black college or university. In the first section of the findings that follow, we discuss factors that influenced participants' choice of institution. Many of the comments shared by students focused on the need to feel connected—a sense of belonging—as an important driver influencing the decision to attend their institution of choice. Students spoke of their need to feel welcomed at their institutions and identified institutional characteristics that facilitated their abilities to adapt.

In the second section, we highlight findings that students noted had a significant impact on their growth and development, academic and otherwise. Comments articulated by students focused largely on the campus climate and experiences on their campuses. The students described how meaningful relationships with faculty and the ethnic and academic diversity on their campuses enhanced their academic engagement and sense of self.

A Strong Desire for a Sense of Belonging

The interviews and focus group revealed a thoughtful process that students had used, demonstrating that they chose their respective institution because of various tangible and intangible opportunities they felt were not available at non-HBCU institutions. Some influencing factors that students mentioned included the school's reputation, culture, and history; noteworthy alumni; outreach programs; and financial aid awards. Of course, these are typical considerations for any student attempting to make informed decisions about where to attend college. However, a major precollege consideration echoed by nearly all of the participants in this study centered on a need to feel a sense of belonging at the chosen institution. Students identified two particular college considerations that they believed satisfied their need for belonging and ultimately influenced their decision to attend their respective HBCUs: access to a small, welcoming college environment and the opportunity to feel culturally empowered.

Access to a Small, Welcoming College Environment

Woven throughout the respondents' comments was a clear expression of their need to feel a sense of belonging to their institutions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students clearly stated that their reason for enrolling in their respective institution was primarily based on the fact that they felt welcomed and that the institution matched their individual and academic needs. Research suggests that students who feel socially and academically connected to and supported by their institutions are more likely to persist (Tinto, 1993). In this study, the participants often sought and were attracted to opportunities to cultivate a sense of belonging at their institutions, and their perception was that the institution they chose would help them achieve these desires. In cases where they had not found the connection that they needed from the school, particularly during the college tours, students were deterred from enrolling.

More specifically, all of the students who were interviewed clearly articulated that during their college search process, they were looking for a family-oriented college environment in which they would feel nurtured, supported, and known by their professors and administrators. A common statement from interviewees was, "I did not want to be another number," which implies that students wanted their presence on campus to be valued and validated. Small school environments naturally promote active faculty, staff, and student interactions (Kuh & Umbach, 2005). HBCUs in particular are well-known for providing small student-to-faculty ratios that allow students to feel supported in their academic endeavors. In the 2007–08 academic year, the average enrollment size of UNCF member institutions was 1,379 undergraduates as compared with 1,908 for all other 4-year private institutions.[2] In the following quote, Simone, one of the students interviewed, aptly states that, during her search to find the ideal college, she found that the HBCU experience would provide her with the small college environment and academic opportunities that she desired:

> Simone: I wanted to enroll in Brooksville College because I wanted to attend a small college that would allow me to really ... thrive. I wanted to know my professors, I wanted to have small classes, and I also wanted an institution that was known for academic excellence. And I started looking at historically black colleges, and of the historically black colleges that I considered, Brooksville College definitely emerged as number one just because of its reputation for producing women ... women who serve.

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2   Data from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2007 enrollment data, analyzed by Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute.

The respondents' mention of their desire to attend small, family-centered institutions not only speaks to the value they place on feeling welcomed and accepted on college campuses but also to the potential positive influence of a convivial environment on students' academic achievement. Moreover, students who were interviewed also noted that small class sizes and an institution's reputation for academic excellence were reasons that they chose to enroll in HBCUs (Myrick-Harris & Nagel, 2011). It is worth noting that research shows that African American students attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs) often feel socially and culturally alienated and disconnected on campuses, which can ultimately adversely impact academic performance (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002).

Many students were acutely aware of the relationship between institutional fit and academic performance and, as a result, used college visits and tours to further explore their options. For several participants, college tours provided an opportunity for students to see and feel the family environment "in action." Students revealed that it was during these tours that their decision to attend a particular institution was cemented.

> Kyana: Well, when I toured the different schools, I came and toured Stonegate College, Brooksville College as well as Glades University. And Twins College was more welcoming. And the tour guides, they looked like they wanted to see me there … I felt like I was part of the school even though I was just on a tour.

Another student commented on the coldness she felt when she toured a non-HBCU.

> Dawn: Like when we went to Old Hickory State College to do a tour to talk to some of the professors. We were like, we don't even go to this school yet and you can't even talk to us. So it was a different environment. You can really see a difference.

The lukewarm reception that this student encountered during her visit to a non-HBCU deterred her from enrolling in that institution. Likewise, other participants in the study commented that the manner in which they were received at HBCUs during their tour compelled them to apply and eventually enroll in their particular institutions. They explained that during college tours, they looked for evidence of a home-like environment, student involvement, and faculty engagement. One student reported:

> Nicole: I believe the main reason was because it was a … homelike atmosphere.… When I went there, I took a look at the classes and the students. I liked the involvement that the students had, it was personal, it was easy to have access to your teachers, it was a lot of one-on-one care, and I liked that.

While small, family-oriented college settings promoted a sense of belonging for

"And the tour guides, they looked like they wanted to see me there … I felt like I was part of the school even though I was just on a tour."

participants and served as a driving factor in their choosing to attend an HBCU, another major theme that emerged from students' college decision-making process was the need to feel culturally empowered.

Cultural Empowerment in the College Decision-Making Process

Freeman and Cohen (2001) explain that, for underrepresented groups, a strong sense of cultural empowerment informs their understanding of their abilities to achieve. Particularly in educational settings, individuals who are culturally empowered possess a sense of pride and psychological comfort that helps to reduce feelings of alienation, disenfranchisement, and hopelessness. In their study, Freeman and Cohen (2001) outlined two major characteristics of culturally empowered people: (1) they understand the importance of their history and heritage and (2) they take pride in the accomplishments of those in their racial and cultural groups. While many African American students choose HBCUs because the cultural awareness mirrors that of the institutions and communities in which they were raised, this study shows the students' desire to feel culturally empowered primarily manifested itself as a result of their precollege racial environments that did not validate their racial identity.

