

# CMSI RESEARCH BRIEF

## Selecting and Persisting at HBCUs: The Alumni Perspective

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### Executive Summary

*Alumni serve many roles for their alma mater enabling a number of insights from alumni surveys. Alumni surveys were used for this study to examine college choice and college completion influences. Between 2013 and 2017, 521 Historically Black College and University (HBCU) alumni responded to the request for feedback on the influences that attracted and helped retain them as undergraduate students at their respective institution. The study's findings reveal the primary attractions to the represented institutions were the desire for an HBCU experience, impressions made during campus visits, and academic reputation. Peers, faculty and staff, and financial aid were the universally acknowledged sources of retention support. The alumni survey responses affirmed the role of peers, faculty and campus events in the creation of student experiences and in doing so informed the recommendations for the design of future comparative and individual HBCU alumni research, student recruitment and engagement.*

### Background

The alumni surveys are a continuation of research featured in the book, *Opportunities and Challenges at Historically Black Colleges and Universities*, examining the student retention strategies employed at Spelman College.

In the book, *The Story of Spelman College*, Spelman College President Florence Matilda Read asks: Yet when all that is said, the

real test, the fruit of the undertaking, is the alumnae, the women whom it has trained. What of them?

Alumni surveys are this study's response. Alumni surveys have been used to assess (i) the undergraduate academic experience (Gaier, S., 2004), (ii) undergraduate research experience (Bauer, K.W. & Bennett, J.S., 2003), (iii) career advising (Ogletree, S.M., 1999), (iv) a particular program of study (Quereshi, M.Y., 1988), (v) study abroad programs (Norris, E.M. & Gillespie, J., 2008), (vi) alumni outcomes, giving and engagement (Gallup, 2015; Collins, J.S. et al, 1999; Gasman and Bowman, 2013; Pearson, 1999). Alumni surveys were used in this study to assess the matriculation influences and student experiences that contributed to the participants' college completion. Choice and retention were examined in tandem as both drive an institution's top line, net tuition revenue. This is important because student-generated revenues (tuition along with auxiliary revenues) are the primary source of operating revenue for most post-secondary institutions (Fitch Ratings, 2013). The composition of total revenues, including non-capital government appropriations, varied between the surveyed public and private institutions.

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Based upon the fiscal year 2016 audited financial statements, the surveyed institutions' dependence on student-based revenues (student revenues as a percent of total revenues) ranged from one-quarter to approximately 60%. The 2016 median for public and private universities was 49% and 86%, respectively (S&P Global Ratings, 2017). Government appropriations were a significant source of revenue for the public institutions, reducing reliance on student revenue. However, state and local government appropriations have not been a consistent source of revenue for public universities. The Great Recession of 2008 resulted in reduced state funding for higher education and the recent increases in state appropriations result in aggregate spending still below pre-recession levels (Mitchel et al, 2017). In a higher education environment characterized by inconsistent public support, constituent surveys are readily assessable tools to support enrollment management by assessing or informing marketing campaigns, financial aid strategies, or existing programs, and in turn student-generated revenues. The objective of this research is promotion of the value of alumni surveys in informing student policies, practices and experiences critical to an institution's financial stability.

## The Study

Results for this study were derived from online surveys conducted between 2013 and 2017 with alumni from five HBCUs, two public institutions and three private. The five institutions selected for this study were: Spelman College (GA), Morgan State University (MD), Howard University (DC), Hampton University (VA) and Florida A&M University (FL). These institutions were chosen for the access to alumni and for a mix of institutional type (public versus private), enrollment size and geographic location. The surveys were confined to the institutions' undergraduate alumni. There were a few respondents that had enrolled in bachelor's-to-master's programs. The online surveys were distributed via email and the social media websites: LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram. Alumni ambassadors were solicited from each institution to personalize the email and social media requests to their alumni networks. Participants were not offered any financial incentive to participate. Depending on the institution, the one-page survey

contained ten, fifteen or twenty questions. The surveys were a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions. The qualitative questions asked respondents to reflect on their matriculation and retention influences, favorite college experience and the one word that described their institution.

