

Access to Higher Education for African Americans

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In a day and time when more people are going to college, access to higher education for African Americans is a cause for concern. For those who are attending these institutions, issues of retention and graduation are also cause for concern. Problems related to access, retention, and graduation occur at both Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and predominately white colleges and universities. Yet, there is some good news in that more federal funds may be allocated for college retention programs. Representative Chaka Fattah (Democrat PA) introduced a college retention proposal in the 106th Congressional session. He then re-introduced the proposal in the 107th Congressional Session. Unfortunately, the last major action taken on the proposed legislation occurred on November 14, 1999, when the bill was referred to the House Education and Workforce Committee. The legislation, entitled *the William H. Gray III College Completion Challenge Grant Program of 1999* (H.R. 3223) is a \$35 million program that was a part of the Clinton Administration's fiscal 2001 budget proposal. If H.R. (House Resolution) 3223 is signed into law, colleges and universities could receive grants for a variety of retention ideas including funding for pre-summer freshman programs, on-campus support programs, and financial incentives for the neediest students (i.e. financial aid that is above the current maximum Pell Grant levels).

In the meantime, institutions continue to grapple with issues related to African American and other minority group preparation for and access to higher education. These efforts include attempts to address problems in recruitment, college entry, retention, and graduation success. Additionally, since 1998, five important reports documenting such efforts and raising public awareness on issues related to minority access to higher education have been released.¹

The good news is that more minorities, including African American youth, have access to and are making it into college. More specifically, according to *Two Decades of Progress: African Americans Moving Forward in Higher Education Report* (UNCF Report), African American undergraduate enrollment in four-year colleges and universities over the past twenty years has increased at a faster pace than the enrollment rate for white undergraduates (UNCF 2).

African American High School Graduation Rates

A review of high school and college graduation rates indicates that in 1980, eighty-seven percent of whites in the twenty-five to twenty-nine age range earned high school diplomas or GEDs. In 1995, the graduation rates for whites remained at eighty-seven. In 1980, approximately seventy-seven percent of African Americans between the ages of twenty-five through twenty-nine had earned high school diplomas or GEDs. However, in 1995, eighty-seven percent of African Americans in this age group had graduated (UNCF Report 6). This reflects an impressive achievement and gain.

African American College Graduation Rates

In 1980, twenty-three percent of whites in their mid-twenties had graduated from college with bachelors' degrees. In 1995, thirty-one percent of whites in their mid-twenties earned bachelor's degrees. On the other hand, in 1980, only eleven percent of African Americans in their mid-twenties had earned bachelors' degrees. By 1995, only sixteen percent of African Americans, in their mid-twenties had graduated with bachelors' degrees. (UCNF Report 5). In spite of the graduation gains, there is still cause for concern. A comparison of African American undergraduate college and university enrollment rates with those of other minority groups indicates that "between 1990 and 1995, Asian women and Hispanic women...increased their enrollment by 43.9 percent and 42.8 percent respectively" (Nettles, Perna, and Millett 37). Hispanic males increased their enrollment rate by 35.9 percent (38). African American females and African American males only increased their graduation rates by only a mere 18.3 percent and 13.1 percent respectively.

More Bad News

Even with the gains in high school, college, and university graduation rates, the bad news is that across the board, the poor are the least likely to go to college. For example, high school is the highest level of education attained by 64.6 percent of students from the lowest quartile of socioeconomic status. In contrast, 41.2 percent of students in the highest socioeconomic quartile attain bachelors' degrees and 2.7 percent achieve first professional degrees (Nettles, Perna, and Millet 39).

African Americans are significantly under-represented in our colleges and universities. For those who do enroll, attrition rates are high and too few students are graduating within six years at four-year institutions. Additionally, while many minority students, including African Americans, graduate from community colleges, they do not transfer in sufficient numbers to four-year institutions. Of those who do graduate from our community colleges and get accepted to four-year institutions, far too many are not completing their bachelors' degrees (Weiger and Smith 30). More specifically, African American rates of graduation from four-year institutions, over the past twenty years, have declined from 35.3 to 24.7 percent (Tinto 71-80). Further, the rate at which African American students earned degrees of any kind has declined over the past twenty years from 47.9 percent to 40.2 percent (Tinto 72).

More females than males of all races and at all socio-economic levels are making their way into and are graduating from colleges and universities. The success of African American females is an important and good thing. This success, however, may have broader implications across family, social, economic and political lines than is generally considered or researched when looking at access issues. Education, or the lack of it, is often tied to life opportunity, economic well-being, and social status. The fact that more African American females are attending and graduating from our colleges and universities may, over time, effect the community status, family relationships, and the leadership roles of African American men and women. The increased earning and political power of women may be viewed as a positive outcome. However, we still live

in a society where it is accepted, particularly by power brokers and decision makers, that the male of any racial or ethnic group should have superior economic, political and social standing. The shift in earning and political power of women may potentially have devastating effects on African American male esteem and role perception as well as on family and community stability.