Precollege Racial and Cultural Environment

Research shows that African American students who choose HBCUs are often motivated by three desires: (1) to be in environments with people who look like them, (2) to be in environments devoid of racism, and (3) to explore their cultural roots (Allen, 1992; Freeman, 1999). These incentives particularly motivate those who have been disconnected from their culture (Freeman, 1999). The majority of the participants in this study commented that they attended predominately white elementary and secondary schools, and within these contexts, they often felt like the minority, socially and culturally. Jackie, a participant in the focus group, shares her experience about the demographic makeup of her high school: "my school was … all White … like the amount of African Americans was minimal." Students who had similar experiences explained that, in their college considerations, they were very intentional about choosing an institution with a sizable number of people of color.

For several research participants, the desire to attend a historically black institution was shaped by experiences with blatant racism or by limited exposure to information about their culture and heritage in formal educational settings. Lauren recounts her experiences in her high school: "Racism was everywhere, like it was scary." As a result of her experiences with racism, she sought a predominately black school for her post-

secondary education. She stated emphatically, "I wanted to go to a HBCU." This student's reaction is not uncommon for African Americans and other students of color who have experienced racism either individually or as a result of institutional racism. The social dynamics faced by minority youth in predominately white settings often compels them to search for spaces and interactions where the threat of racism is absent (Tatum, 1997). Attending an HBCU as a postsecondary option allows them to benefit from positive, cultural experiences around being black that they may not have received during their formal elementary and secondary education experiences.

The opportunity to explore their cultural roots is another major reason students decide to attend an HBCU. This motivation is especially a factor if the opportunity for true cultural engagement did not exist during prior formal educational experiences. Several students discussed how their schools did not allow them opportunities to fully explore their African American history or culture. Several male students clearly articulated that, as a result of their lack of exposure to their cultural roots, they had selected their respective institutions because of "the fact that it is an HBCU" and because they wanted to "benefit from their culture." Quinton, a student in the focus group elaborates:

> Quinton: I made a decision to come after the experience that I had at a predominantly [white] institution in order to embrace my own history, heritage, and everything that has gone into making us who we are.

Confirming the argument posed by Freeman and Cohen (2001) about the importance of cultural empowerment, these students' statements reflect the idea that, when an individual is physically or educationally disconnected from their culture or heritage, there is a degree of disequilibrium that creates a feeling of marginalization. This phenomenon has been cited as an experience that many African American students encounter in our current school system (Delpit, 2006). While some schools have been successful in facilitating inclusive educational processes for students of color (Banks, 1997), the general process of implementing a truly multicultural pedagogy has not yet been achieved in our current educational system (Goodwin, 2002). Historically, students of color have been denied the opportunity to comprehensively explore their histories within U.S schools. In fact, several researchers have reproached curriculum developers and educators for providing limited historical information about people of color in the United States and internationally (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Sleeter, 2001).

Students in the study revealed that they were in search of perspectives and ideologies that were more closely aligned with their own personal, cultural, and racialized experiences. Psychologist and educator Beverly Tatum (2007) speaks to the importance of

" I made a decision to come after the experience that I had at a predominantly [white] institution in order to embrace my own history, heritage, and everything that has gone into making us who we are."

teachers positively reinforcing students' identities and experiences within the classroom context: "Affirming identity is not just about being nice—it is about being knowledgeable about who our students are, and reflecting a story that resonates with their best hope for themselves" (p. 31).
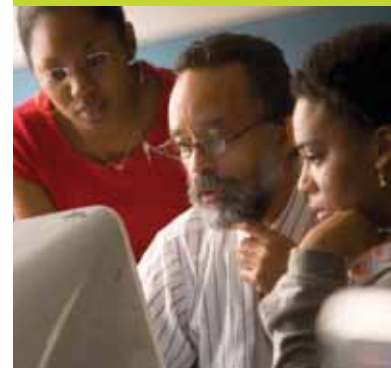
This study's findings support Tatum's recommendation. During the focus group, participants engaged in a lively discussion about the opportunity that they believed HBCUs would afford them to explore black experiences from historical and contemporary perspectives that rang true for them. One student in particular agreed:

Jackie: If you went to other institutions you can learn African American history. Still ... it's just that the professor being at a black institution might teach that content in a different way or might be able to relate to you better.

This student's comment speaks to the importance of making historical content relevant and real in the lives of the students. This priority is particularly important for students of color because their histories have traditionally been ignored or distorted in historical research and teaching. This student and many others in the focus group believed that African American history at an HBCU would be taught with a command, awareness, and sensitivity around racial and cultural perspectives that non-HBCUs may not offer. Another idea that this comment introduces is the absence of racial pressure on HBCU campuses. Black students at PWIs may face minority status pressures. In such environments, these students' personal opinions are viewed as automatically representing the opinions of all African Americans, thus reinforcing the idea that a singular perspective is easily taken to represent "the race" as opposed to one point of view, or one frame of reference that does not represent a comprehensive point of view. Within these racially based dialogues, Blacks often make a conscious effort to move cautiously in explaining their perceptions and experiences, limiting their ability to fully engage in academic content.