## Findings

The sample alumni represented classes between and including 1951 and 2017 and graduated on average in four years. The majority of respondents received some form of financial aid from their institution, lived on campus for a portion of their tenure and participated in co-curricular activities. The primary attractions to the represented institutions were the desire for an HBCU experience, impressions made during campus visits, and academic reputation. Peers, faculty and staff, and financial aid were the universally acknowledged sources of retention support

## Who Were the Survey Participants?

This pilot group represented four generations: Silent Generation (graduated 1950-1967), Baby Boomers (graduated 1968-1986), Generation X (graduated 1987-2002), and Millennials (graduated 2003-2019). The majority of respondents were Generation Xers (53%), women and African-American. Howard University was the one institution where Millennials were the primary respondents (72.5%). The surveyed alumni, other than those determined to only go to their respective institution, had college options based upon their number of college applications. The number of colleges and universities that the alumni applied to ranged from one to eleven, with an average of 3.4. Two-thirds of respondents applied to both HBCUs and Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). The PWIs included all but two of the Ivy League schools; state flagship public institutions, such as University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Pennsylvania State University, University of Florida, University of Virginia; medium and large-sized private colleges, including Massachusetts Institute of Technology, New York University, University of Chicago, Duke University and Georgetown

University as well as smaller public and private institutions, such as Loyola University, and Millersville University.

The majority graduated in four years or less (68%). The sample alumni at Spelman College (Spelman), Howard University (Howard) and Hampton University (Hampton) earned their bachelor's degree in an average of four years. Morgan State University (Morgan) and Florida A&M University (FAMU) alumni graduated on average in four and a half years. Howard, Hampton and FAMU alumni were asked to identify the primary factor that contributed to an enrollment period longer than four years. The top reason for Howard and Hampton alumni was repeated courses (24.5%) and enrolled in a bachelor's-to-master's degree program (29%), respectively. For FAMU, the primary reason was a tie between personal or family reasons (17%) and changed major.

The participants earned a number of different majors. Spelman graduates were not asked their major and there wasn't a concentration in any particular major at the other surveyed institutions. Approximately 30% of the Morgan respondents earned a degree from the current day School of Business & Management. More than one-third of the Howard respondents (37%) earned a degree from the College of Arts and Sciences. One-third of the Hampton respondents earned a degree from the School of Liberal Arts. Approximately one-third of the FAMU respondents (35%) earned a degree from the College of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities.

The majority of surveyed alumni lived on campus for a portion of their tenure at their respective institutions, even when accounting for the exclusion of Spelman and Morgan alumni. At Howard, 93% of surveyed alumni (or 129 persons) lived on campus for at least one semester. All but one Hampton respondent (141 persons) and 73% of FAMU respondents (72 persons) lived in campus housing for all or a portion of their tenure.

Similarly, the majority of respondents participated in co-curricular activities, even though this question was not presented to Spelman and Morgan alumni. 87% of Howard and Hampton alumni and 75% of



### Surveyed Alumni Profile

- Generation X
- Female
- African American
- Applied to both HBCUs and PWIs
- Graduated in four years
- Lived on campus for portion of tenure
- Received some form of financial aid
- Participated in co-curricular activities

FAMU alumni participated in extra-curricular activities. Information for Spelman and Morgan alumni involvement was gleaned from responses to the question regarding retention influences.

The majority of all respondents received some form of financial aid from their undergraduate institution. The level of institutional financial support for students ranged between 58% and 80%. Refer to Figure 2 on page 7 for a breakdown of the type of support provided by each institution.

