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Janelle is a graduate of Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, America's oldest HBCU. After earning a B.S. in Business Administration with a minor in Marketing and Hospitality, she continued her education at The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State). While at Penn State, she earned a M.P.A in Public Policy and Administration, a certificate in Public Sector Human Resources Management and was certified as a Diversity Relations liaison. In addition, Janelle obtained an M.Ed. in Student Affairs Leadership from Widener University. Coupling her interest in social justice, education and policy, Janelle earned an Ed.D. from Widener University in Higher Education Administration and Policy.

CMSI RESEARCH BRIEF

HBCU By Choice: Examining the College Choice of Black HBCU Undergraduates

by Janelle L. Williams, The University of the Sciences

Executive Summary

One in four of Black graduates who earned a bachelor's degree, in the United States, received their degree from a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) (Gasman, Lundy-Wagner, Ransom and Bowman, 2010). In 2013, Frank Brogan, the Chancellor of Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) asked, "If kids of color can go anywhere, why are they choosing Cheyney University [an HBCU]?" (Owens, 2013) The question posed by the Chancellor emphasizes the need for further exploration into college choice for Black students. Despite a plethora of other institutions, many Black students continue to choose HBCUs to pursue higher education. This research brief examines the factors that influence African American students' choice to attend an HBCU and provides recommendations to support HBCU enrollment and recruitment initiatives. The findings will discuss five themes that emerged from this phenomenological qualitative study, including alumni influence, cost, cultural identity, legacy, and location.

Background

In the early part of the 1960s, enrollment at HBCUs accounted for 70 percent of the total Black undergraduate student population (Gasman et al., 2010; Redd, 1998). The seemingly high enrollment was in part, due to the lack of choice that African Americans had across the nation. During this period, the first —and arguably the only— choice for Black students seeking post-secondary education was to attend an HBCU.

In 2017, HBCUs accounted for only eight percent of Black American undergraduate enrollment, almost a 50 percent decline from the 17 percent that enrolled in 1980, less than 40 years prior (National Center for Educational Statistics,

2018). The steady decline in Black student enrollment in HBCUs, starting in the late 1960s, is in part attributable to desegregation and increased access as a result of the 1964 Civil Rights Act implementation. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is directly credited with expanding the range of educational choices available to all Americans by requiring that:

"No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, or be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" (P.L. 88-52, 78 Stat. 241).

This Act granted all U.S. citizens the individual right to choose an institution of their choice. The enactment of the Civil Rights Act essentially altered the HBCU student market and recruitment pool. HBCUs were no longer the only educational choice for Black students who wanted to pursue higher education. For the first time, HBCUs were not only in competition with each other; these 105 institutions were now in direct competition with over 4,000 other institutions of higher learning (Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Lee and Keys, 2013, Redd, 1998)

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Changes in the law and in higher education introduced a new dynamic of problems for HBCUs, namely declining enrollments. The 2014 Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges stated that, “the most important strategic issue facing the entire HBCU community over the next two to three years is finding ways to be more competitive with predominantly White universities to enroll the best and brightest African-American students” (p.2). For HBCUs and most public institutions, enrollment account for up to “30 percent to 90 percent of all revenue” (Kinzie et. al, 2004, p. 4). For HBCUs to remain fixtures in the higher education landscape, it is necessary to understand how and why Black students make the choice to attend these institutions, as a means to address and increase enrollment.

In 2004, a Lumina Foundation special report highlighted a fundamental truth for all institutions of higher education originally stated by the inspired King Solomon, who said, “A multitude of people are a king’s majesty, but a ruler without subjects is ruined” (Proverb 14:28). The report noted that HBCU or otherwise “student enrollments are the lifeblood of colleges and universities” (Kinize et al, 2004, p. 4). A later report reiterated and added that “the most critical resource of any institution of higher learning is its human capital, and HBCUs are at risk of losing that” (Van Camp, Barden, Sloan, & Clarke, 2009, p. 457).

In 2013, St. Paul College, an HBCU in Virginia, closed due to low enrollment and financial trouble (Lee & Keys, 2013). In 2017, Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, the nation’s oldest HBCU, narrowly escaped closure after experiencing a 55 percent decrease in enrollment over the past ten years (Cheyney, 2016). Concordia College in Selma, Alabama will close at the end of the spring 2018 semester. Addressing the enrollment decline through a different approach is desperately needed, as past approaches have not been successful in countering the decrease. By examining why Black students continue to choose to attend HBCUs and what influences them, administrators can lead HBCUs in a new recruitment direction. With this knowledge, HBCU administrators can begin to think intentionally about methods to proactively recruit new students, explore enrollment tactics for continual future growth and consider how they can maintain competitive positioning within the higher education landscape.

The Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the factors that influence African American college students’ decisions to enroll (college choice) at HBCUs. In this study, I use a phenomenological qualitative design to gain a deeper understanding

of how and why African American undergraduates make the decision to choose HBCUs. I used the phenomenological approach to “distinguish phenomena (the perceptions or appearances from the point of view of a human) from noumena (what things really are)” (Willis, 2007, p.53). I interpret how and what factors led the participants to choose and enroll at an HBCU (the phenomenon) by listening to their stories, and creating a shared experience (Bound, 2011). The phenomenological approach is reflective and retrospective in nature, looking back at the lived experiences of the participants. Typical studies that explore HBCU college choice look at current Black high school students who may select an HBCU in the future and/or current HBCU students who are looking to transfer. However, this study’s sample consists of Black HBCU alumni.

Findings in this study are intended to inform higher education policymakers and administrators including college choice researchers, development practitioners, enrollment managers, admission counselors, recruiters, and high school guidance counselors. I analyzed data from in depth semi-structured one-on-one interviews and a demographic survey collected from Black American HBCU graduates from two HBCUs in Pennsylvania, Cheyney University of Pennsylvania and Lincoln University. The target population is HBCU alumni from 1964-2016, however, for the feasibility and conveniences of this study, I used the accessible population of alumni from 2011-2016. I interviewed 10 participants, 5 participants from each institution, for this study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What factors influenced the college choice process for Black undergraduate students who enrolled at a Historically Black College or University for post-secondary education?
- How do these factors influence the college choice process for Black undergraduate students who enrolled at a Historically Black College or University for post-secondary education?

Results

Previous quantitative research by Sevier (1993), Freeman (1997, 1999), and Freeman & Thomas (2002) have all consistently concluded that in some way (a) family, (b) peers, (c) institutional characteristics (d), fit and (e) cost are the most significant factors that influence Black students who apply and choose to attend HBCUs. Sevier's study found that (1) reputation of the college, (2) availability of a specific major, (3) availability of financial aid and (4) total cost of attending were the most significant to Black students in his study (Sevier, 1993, p.49). In the 2009 study conducted by Van Camp et al, racial identity was found to be significant. The findings of this study overlapped with themes described in previous studies, with a notable exception. The primary research question asked, "What factors influenced the college choice process for Black undergraduate students who enrolled at a Historically Black College or University for post-secondary education?"

Based on the participant narratives, five significant themes emerged from the data analysis to include factors linked to (1) alumni influence, (2) cost, (3) cultural identity, (4) legacy, and (5) location. Alumni influence was the most significant theme appearing in 100% of the responses. Each participant shared that HBCU alumni in the form of parents, family, friends, counselors, teachers and mentors all played a role in their decision to apply and or attend an HBCU. Even if the alumni member was not from Cheyney or Lincoln, each participant shared that an HBCU alumni still encouraged him or her to apply to at least one HBCU. Alumni, legacy and cultural identity were themes that emerged and that were not present in previous studies, though alumni/ legacy could be similar to family ties to a college, ranked 24 in Sevier's study. The term, legacy retained two definitions in this study, to be a legacy means either to have an immediate family member (mother, father, and siblings) attend the same institution or to have a family member (s) who attended an HBCU, not the institution the participant attended. Cultural identity also has two meanings in this study, identifying as a Black American or having Black American/African ancestry. Notably, no participant in this study mentioned academics, academic reputation or availability of major.

The participant narratives also revealed important details to answer the second question of how these factors (alumni influence, cost, cultural identity, legacy, and location) influenced their college choice process. Table 1 includes selected quotes that reflect the collective thoughts of the sample.

Recommendations

The findings of this research study are meant to inform and assist HBCU stakeholders (e.g., administrators, admissions, enrollment management, retention services, and marketing) in the improvement of enrollment practices that could address the declining enrollments and build pipelines for future recruitment practices. Based on these findings, I make several recommendations for practice and research.

First, I recommend that Cheyney and Lincoln administrators conduct more research exploring alumni influence, cost, cultural identity, legacy and location as it relates to their incoming classes to create a more in-depth student profile. Woodley and Figiel (2004) emphasized that an in-depth analyses of college choice factors that influence students to choose institutions is missing from traditional student profiles. Traditional demographic student profiles are no longer sufficient; more research in this area is needed. "Recruitment strategies that work for traditional White students will not always work for racially and ethnically diverse students. It is important that any institution or profession seeking to attract minorities research what works best for attracting minority students (Bryan, n.d, p. 4)".