Another theme that surfaced, but was not consistently reflected by all students, involved the role of spirituality in students' educational lives. A few students in the focus group shared that their decision to enroll in their institution was related to a deep sense of the appreciation they had for the Christian values upheld by their colleges. According to these students, they saw their faith as an important dimension to consider in seeking the right fit with an institution. As we continue to understand the relevance and importance of HBCUs in the 21st century, researchers must ask questions in intentional ways to better understand the role spirituality and religion play in students' college choice process and in their educational lives. Because many HBCUs were founded by religious institutions, and some have maintained their faith perspective as a strong aspect of the

"If you went to other institutions you can learn African American history. Still ... it's just that the professor being at a black institution might teach that content in a different way or might be able to relate to you better."

institution's identity and mission, this factor had an influence on college choice for a select group of students.

As revealed in this section, many research participants made a conscious decision to attend an HBCU because of their desire to attend small, family-oriented institutions that would reflect their values, acknowledge their cultures and histories, and promote a sense of belonging that many did not experience in their precollege educational experiences. These findings run counter to the current national discourse on HBCUs that suggest history, culture, and tradition have no contemporary sway over the current college-going population. On the contrary, the majority of the research participants clearly expressed that history, culture, and tradition mattered within their educational context because it helped to foster a sense of belonging that they believed would not be available in non-HBCU settings and that had been absent in their K–12 education experiences.

Furthermore, these findings suggest two noteworthy ideas about HBCUs. The first idea is that, as students pursue their academic studies, HBCUs can be instrumental in providing an opportunity for them to delve more deeply into the social and historical contexts that shape the experiences of African Americans. Such exposure can be beneficial for African American students who have not had an opportunity to explore their history, just as it can be for other racial and ethnic groups interested in a broader understanding of American history. Second, HBCUs can be instrumental in helping more PWIs and minority-serving institutions enhance their campuses to more effectively address issues that hinder the sense of connection and engagement African American students experience on their respective campuses. Findings in this section make clear that ideas students have about their racial identity are important drivers that influence choice and comfort on a college campus. Institutions that understand this reality are likely to be ahead of the curve in cultivating and developing the academic and social potential of their students.

> **...as students pursue their academic studies, HBCUs can be instrumental in providing an opportunity for them to delve more deeply into the social and historical contexts that shape the experiences of African Americans.**

In this section, we have highlighted factors that influenced students' decisions to attend an HBCU. We now turn our attention to experiences they have on HBCU campuses, experiences that add further perspective about the unique attributes of these institutions.

An Engaged Campus Environment

A substantial body of research indicates that the academic and social environments of institutions play a significant role in student adaptation, engagement on campus, and educational aspiration and attainment (Bridges, Kinzie, Laird, & Kuh, 2008; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998). Research also suggests that African American students on predominantly white campuses often face greater difficulty adjusting to their institutions than their White counterparts. Some of the challenges they face include feeling a sense of disconnectedness, alienation, and low achievement (Allen, 1992; Nettles, 1988). On HBCU campuses, however, researchers have found that African American students often have positive social and academic experiences (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Guiffrida, 2005); the comments generated through our interviews and the focus group confirm these findings.

Interpersonally Engaged and Student-Centered Faculty

Student-faculty interactions are key features in attracting, retaining, and graduating students in postsecondary institutions (Nagda, Gregerman, Jonides, Hippel, & Lerner, 1998). Within the HBCU context, African American students perceive professors as going beyond their professionally related responsibilities by expressing genuine interest and concern for their students' entire development (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). In the interviews and focus groups conducted for this study, students used descriptors such as "helpful," "challenging," "caring," and "involved" to describe their academic and interpersonal interactions with their professors. Students related that faculty members often took a holistic approach when engaging them that included inquiring about both academic and personal concerns. One student described her faculty interactions this way:

> Simone: I think at Brooksville College, it's really great because the professor cares about you as a total person and not just a student. So the professor usually knows what's going on in your personal life and your family ... and I think that really makes a difference.

Through the kind of meaningful relationships with faculty described above, students gain a sense of support, caring, and concern that has the potential to influence their academic performance and their social adjustment. The majority of the students

in the interviews and focus groups spoke fondly of the faculty relationships that they had developed and described faculty members as serving as surrogate parents to them in their biological parents' absence. One student aptly describes her experience with faculty as being part of "a family … they take care of you, they train you up, then you go out into the world. That's the type of experience I am talking about." Students described visiting their professors' homes and attending social gatherings with them. According to the participants, faculty members who exhibited parental qualities were sincerely interested in their personal welfare.

Students also identified interactions with faculty that occurred within and outside of the classroom context that they believe influenced their academic success. For instance, several students explained that professors would offer additional time outside of class to help them master challenging course material. Jamal, a marketing major, described the academic support he received while struggling in a course:

> Jamal: I know one of my professors, off-hand, that I had a problem in a class that I just really really needed help on. He stayed after class to help me with that problem just to make sure that I understood it to the fullest … to the fullest…. It's just a great thing to have professors like that.

In addition, participants also recounted professors' efforts to provide academic resources for the students' other classes. A student at a historically black campus described the support she received from her English professor for her computer science course.

> Jennifer: My freshman year, I was taking an English class. I had an A in her class, but however…I had a C in Computer Science…. During class, she asked me to stay after class to talk to her. So I did. And in our conversation she said, 'Hey, although you're passing my class, I've noticed that you are not doing so good in another class.' She asked me if I needed any help, and if I did, she told me she would find me a tutor in that class.

It is evident from these students' comments that they have an appreciation for professors who are accessible, approachable, and resourceful. Their comments make it clear that professors with these qualities allow students to comfortably seek help with challenging course material. From the participants' perspectives, the out-of-class interactions they had with faculty contributed to their striving for excellence in their courses and helped to create the family environment that a number of students identified as a factor that influenced their college choice. Furthermore, as the next section demonstrates, the strong relationships with faculty also significantly shaped these students' personal and professional development.

" I know one of my professors, off-hand, that I had a problem in a class that I just really really needed help on. He stayed after class to help me with that problem just to make sure that I understood it to the fullest … to the fullest…. It's just a great thing to have professors like that."