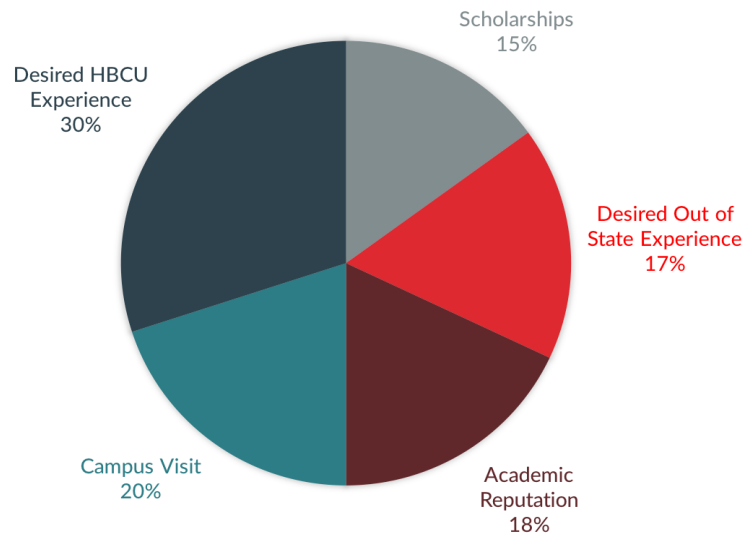
### What Factors Influenced Participants' Enrollment Decision?

The top five (5) matriculation influences, in order of influence, were (i) desire for an HBCU experience, (ii) impressions made during campus visits, (iii) academic reputation of the institution, (iv) location or desire for an out-of-state experience, and (v) scholarships (see Figure 1).

This question was presented as a qualitative question to Spelman and Morgan alumni. Howard, Hampton and FAMU alumni were presented with fifteen to sixteen matriculation influences. Respondents were instructed to select as many as applicable. While many students had

multiple matriculation influences, when instructed to select one, the desire for an HBCU experience remained the most significant as relayed by approximately one-quarter of the aggregate respondents. The desire for an HBCU experience was referenced the most by alumni with the exception of those that attended Spelman and Morgan.

**Figure 1: Top Five Matriculation Influences**



Spelman's academic reputation was cited as the primary draw to the college.

“I wanted to go to a historically Black college and felt that if I went to one I should go to the number one ranked college. I also wanted to go to a smaller school where I was not just a number in a large headcount. My cousin also went to Spelman and through her I fell in love with the sisterhood of Spelman College.

*2006 Spelman Graduate*

Spelman's academic reputation was followed by a desire for an HBCU experience and a desire for an all-female college experience. For some, underlying this desire to attend an HBCU and experience Spelman's sisterhood was the lack of diversity experienced at school prior to matriculation. According to two alumnae:

“I knew it would likely be the only time in my life I could be immersed in a Black, female-centered environment. I grew up in a predominately White community and wanted a change of pace.

*2009 Spelman Graduate*

“The majority of my primary education was absent diversity and I wanted not only an academic experience of excellence, but one where I was surrounded by peers that may look like me but were still uniquely diverse in their own right – also striving for excellence.

*1999 Spelman Graduate*

For Morgan alumni, the primary university attraction was location, particularly the university's proximity to the student's home. In contrast to the other institutions, scholarships were a significant matriculation influence for Morgan graduates. As reflected by a 1999 Morgan graduate:

“Full academic scholarship was a big factor because it was the only way that my parents would let me leave the state! I also wanted to experience an HBCU and be relatively close to home and family.

*1999 Morgan Graduate*



While being a legacy or having a family member that attended the institution didn't make the top five matriculation influences, there were alumni at all five institutions that credited having had a family member that graduated from the institution as a matriculation influence. 14% of Spelman, 8% of Morgan, 17% of Howard, 26% of Hampton and 34% of FAMU alumni were motivated to enroll because of a graduate in the family. The referenced family members included great-grandmothers, great-aunts, aunts, mothers, fathers, siblings, and cousins. Hampton and FAMU alumni were specifically asked if they had a grandparent or parent that attended their alma mater. 11% and 14% of the Hampton and FAMU alumni, respectively, were legacies.