Barriers to College Entry and Graduation

The challenge of successfully moving many more African American males and females into and through higher education must be considered and addressed. There appear to be several barriers to college entry, retention and graduation, including personal issues or challenges, lack of meaningful college preparation, and tougher high school graduation requirements. For example, the requirement to pass standardized tests, curricular relevance, culture, geographical location, and lack of money or financial support can also pose daunting challenges (Harris 16). It is important to note that these issues are faced by many students irrespective of race and ethnicity.

Lack of appropriate academic preparation is a significant challenge that must be met and overcome. For example, the state of Massachusetts will require students to pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System test (MCAS) as a graduation requirement beginning in 2003. The success of minority students on the MCAS, which was administered to children in grades four, eight, and ten in 1998, 1999, and 2000, has been abysmally poor. The substantive areas tested were English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science and Technology. In Spring 2000, students in grades eight and ten were also tested in History/Social Science.

A student's performance on the MCAS is scored as "advanced," "proficient," "needs improvement," or "failing." Reportedly, students at the advanced level are able to demonstrate both a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the subject matter as well as the ability to solve complex problems. Students at the proficient level are reportedly able to demonstrate a solid understanding of the subject matter as well as the ability to solve a wide variety of problems. Students falling within the needs improvement classification demonstrate partial understanding of the subject matter as well as the ability to solve some problems. Finally, students in the failing category are said to demonstrate minimal understanding and lack the ability to solve simple problems. Figure 1 compares the 1998 statewide failure rates for all students with those of African American students in three subject areas at grades four, eight, and ten.

Figure 1

These results indicate that in 1998, thirty-three percent of African American fourth grade students tested failed the English Language Arts section of the MCAS. Fifty percent failed the Mathematics section and thirty-two percent failed the Science and Technology section. At the eighth grade level, twenty-five percent of African American eighth graders failed the English Language Arts section of the MCAS. Seventy-five percent failed the Mathematics section and seventy-four percent failed the Science and Technology section. Forty-nine percent of African American tenth graders failed the

English Language Arts section of the test. Eighty percent failed the Mathematics section and sixty-five percent failed the Science and Technology section.

Figure 2 shows MCAS statewide results in each of the three grade levels for 1998 through 2000 for African American students.

According to *the Spring 2000 MCAS Tests: Report of State Results*, issued by the Massachusetts Department of Education, the percentage of students overall falling into the failing level is declining and the percentage of students moving into the proficient or advanced levels is increasing (2). However, the percentage of eighth and tenth grade students performing at the failing level in math, science and technology, and history/social science is still too high. Specifically, while African American students showed improvement in many areas, sixty-six percent of those in grade four fell into the needs improvement group in English language arts. Twenty-nine percent fell into the failing group. In mathematics, forty-five percent of the fourth graders fell into the needs improvement group and forty-three percent fell into the failing group. In science and technology, fifty-one percent of the fourth graders fell into the needs improvement group, and twenty-three percent fell into the failing group.

The test results for African American eighth and tenth graders are also discouraging. In mathematics, only seven percent of the eighth graders were in the proficient group. Twenty percent were in the needs improvement group and seventy-two percent were in the failing group. In science and technology, only eight percent of the African American eighth graders were in the proficient group. Twenty percent were in the needs improvement group and seventy-three percent were in the failing group. As for tenth graders, in mathematics, twelve percent of the African American test takers were in the proficient group. Fourteen percent were in the needs improvement group, and seventy-seven percent were in the failing group. Finally, in science and technology, only five percent of African American tenth graders were in the proficient group. Twenty percent were in the needs improvement group and seventy percent were in the failing group.

With the exception of eighth grade English language arts and fourth grade science and technology, there was no significant decrease in failure rates among African American students between 1998 and 2000, and in two areas the percentage of failures actually increased. Should these testing patterns persist over time, large numbers of African American students will not be graduating from high school or moving on to college. Success in the math and science and technology areas are particularly important to college and university preparation and admission because mastery of mathematics, science and technology are important to success in a variety of study areas.

One must ask the question why African American students score so poorly on the MCAS exams. Without a doubt, there are many reasons that explain these test taking failures. If, however, accurate measurement of student ability and the achievement of student success in meeting testing standards are priorities, one of the highly likely reasons for testing failure that should be easy to remedy is the problem of preparation that flows from, or is related to, a lack of textbooks and other educational supplies.