Professional Socialization on HBCU Campuses

HBCUs, as a matter of practice, are committed to developing the whole student. In addition to providing academic support, HBCUs are a source of knowledge related to professional development. Students shared that faculty members often engaged in socializing them into the professional domain by instilling requisite skills and ways of behaving that prepared them to interact both inside and outside of the academic setting. One male student describes the professional socialization he received from his professor this way:

> Karl: She's just so hard on you about business etiquette and communication. And learning how to talk, and learning how to master the art of mingling when you're around a business setting. You know, learning how to dress up more than one or two times a week. She was just so hard on that, and it really instilled a lot in me to the point that I do most of the things that she taught me to this day.

Previous research reports that administrators at HBCUs also serve as informal mentors and engage students in many of the same ways that faculty do (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). As reflected in the preceding quote, Karl describes the ways in which faculty held students accountable, in an uncompromising way, to help them prepare for their professional lives. Students were firmly taught, and their professors modeled for them ways of communicating professionalism. Clearly, this student had a positive, respectful relationship with his professor, enabling his professor to effectively assist him in developing professional behaviors. For this student, and many others in the study, an unspoken dimension in their interactions with, and professional socialization by faculty, is the level of trust that existed in their relationships. For these students, trust played a significant role in how they were able to fully benefit from this level of support from faculty. As reflected in the previous quote, the student trusted his professor to the extent that her advice and criticisms were welcomed and operationalized.

Likewise, another student described how students within the classroom setting were held accountable to behave in ways that communicated professionalism. In the following quote, Robert explains that, in instances where students were late to class, his professor emphasized punctuality and the importance of time management through corrective measures:

> Robert: I think what's different about Hamilton State is that the teachers, the professors, take the time out to hold their students accountable to another level. An example, if there were a student that came 5 minutes late to class (whereas if you're at a bigger institution, it probably wouldn't be beneficial for the teacher, the

instructor, to stop the class and address the student because the classroom would be so big and the lectures so intense), but anyway, at Hamilton State, if a student comes in 5 minutes late, the teacher will address the student, hold the student accountable, and then move forward with class. And I think that for us as students it makes us question and challenge our leadership to make sure that we're there that much earlier to class and holding students accountable because we don't want to get called out in class. And it really helps us in the end because it teaches us responsibility with time management and other principles that are really going to be effective for the work force. So, I think for our teachers at Hamilton State, they really take out that extra time to hold us accountable and really have a standard for us.

This student understands and appreciates the level of concern and the respectable manner in which that concern is conveyed by faculty. His comment also echoed those expressed earlier about the benefits of a small college environment. That is, it brings to mind the opportunities afforded in small environments where professors can personally know their students and engage their personal and professional development in active and constructive ways, thus, helping students before problems become significant barriers to success.

In this study, students found value in and appreciation for faculty who showed genuine concern and interest in their personal, academic, and professional success. This finding is not surprising; scholars have noted that African Americans at PWIs have often lamented the inability or difficulty engaging in meaningful relationships with faculty (Guiffrida, 2005). In this study, students made obvious the need for faculty to engage as mentors with their students to foster personal development beyond the classroom context. The level of commitment of faculty for fostering student success is especially important for students who come from backgrounds where they might be the first in their family to pursue college. To have erudite, experienced, and involved professors of color actively engaged in their professional development was validating for the students.

The findings in this study are consistent with research literature on HBCUs that reports faculty's willingness to support students in various ways (Beach, 2002; Drewery & Doermann, 2001). Participants identified meaningful interactions and relationships with faculty as being paramount to their academic and personal success and cited several experiences that highlighted the types of interpersonal relationships they shared with their faculty members. Students seem to value the fact that faculty are often willing to act as educators, mentors, counselors, and in some cases, surrogate parents to their students

to ensure their academic and personal success. The personal capital that faculty members earn with their students is particularly important because many HBCUs enroll and graduate a disproportionate number of first-generation college-goers as well as students from disadvantaged backgrounds and underrepresented groups. Research shows that these populations, in particular, require additional mentoring and academic support during their educational programs. On HBCU campuses, students' strong relationships with faculty demonstrated that faculty members were invested in their success, which compelled students to engage academically and develop as individuals.

Institutional Diversity and the Mission of HBCUs

Another interesting feature of HBCUs that students discussed in terms of what they valued about their campus experience had to do with diversity on the campuses. Research suggests that diversity on campuses allows students to interact with others who are different from themselves and provides outcomes such as critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, cognitive development, and self-confidence (Chang, Denson, Saenz, & Misa, 2006; Kuh & Umbach, 2005). To some, this finding might seem unusual because many

> Students spoke about the variety of nationalities, cultures, and languages that were represented on their campuses and appreciated the fact that HBCUs attracted and welcomed students of various racial and ethnic backgrounds.

associate HBCUs with homogenous environments. During the interviews, several students introduced the various forms of diversity that existed within their HBCU campuses and highlighted two salient features that they believe significantly influenced their social and academic experiences: the ethnic and academic diversity of the student population.