## What Factors Influenced Participants' College Completion?

The alumni were presented with thirteen matriculation influences and instructed to select as many as applicable (see Table 1). The top three retention influences were (i) peers, (ii) faculty and staff and (iii) financial aid. Peer effects are high at all five institutions. Three-quarters or 390 of the 521 respondents credited their classmates as a significant influence on their persistence. The following two alumni quotes highlight the influence of positive peer pressure:

**“The biggest factors were personal goals and classmates. I had an intrinsic drive to succeed and my close friends shared that drive so collectively we encouraged one another through friendly competition.**

*1999 Morgan Graduate*

**“The relationships I had with my Spelman sisters and their academic success set a standard of achievement.**

*1998 Spelman Graduate*

'Faculty and Staff' was a close second to 'Classmates' as the primary support in the attainment of the alumni's bachelor's degree.

**“At Spelman both the faculty/staff and students valued education. So we held each other accountable. You were expected to do your best.**

*2000 Spelman Graduate*

**“I valued the attentiveness of the professors and their focus on seeing each student excel.**

*2005 Spelman Graduate*

Hampton and FAMU alumni were specifically asked to rank how likely they agreed that at least one professor cared about them and their success. 68% of Hampton respondents were extremely likely to agree that at least one professor at Hampton cared about their success, 22% likely, 5% neutral, 1.4% unlikely and 4.23% extremely unlikely. 80% of FAMU respondents were extremely likely to agree that at least one professor at FAMU cared about their success, 16% likely, 2% neutral, and 2% extremely unlikely.

68% or 354 of the 521 respondents acknowledged the influence of financial aid (academic scholarships, athletic scholarships, and work study) as a retention tool. Approximately 75% of Spelman alumnae received some form of financial aid, 80% for Morgan alumni, 79% for Howard alumni, 60% for Hampton alumni, 58% for FAMU alumni. In contrast to other surveyed institutions, academic scholarships were a retention, not an attraction, tool for Spelman.

“Having a full academic scholarship provided me with the ability to attend Spelman. Being surrounded by my peers/classmates who constantly encouraged me and formed study groups with me helped me to succeed. Talking to alumni and learning more about the Spelman network also provided me with motivation to succeed. Lastly, being able to attend Spelman and Georgia Tech was an amazing experience. The faculty and/or staff at Spelman were very supportive and encouraging.