Second, I recommend that HBCUs not rely solely on current College Choice Theory (CCT) and College Choice Models (CCM). CCT and CCM can assist in gaining insight into why and how students select an institution; however, they do not provide much insight on actual influences or factors for Black students or aggregate the data using Black student samples. In addition, CCM has not been designed for or to specifically assess Black students or HBCU choice. One study highlighted that "more must be done to identify how considering an HBCU affects the college choice process. The college choice literature has generally neglected to consider students of color" (Van Camp et al, 2009, p. 458). Future researchers could examine existing known factors in greater depth and with larger samples, using CCT or CCM in addition to other modified models.

Third, I recommend creating a CCM specifically designed for HBCUs or students of color that include a focus on cultural capital and cultural identity. Cultural identity is a factor that has not yet been explored in depth in previous or current studies, although McDonough (1997) emphasized that outside of social class, race and culture are the most influential factor correlated to college choice. Dr. Beverly Tatum, former president of Spelman College [an HBCU] asserted that "fit" or cultural identity was a top influential factor in HBCU college choice stating

Table 1. HBCU Choice Factors

Factor	Student Testimonies
Alumni (former HBCU student)	<p>... "when I was writing my college essay, I asked my English teacher for help, and he turned out to be an HBCU Alum, Cheyney actually, and started sharing his story"...</p> <p>... "so those two [teacher and counselor] I remember really pushing the HBCU agenda and definitely discussing their experiences and you know how much pride they had"...</p>
Cost (Net cost/out of pocket expenses)	<p>... "I got into Penn State on a partial scholarship, but even with financial aid, I would still need to take out a \$10,000 loan each year to cover the balance...When Cheyney sent my financial package, I only had to pay \$750 out of pocket each semester after a partial scholarship and financial aid. So it made the most financial sense to go to Cheyney"...</p> <p>... "Cost played a big influence because I knew that higher education wasn't going to be free and I wasn't quite sure of how I was going to pay for school, so that was a huge factor, not just for me but also for my parents"...</p>
Cultural Identity (Identifying as Black in the United States)	<p>... "Understanding the history of my family, Black people and why Lincoln was established in the first place made my decision easy. Sure, I got into other schools and I applied to PWIs, but that's not where my grandfather went, my parents went or the scores of Black Americans who made sacrifices so I could go"...</p> <p>... "I wanted to be around people who wouldn't judge me based on my skin. You know, I wanted to fit in with people who understand what it is like to be in my skin, who know the words to Jay-Z lyrics, who grew up watching Martin, who knows what the Poppy store is...it's the nuances of being Black that only other Black people can understand on the macro and micro levels"...</p>
Legacy (Family who attended an HBCU)	<p>... "My older sister actually attended Lincoln University before me and as a result I pretty much fell in love with it. I remember trying to go up to the campus every chance I got, [laughs] I probably spent more time at Lincoln then at [high school name deleted]. In my mind I was already a Lincoln student"...</p> <p>... " Most of the people, if not all of the people in my family who have degrees graduated from a HBCU. I knew I wanted continue the tradition, I mean if I could, it was like the rite of passage almost, something I definitely would explore when applying to colleges" ...</p>
Location (Proximity to Home or Family)	<p>... " Location was a big factor in where I went to school, primarily because I needed to have access to my mother's cooking, joking but serious [laughter]. I also had a part time job that I wanted to maintain, so I needed to be close...Cheyney was close enough for me to go to school during the week, come home, and work on the weekends"...</p> <p>... "I wanted to go, I mean, I need to go somewhere close because my family didn't have a car. But I still wanted to feel like I was going away to school"...</p>

“Students are drawn to environments where they see themselves reflected in powerful ways, places where they see themselves as central to the educational enterprise” (Tatum, 2005, para 16). McDonough, Antonio, & Trent (1995), Perna (2006), Van Camp et al (2009) and Williams (2017) provide conceptual frameworks for such an endeavor.

Conclusion

For nearly a century, HBCUs were in a practical manner the only institutions of higher learning accessible to Black people in America. Today, Black Americans and all Americans now have the individual right to choose when, where and how they would like to pursue post-secondary education. HBCUs still prove to be relevant and are still a choice for many Black students looking to pursue higher education. Accounting for only three percent of the nation’s 4,000 plus institutions of higher learning, HBCUs are responsible for producing approximately 25 percent of all bachelor’s degrees, 10 percent of all master’s degrees, and 26 percent of all first professional degrees earned by Black Americans annually (Conrad & Gasman, 2015).

Findings from this study could be used to develop new targeted recruitment strategies for Black student populations, help HBCUs reposition for future enrollment growth and to generate new strategic plans for a possible HBCU college choice model. In addition, this study could be useful to college and university presidents, deans, faculty, and administrators in understanding who their students are—expanding current student profiles. Further, this study provides high school counselors, parents and prospective college students with additional information to consider when making choices about attending an HBCU after high school or for graduate study.

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