Ethnic Diversity. Although HBCUs enroll and support a high proportion of African American students, they have always welcomed students of various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Participants in the study identified various racial and ethnic groups that existed on their campuses. For example, one student described diversity on his campus, "Seeing that we're in Miami, [the student body is exposed to] the diversity from the Caribbean, you know, the Hispanic community, [and] of course the African-American community." Students spoke about the variety of nationalities, cultures, and languages that were represented on their campuses and appreciated the fact that HBCUs attracted and welcomed students of various racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Beyond racial and ethnic diversity, others reflected on within-group diversity among Blacks on campus. Between 1990 and 2000, nearly 25% of the growth of the U.S. Black population was derived from immigrants arriving from Africa and the Caribbean (Logan, 2007). Approximately 13% of all college-going Blacks in the United States are

either immigrants themselves or the children of African or Caribbean immigrants (Kent, 2007). Although the large influx of Black immigrants from various Caribbean islands and numerous African nations continues to challenge the long held assumption that "black" strictly refers to African Americans in the U.S. context, the dominant narrative continues to portray the diverse Black population as a monolith. Bryce-Laporte (1972), in his seminal piece on the Black immigrant experience, captures the fact that, for a long time, race has been an externally imposed social identifier for Black immigrants. Referring to them as the "invisible minorities" in the multicultural U.S. society, he argues that their phenotypic resemblance to native-born Blacks has historically resulted in their experiences being classified under that of their native African American counterparts. Particularly within the context of HBCUs, the within-group diversity as it relates to ethnicity, class, language, and national and geographic origin are often minimized in conversations about the Black student population.

Historically, HBCUs have served as the educational homes for many people of African descent who migrated to the United States for educational opportunities after the abolition of slavery. Two notable African alumni from HBCUs who returned to their African nations to promote independence from Britain and serve as the first presidents of their respective nations were Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria. The international ties that many HBCUs have made and maintained with African and Caribbean nations have cultivated an exchange of knowledge that mutually benefits all parties involved.

Many of the research participants appreciated the opportunities that the HBCU context allowed for them to better understand the shared histories—and, often, cultural differences—of those with common ancestry.

Particularly for the student population, the relationships provide students the benefit of gaining insight and understanding about other people and cultures. Most important for native African American students on HBCU campuses, these interactions allow them the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the shared heritage of African diasporic peoples in the United States and abroad (Hytche, 1990).

In the focus groups, several students indicated that they appreciated their HBCUs because of the exposure to the diversity within the Black population; diversity to which many were unfamiliar. One student who had attended predominantly white elementary and secondary schools shared that she did not know about the heterogeneity of the Black population until she attended a historically black institution. She stated, "I didn't know how much diversity we had within the Black community."

This student's statement is not surprising considering the lack of exposure and

understanding about the diversity within the U.S. Black population. The discussion about race in the United States is often limited to racial categories and not nationalities and ethnicities within racial groups. Likewise, the new understanding that this student gained about various Black groups also affected the participants in the interviews and focus groups, particularly, one who was of recent Caribbean descent and another international student on the campus. One Bahamian student, who came to the United States to pursue his higher educational aspirations, spoke about how, over time, he felt a sense of connection to the struggles that HBCUs have undergone:

> Nathan: I guess after … coming here and [I] was going through the field of HBCU life and even though it has its ups and downs … I guess I tend to become more prideful because in the Bahamas the Civil Rights movement and in the Caribbean as a whole is not really like, I guess, an issue, but, I guess, coming to the United States and you see … the history [of] what HBCUs have gone through [and] where they come from … I'm sorry when you listen to our history. I guess it makes you want to cry based on where our school actually came from to where it is at now…. Because of that one fact it tends to give you a sense of pride and a sense of "I belong here" just because of the fact that you can relate just based upon this.

According to the comment, it appears that this Bahamian student was unaware of the struggles of racism or being black in America before coming to the United States. Research shows that many immigrants who are racial majorities in their country of origin are likely to be unaware of racially based discrimination in the United States (Bashi & McDaniel, 1997). However, it also seems like the bonding between this student and his historically black institution was around the legacy of struggle and freedom about which he was previously unaware and to which he had become tied because of common ancestry and phenotype.

Part of the success of HBCUs is acknowledging and celebrating the diversity within the Black population that is often overlooked when students attend PWIs. Members of the Black immigrant population share phenotypic traits with long-standing African Americans, and are often grouped together as a homogenous entity without any meaningful and comprehensive exploration of the ethnic and cultural similarities and differences within the group. However, there are many such opportunities for exploration within a majority black context. Many of the research participants appreciated the opportunities that the HBCU context allowed for them to better understand the shared histories—and, often, cultural differences—of those with common ancestry. These recent

demographic changes in the U.S. Black population and within college campuses force us to rethink the current perceptions of underrepresented students on college campuses.

Academic Diversity and Mission Appeal. Within the collective of HBCUs and specifically within the network of UNCF member institutions, there are a diverse set of institutions that range from highly selective universities to institutions that allow open enrollment. Highly selective universities accept a lower percentage of student applicants, which is generally one-third of the applicant pool or lower. In contrast, open-enrollment institutions provide educational opportunities to all students, with the primary admission requirements being state residency and either a high school diploma or a GED certificate. At the core of open-enrollment institutions is the notion of extending educational opportunity and personal development for a broader cross section of prospective students. Providing access to higher education is a historic mission of HBCUs, and although only a few continue to have an open-enrollment policy, all are committed to providing access to historically underrepresented students. A common reality for students attending an open-enrollment institution is that, within the classroom context, students are more likely to encounter fellow students with uneven academic preparation. In the focus group, 6 of the 13 participants came from open-enrollment institutions. During the conversation, these participants reacted in a myriad of ways to their experiences on campuses with open-enrollment policies.

Several research participants expressed a strong sense of belief in the mission and commitment that HBCUs — particularly open-enrollment institutions — have to educating students of all backgrounds and circumstances. In the focus group, research participants discussed the diversity of students that the open-enrollment policy welcomes. Students explained that open-enrollment institutions consist of students ranging from those highly prepared for college rigors to students who are academically challenged. A prominent theme during this discussion was that the open-enrollment policy offered students, as many described it, "a second chance." Specifically, the policy afforded students who are not as academically prepared educational opportunities that they may not be able to obtain elsewhere. One student explained:

> Dawn: If we don't give our peers a second chance or let them in, then who will? The bigger institution is not going to do it. That is the point of an HBCU. We need to keep the open-door policy, not just wring our hands and turn our backs on them. Cause what if somebody would have done that to me?