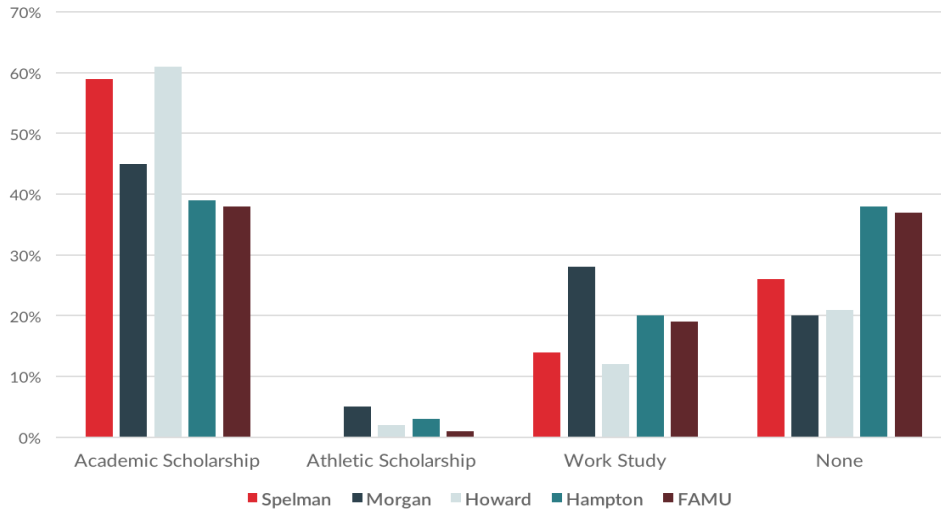
*1998 Spelman Graduate*

## The Power of Peers Further Examined

Campus or co-curricular activities ranked seventh as a retention influence. Howard, Hampton and FAMU alumni were asked what campus activities they were involved in and the influence of their participation in extra-curricular activities on their college experience. The referenced extra-curricular activities included involvement with student government, major clubs, such as the Psychology club or Biology club, regional clubs, such as the Louisiana club or Texas club, sororities and fraternities, intramural sports, cheerleading, student chapters of professional organizations, like the Associated General Contractors or National Society of Black Engineers, ROTC, the marching band, choir, university radio station, and serving as residential advisors. Alumni at all three institutions responded that the primary benefit of extra-curricular activities was the creation of friendships. Extra-curricular activities were also attributed to creating a well-rounded college experience, increasing a connection to the institution, developing leadership skills, practicing time management and providing networking opportunities.

**Table 1: Distribution of Retention Influences**

	Spelman	Morgan	Howard	Hampton	FAMU	Total
Classmates	34	79	112	98	67	390
Faculty and/or Staff	31	60	113	98	72	374
Financial Aid	34	80	107	79	54	354
Academic Offerings	24	34	68	49	44	219
Classroom Size	29	34	39	46	26	174
Academic Advisor	14	21	67	34	33	169
Campus Activities	-	-	72	52	29	153
Volunteer Activities	22	34	50	25	12	143
Alumni	20	18	48	34	18	138
On Campus Housing	-	-	71	31	11	113
Career Counseling	12	7	28	14	11	72
Residential Advisors	6	9	20	11	3	49
Medical or Mental Health Services	4	1	14	1	3	23

**Figure 2: Financial Aid Breakdown**

Below is feedback from four Howard alumni regarding the influence of co-curricular activities on the creation of community:

“The other participants helped me to study, pushed me to do well, and helped me focus. There was no way I could be a leader in these groups and not do well academically.

*2002 Howard Graduate*

“They kept me focused, especially Bisonettes, since I had to maintain an acceptable GPA, and introduced me to a range of friends that I still speak to and work with today.

*2000 Howard Graduate*

“Helped me to develop [a] social circle and increase leadership abilities.

*2012 Howard Graduate*

“They allowed me to establish strong bonds and friendships. They provided mentors and guidance in similar majors. They helped me acclimate to Howard as I did not feel connected to the institution as my low-income background made me feel out of place. They pushed me to do more and be greater.

*2007 Howard Graduate*

It should be noted that not all respondents ascribed any significance to their participation in co-curricular activities. Approximately one-third of Howard respondents said extra-curricular activities had little to no impact on the completion of their undergraduate studies. 10% of Hampton participants and 15% of FAMU respondents communicated that co-curricular activities had minimal to no impact on their college experience.

The significance for those that did is that the primary benefit attributed to extra-curricular activities was the creation of the alumni’s most memorable experiences. Howard, Hampton and FAMU alumni were also asked to reflect on their favorite experience at their institution. The overwhelming favorite experience was the creation of friendships, created resultant co-curricular activities, living on campus and participation in campus events. The referenced campus events included formal occasions, such as Homecoming, graduation, Saturday football games, convocations, Freshman Week, and informal gatherings, such as time spent in dormitories.

“Spending time bonding with friends, roommates, and classmates in the dorms. These experiences transformed the relationships with my fellow Hamptonians, making them family.

*2002 Hampton Graduate*

*“When legacy and community combine often experiential pride is the result.”*

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Gallup and Purdue University’s inaugural study of U.S. college alumni in 2014 suggested that a student’s experience at her college or university is more significant to workplace and alumni engagement than the type of institution attended (Gallup, 2015). Another 2015 Gallup report focused on minority college graduates. This report concluded HBCUs created a better college experience for minority students than those at PWIs due to supportive faculty and involvement in experiential learning opportunities (internships, long-term research projects, extracurricular activities). The alumni surveyed for this study confirmed this characterization. This sample alumni group chose their institution foremost for an HBCU experience followed by impressions made during campus visits and the institution’s academic reputation. The primary retention influences were peers, faculty and staff, and financial aid. 72% of the surveyed alumni credited faculty and staff as a contributing factor to their academic success. 68% of Hampton alumni and 80% of FAMU alumni, respectively, were extremely likely to agree with the statement that at least one professor cared about them and their success while an undergraduate. The surveyed alumni not only reinforced some of the perceptions of HBCUs (affirming, supportive) but also confirmed the importance of some of the initiatives undertaken by some of the institutions, such Morgan’s increased use of learning communities (Morgan State University, 2011).