HBCUs have long been heralded for providing educational opportunities and individual development for students of all backgrounds, "regardless of academic preparation, test scores, socioeconomic status, or environmental circumstances" (Brown &

Freeman, 2002, p. 238). The value of opportunity in higher education is particularly relevant for students of color because research consistently demonstrates that early educational experiences often do not provide them with opportunities or resources to demonstrate their full potential (Kozol, 2005). Several of the students enrolled in institutions with an open-enrollment policy enrolled specifically because they believe in the mission of these institutions to provide students with second chances. For these students, there was an interest in and value for colleges that upheld a mission and a commitment to providing opportunities to the underserved. However, as expressed in the focus group, students at these institutions did not extend open arms to all who enrolled. Rather, their welcome was specifically reserved for people who would take full advantage of the opportunity provided to them. One student said it best:

> Chonika: If a student comes in with a 1.5 [GPA], they can end up leaving with a 3.5. But you need to make sure that that first semester, if they're not on their grind so to speak, then they really don't need to be there because it's continuously hindering the other students as well as the college achieving their goal of helping their students.

Through this comment, this student expressed an understanding of and appreciation for the opportunity that open-enrollment institutions offered students who may have come from disadvantaged educational backgrounds. By her tone, however, there was a clear intolerance for students who were not serious about taking full advantage of the opportunity provided by their institution.

Not all participants universally embraced this perception regarding the open-enrollment policy, particularly as it related to their individual academic experiences at their respective HBCUs. In fact, two of the six students struggled with the policy, describing it as well as the students who were not as academically strong, as a liability to their own experiences. However, these statements were quickly challenged by other students who believed that a grade point average should not be used to limit one's academic potential. Marcus, a student attending an open-enrollment institution, expressed his opinion:

> Marcus: I don't think … because you have a one point something or whatever and my requirement is a 2.5, I'm going to turn you away…. People make mistakes…. People come to college to find themselves.

Many of the participants saw higher education as an opportunity to engage in personal discovery. To them, college offered the opportunity to explore new ideas and to take on new identities to discover their individual talents and get a better understand-

For these students, there was an interest in and value for colleges that upheld a mission and a commitment to providing opportunities to the underserved.

ing of their personal and professional goals in life. Through this process, however, the participants understood that mistakes do happen—in high school as well as in college. The conversation led to an example of a young man who, through the educational opportunity offered at an open-enrollment historically black institution, was able to turn his life around. Janelle explains:

> James Williams is a student that graduated in two years from Greeneville College. He was a thug once he got there. And now he is like one of the most reputable violinists in the state of Alabama.... So it's a Cinderella story.

In Janelle's description of her schoolmate, she alludes to the importance of academic identity in the educational process. Although a student may not construe himself as an academic in high school, that does not preclude the possibility of creating (or "finding") an academic identity later in life, perhaps in an environment more accommodating to such self-identifications. Even if a student devalues an academic identity in high school, that student is not necessarily committed to a nonacademic identity. Research shows that students' identities may fluctuate, and that a student may change to and settle on a more academically oriented identity while in college even though he or she may not have valued this identity in high school. This finding is particularly relevant for some students who perhaps were unable to demonstrate their potential because they lacked access to mentors, lacked exposure to various types of extracurricular activities, or faced obstacles from other environmental factors. Furthermore, it is easy to dismiss their ability to be academically successful because they may not present themselves in ways generally consistent with the stereotype of a good student. However, in the case of James Williams and others like him who attended a school that had a mission to seek out and educate all students, regardless of background, we see a student who was able to positively change his situation (and identity) in a way that benefitted him and his community. Clearly, based on her comment, Janelle sees her peer's transformation and his talents as being extraordinary.

> **Research shows that students' identities may fluctuate, and that a student may change to and settle on a more academically oriented identity while in college even though he or she may not have valued this identity in high school.**

Conclusions

The perspectives shared by this small sample of students reflect findings that have been empirically validated elsewhere (Freeman, 1999; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Guiffrida, 2005). They add to our knowledge by highlighting important factors associated with precollege experiences that might drive interest in attending an historically black college or university, even as we continue to make important progress on enhancing the diversity of institutions that are predominantly white. Their comments also offer perspective on what students find most beneficial and unique about their learning experiences as they matriculate through the institution. Students were generous in responding to questions that addressed the primary research question of interest. Yet, at times, they also briefly mentioned opportunities where there were obvious needs for enhancements, including the following:

- Facility enhancements—Students discussed the need to see improvements in residential and academic facilities.
- Administrative services—Some students commented on the desire to see improvements in coordination among departments that manage crucial aspects of registration, financial aid, and enrollment.
- Technology enhancements—Many students reported that their campus was wireless and that they had access to computers, but they also wanted to see enhancements in the use of technology in the classroom.

Given the financial capacity and the cost associated with enhancements to facilities and technology, it is not surprising that small private institutions would have difficulty financing needs in these areas. UNCF, through the Institute for Capacity Building (ICB), has played an important role in accessing technical and financial assistance to address needs in all three of these areas.

The ICB exists to support the ongoing capacity-building efforts of UNCF's 39 member institutions by providing support in six vital areas of institutional capacity and effectiveness: Institutional Advancement; Enrollment Management; Curriculum and Faculty Enhancement; Fiscal and Strategic Technical Assistance; Facilities and Infrastructure; and Leadership and Governance. ICB has established a model that involves four core strategies for assisting member institutions: institutional grants, technical and consultative assistance, professional development, and the establishment of communities of practice. ICB's Enrollment Management Program (EMP) is designed to support member institutions with

building highly efficient and strategic enrollment programs capable of effectively recruiting and retaining students. The EMP has had significant success with the four institutions participating in its pilot program. Pilot institutions saw increases in overall enrollment of first-time freshmen, gains in enrollment of first-time African American males, and an increase in applications.

The ICB Facilities and Infrastructure Enhancement Program launched the Building Green at Minority Serving Institutions in 2010. The first major event held in Atlanta featured a tour of Spelman College's new LEED silver-certified dormitory. The building is somewhat of a living laboratory with energy efficient features, programs, and requirements for students that reinforce sustainable lifestyles. The entire Atlanta University Center has committed to sustainability as a shared priority, and more than 85% of all UNCF institutions now participate in the Building Green initiative. According to Robert Frank, senior vice president and publisher of *The Princeton Review*, "64 percent of the nearly 12,000 college applicants and parents who participated in [the] recent College Hopes & Worries Survey said having information about a school's commitment to the environment would impact their decision to apply to or attend it" (de Morsella, 2010, n.p.). With a national focus on green jobs and an emerging global green economy, campus sustainability is a consideration for parents and students.

The ICB launched the UNCF Curriculum and Faculty Enhancement Program (CFEP) in October 2007 to help ensure that member institutions maintain highly qualified faculty who develop cutting edge curricula and use innovative approaches to teaching. In spring 2008, the CFEP convened two roundtables—one for faculty and another for chief academic officers at UNCF member institutions—to determine the needs and the strengths in the areas of faculty and curriculum development. Between spring 2008 and summer 2009, the CFEP conducted a comprehensive Faculty Engagement Study to assess the kinds of faculty development opportunities offered at UNCF member institutions as well as determine faculty characteristics and satisfaction with development opportunities offered by the institutions.

In addition, since 2008, the UNCF CFEP has provided grants and technical support to create, enhance, and institutionalize faculty development programs at member colleges and universities. The CFEP also has provided professional development opportunities for faculty through co-sponsorship of six national meetings focusing on faculty development.

> **The EMP has had significant success with the four institutions participating in its pilot program. Pilot institutions saw increases in overall enrollment of first-time freshmen, gains in enrollment of first-time African American males, and an increase in applications.**

Sponsorship has included financial support for three consecutive HBCU Faculty Development Network Symposia (October 2008, October 2009, and October 2010) and financial support for three consecutive symposia of the Faculty Resource Network (November 2007, November 2008, and November 2009).

These examples highlight progress UNCF member institution campuses are making to improve the overall academic and social experiences of students who choose to attend these institutions. In addition, beyond the value of this survey's data for UNCF member institutions and other HBCUs, the findings have implications for research, practice, and policy on a broader level. In the next sections, we briefly discuss these implications in turn.

Research

The limited sample size makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the relevance of these themes for a more representative sample of students attending UNCF member institutions. For example, we know that, within the UNCF network, 10% of students attending these institutions come from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. That number jumps to 20% when one includes all HBCUs. There has been some research (e.g., Closson & Henry 2008; Conrad, Brier, & Braxton, 1997) but not nearly enough devoted to understanding why these students find these institutions attractive. Understanding this attraction seems critically important as institutions seek to build from their historic mission and expand their capacity to serve a growing diverse population of potential college students.

> Students who discussed costs did not delineate between when cost was or was not more of a factor; they simply reported that they were aware of many students who had to leave because they could not access the finances needed to continue.

In addition, we also know that retention from the freshman to sophomore year is a challenge among HBCUs, with some 39% of students leaving UNCF member institutions after the freshman year. Comments from students and faculty associated with a recently completed Mellon Network Assessment of UNCF institutions suggested that academic preparedness and financial needs were strong drivers of attrition at UNCF member institutions. Faculty members associated attrition with lack of academic preparedness in the early years and claimed that financial problems drove attrition beyond that freshman-sophomore transition point. Students who discussed costs did not delineate between when cost was or was not more of a factor; they simply reported that they were aware of many students who had to leave because they could not access the finances needed to continue. We recommend conducting research to understand how experiences on campus, academic preparedness, and access to financial resources work together to result in a successful match where

students are able to complete their degrees. This research would require a focus on not only students who remain but also those who leave the institution to matriculate elsewhere.

Practice

The overwhelming importance of campus fit—the extent to which students felt embraced, welcomed, and supported—mattered a great deal in students' assessment of why they chose their respective institution and what they valued most once enrolled. To what extent does the need for acceptance, validation, and support (academic and personal) drive how students make decisions about "match" and potential "goodness of fit?" Certainly not all students are able to visit institutions during the college search process, but for those who

Essentially, institutions that establish a robust practice of gathering, analyzing, and using data to design, implement, and evaluate interventions intended to enhance student engagement will fare much better than institutions that fail to consistently use such practices.

did in our small sample, it was clear that the sense of feeling embraced and welcomed mattered in their decision-making process. What might this observation mean for HBCUs, minority-serving institutions, and other institutions of higher education? We speculate that it means more attention must be devoted to the campus climate and the opportunities that students will have to feel like they are a part of a community.

Based on precollege experiences, there are several strategies worth implementing and evaluating to gauge student expectations as well as their actual college experiences to gain relevant insights about what they have to say about campus climate and community. We highlight a select offering of such examples here:

- Combine "high touch" (e.g., tours, student ambassadors) and "high tech" (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking media) strategies to make explicit your approach to help potential and current students feel a part of the community and your approach to evaluate the effect of such practices.

- Capture and use data that help to inform your institution's understanding about precollege experiences and associated expectations that might influence student engagement on campus. Recently, Cole, Kennedy, and Ben-Avie (2009) discussed the importance of focusing on precollege data as strong predictors of campus engagement during college matriculation, especially during the first-year transition. Tools such as Beginning Student Survey, College Students Expectations Questionnaire, College Student Inventory, The Freshman Survey, Entering Student Survey, among others, all provide a means to gather important baseline data that can be useful in

tailoring the campus experience so it better meets the collective and individual needs of enrolled students. Many of these tools have companion surveys that can be administered in later years to assess changes over time.