Howard, Hampton and FAMU alumni concluded their survey with the one word they would use to describe their institution. ‘Mecca’ was Howard’s one word. The surveyed Howard alumni communicated Howard’s value proposition lies in experiential pride, the combination

of the legacy underlying the University’s moniker, the “Mecca”, the historical epicenter of Black scholarship, and the creation of community. ‘Family’ and ‘excellence’ are defining words for both Hampton and FAMU. Collectively, the surveyed alumni communicated their respective institution’s value proposition lies in the creation of community through supportive faculty, motivating peers, campus events, and co-curricular activities.

**Future HBCU Alumni Research.** This study reflects the opinions of select HBCU alumni and cannot be used to generalize about the HBCU college experience at the individual institutions or collectively. The survey respondents were volunteers and constitute a non-probability sample. The limitation of a non-probability sample is the inability to attribute findings of a study to the respective alumni population. Another limitation is selection bias. The level of participation by certain demographic groups is not representative of their composition of the institution’s alumni base. Millennials, particularly the class of 2005, were overly represented in the Howard University study. Members of Generation X, notably classes of 1998 and 1999, were overrepresented in the Morgan State University survey. These limitations may be mitigated with expanded surveys derived from a sample of randomly selected email addresses provided by the respective institution. A broader study of alumni could additionally examine the return on investment of the institution’s degree with questions regarding alumni employment, industry, position, salary, and outstanding student loan debt. In advance of a broader survey, this study pretested questions assessing perceptions of the institution’s attraction and available retention resources. An expanded study could be done for individual institutions or multiple for a comparative analysis. The benefits of a comparative study include the dissemination of a broader narrative of HBCU students and their experiences and the cultivation of data for development of best practices. A public policy implication is the ability to attribute conclusions to a sector versus the variances of a particular institution (McGuire, M.D., & Casey, J.P., 1999).

**Student Recruitment.** A tertiary objective of this study became presenting the profile of the HBCU student that emerged during the



research. The HBCU student profile that emerged was one with college options and the requisite aptitude for college success. The average surveyed alumni applied to a variety of institutions and graduated on average in four years. HBCUs have historically taken greater risks on students based upon secondary academic records and standardized college entrance test scores. This narrative certainly covers a segment of the HBCU student population but not all segments. The aim of an expanded HBCU student profile is to engage the woman or man whose grades would grant them admittance to any institution by illustrating a cohort of peers.

Another initiative promoted with the research findings was the merit of recruiting at predominately White secondary schools. Spelman and Morgan alumni communicated the appeal of an HBCU was influenced by having graduated from a predominately White high school. The graduates' response, underscore the sentiments of past research in suggesting a recruitment strategy focused on students at predominately White secondary institutions who might be motivated by the inimitable HBCU experience of studying amongst other talented Black students (Freeman, K. & Thomas, G.E., 2002).

**Student Retention.** The surveyed alumni success reflects in part the HBCU legacy of supportive faculty and peers. Peers were noted as sources of positive peer pressure, standards of excellence and family. Peers exceeded Faculty as a retention influence. The alumni data promotes the importance of institutionalizing student interaction in the college experience. Of the available strategies to encourage student interaction, living-learning communities, peer tutoring, supplemental instruction, on-campus housing, and participation in extra-curricular activities, only the influence of the latter two were surveyed. The primary benefit attributed to participation in campus activities and organizations was the creation of friendships and friendships made were the overwhelming memorable experience cited by Howard, Hampton and FAMU alumni.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The term 'alumni' is used throughout the study to include both male alumni and female alumnae.

<sup>2</sup>Spelman and Morgan alumni were not asked to identify their gender or race.

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