- Beyond gathering data on precollege experience, it is also important that institutions engage in ongoing, periodic, cohort-based assessment activities to track progress over time, especially as new strategies are used to address concerns about differences between the types of experiences an institution endeavors to provide and what students actually experience and report through ongoing periodic assessment activities. Ongoing assessment is important in terms of both academic and cocurricular student life programs (Kuh, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Disaggregating data by subgroups can also provide important perspectives on the extent to which findings are consistent across subpopulations.

- As institutions develop strategic plans that include a focus on enhancing academic and co-curricular experiences, it is important to include opportunities to evaluate the extent to which new strategic objectives are understood and reflected throughout the institution by various stakeholders, including students.

Essentially, institutions that establish a robust practice of gathering, analyzing, and using data to design, implement, and evaluate interventions intended to enhance student engagement will fare much better than institutions that fail to consistently use such practices. Students who are more engaged academically and socially are more likely to experience success and persist.

Policy

On face value, policy implications might seem premature, yet we believe there are a few considerations worth noting. The most important consideration focuses on the overall weight of attention given to what students—current consumers—of higher education have to say about the value and benefit of attending HBCUs over other institutions. We posit that any framework created to assess a value proposition must include student input if we are to avoid the implicit, and sometimes explicit, tendency to make judgments about value purely based on principles or perspectives (e.g., post-racial) that may not represent realities that drive students to pursue these institutions.

Recently, a report by Long (2010) was released that called for an increase in data collection efforts by the federal government to improve the quality and quantity of information accessible to students and parents about institutional performance in four key areas. The recommendations were based on the author's assessment that the cost of earning a

college education has increased financial risks for students and tax payers; thus, it is vital that consumers have access to the right kind of data to inform the decision-making process. Many of the proposed data elements are already being tracked through various sources, including the Department of Education, but are difficult to access given the varied places consumers must search to locate information. Four broad categories of information that are organized and disseminated through the government need to be made easily available to families:

- Institutional Characteristics—Data about a variety of attributes, including level/sector; major and degrees available; size; location; demographic profile of students; and level of selectivity

- Cost and Affordability—Data on list price; typical aid support; typical level of financial age based on median income; average level of debt incurred by students, disaggregated for the entire student body and Pell grant recipients; average amount of debt compared with peer institutions; and loan default rates

- College Experience and Value-Added Measures—Data on expenditures per student; expenditures on instruction; student services and academic supports; faculty characteristics; class size; student satisfaction; course completion rates; retention rates; graduation rates; and time to degree; success rates of peer institutions with similar student populations; and overall level of resources

- Potential Benefits and Returns—Data on employment rates after graduation; salary information over time; alumni satisfaction; and employer satisfaction with graduates

It is beyond the scope of this report to engage in a critical analysis of each of these components or analyze the value and benefit associated with having the government invest in data collection efforts to capture and disseminate this information in a more coordinated fashion. However, within the College Experience and Value-Added Measures category, expanding data on student satisfaction to include student engagement might offer deeper perspective on the extent to which students report a deeper sense of engagement with the institution. An extensive body of research documents the relationship between campus environment and student outcomes (Davis, 1994; Hurtado et al., 1998; Oucault & Skewes-Cox, 2002). One of the most popular ways in which many institutions assess campus climate is through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Since the creation of NSSE 10 years ago, nearly 1,500 institutions of higher education have participated in one or more of their surveys. Clearly, incorporating data on student engagement needs to be included in frameworks designed to help students make informed choices about which colleges and universities are the best fit for their individual needs. The expense associated with conduct-

ing a NSSE survey may challenge institutions with limited financial resources, but it is only one means for assessing data on the reported level of student engagement on campus. The National Resource Center for First-Experiences and Students in Transition provides access to a database that includes assessment tools for use throughout the collegiate experience to understand student engagement and student satisfaction. As higher education continues to come under increased scrutiny for improving student outcomes, student perspectives about the campus experiences must remain a vital part of the conversation about value proposition.

It is clear that students have a barrage of information to manage as they make critical decisions about where to invest their time and resources toward earning a college degree. We do not take lightly that the proposition of financing a college education is much like a business investment wherein both risks and benefits come with the decisions that are made. Yet, even as we frame the process as a business decision, it is important that we not minimize or overlook aspects of "match" that go beyond easily quantifiable data (e.g., academic major, level of belonging, level of personal support, etc.) that ultimately might make the difference between a student persisting or dropping out. Recall the comment made at the beginning of this report by the young man who noted his HBCU was "the only one [where] I felt like I was a part of something larger."

Students are not homogenous; they come from different backgrounds and need different things at different points in their lives.

Students are not homogenous; they come from different backgrounds and need different things at different points in their lives. It is for this reason that we continue to need a diverse set of higher education options, including HBCUs, to meet individual needs. Students in our sample clearly found value in attending institutions that provided them with an opportunity to learn from and interact with students to whom they had little exposure during the elementary and secondary education experiences. Students valued what it felt like to have faculty members who inspired and encouraged them when the "going was tough" or when they found themselves struggling, both academically and personally. HBCUs are not the only institutions that can offer this kind of "ethic of care" within the learning environment, yet this service has been and continues to be a part of their historic mission and something they have created a track record for doing well.

We need to be certain that we are not overlooking these aspects of match, especially as the rate of first-generation and underrepresented minorities going to college increases. If we are going to be transparent with students and those adults helping to finance their education, we need to make sure that we are approaching this process from a balanced perspective and that students know and understand their potential for success based on the institution's experience serving students who might reflect their own broadly defined demographic profile.

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