According to Joan Vennoch of the *Boston Globe*, the budget for Boston schools' per pupil allocation for educational supplies has not been increased in at least six years (15). The per pupil distribution formula, for the approximately four million dollars that has been budgeted, includes \$55 for elementary students, \$62 for middle school students and \$71 for high school students. In addition to the monies being earmarked for textbooks, the funds are supposed to pay for, among other things, postage, blackboards, easels, pens, reading tables and floor mats! Students who have had to learn under these circumstances make up a significant proportion of those who look to Bunker Hill Community College as their pathway to higher education.

In the same article, Vennoch surmises that "Boston public schools lag behind other school districts of comparable size and ethnic makeup in closing the racial achievement gap because Boston students don't have textbooks to take home...at Hyde Park High School...it is typical for 25 to 30 students to share four or five books during any given class." And, "since [students] can't take textbooks home, they must rely on their notes for study and homework" (15). According to Vennoch, one student graduated without ever having received a math book. How can these students or any similarly situated students be expected to pass or excel on standardized tests or to be adequately prepared to attend, succeed or graduate from college?

Students who have been unsuccessful in their attempts to pass the MCAS will be able to repeat the test. In fact, Massachusetts, is considering plans to allow unsuccessful students up to four additional opportunities to pass the MCAS exam. Other options include affording students an opportunity to take the exam without having to answer the most difficult question(s) and assisting students to make necessary gains via participation in after school programs and tutoring sessions. Here again, one has to ask, if students who repeatedly fail the MCAS will ultimately be allowed to take the test without having to answer the most difficult questions, how relevant can these questions be and why ask them at all?

Former Governor Cellucci proposed that students who fail the MCAS but complete all other high school requirements be given a certificate of completion. It is not illogical, however, to assume that the student who has not passed the MCAS test and does not have a diploma or a GED will be denied entry into college. And, assuming the MCAS really tests or measures student mastery of relevant subject matter, even if colleges and universities are prepared to accept students with certificates of completion, the question would remain whether or not a student who was unable to pass MCAS is prepared to do college level work. If substantial numbers of African American students cannot pass MCAS or similar tests, it is likely that barriers to higher education barriers will become increasingly difficult to surmount.

As for other types of standardized tests, according to the UNCF Report, in 1996 African American SAT test takers scored 100 points below their white counterparts on both the verbal and math sections of the SAT (UNCF 3). Such results diminish the likelihood of gaining entry into the elite educational colleges and universities. Additionally, once in school, according to Claude Steel, Professor of Social Psychology at Stanford University,

“the grades Black students earn the first semester of college quickly fall behind those of White students with similar standardized test scores” (qtd. in Weissman 1). In other words, according to Professor Steel, “the same achievement level requires better preparation for Blacks than for Whites” (70). Assuming Professor Steel is correct, there are broad implications for retention and graduation success.

There is, however, another point to consider. Does the better preparation that Professor Steel alludes to really relate to academic preparation? For example, if there is a “skin tax” arising from issues of racism and lack of culturally competent teaching and service delivery that must be borne by African American and other minority students which does not have to be paid by white students, this may at least partially explain performance differences. Does the trauma, sense of isolation or alienation explain or partially explain why the grades Black students earn fall behind those of their white counterparts? Does financial worry, the fact that so many African American students are “time poor” (i.e. students are working while going to school, single parents are attending to family issues and day care needs, etc.) further explain the grade disparity? If the answer to some or all of these questions is “yes,” even if programs are put in place to address gaps in academic preparation, African American students will continue to drop out or fall behind.

Financial Barriers and Other Challenges

In both secondary and post secondary education, poverty is strongly related to low academic achievement. Additionally, students from low income families, including those from all racial and ethnic groups with above average grades are significantly more likely to leave college without bachelors’ degrees than are students with higher incomes (HR 3223). The fact that loans have become the primary source of student aid creates another barrier or source of concern for many African American students because they are reluctant to borrow money for school. Equally important, dependence on loans factors in as a retention issue for those who are in school; the loan burden may also discourage students from applying or going on to graduate school. Another concern arises from the over dependence on loans for college access being borne by those who are required to borrow in order to take remedial courses necessary to do college level work (American Council on Education 16). In other words, high risk students who have been unconscionably underserved by our public schools are expected to bear the cost associated with closing educational gaps so that they may have a chance to succeed in college.

College and university entry, retention and graduation success rates are further diminished if the individual is a first generation college student, has a low high school grade point average, has postponed or delayed college entry after high school graduation, or is working full-time. These are issues and situations frequently experienced by African Americans. Further, the level of any student’s parents’ education may influence educational outcomes, as do cultural attributes of the home, community, and school. The level, the concern about, as well as the amount of racial/ethnic prejudice and discrimination the student must face may also influence academic success and educational outcomes.

Finally, the African American student may be further challenged by service delivery gaps. For example, little-to-no service, guidance, or support may be provided to help the high school student gain access to postsecondary schools. Further, school staff may lack the cultural competency skills needed to help the African American student make a successful transition from high school to college.

The foregoing presents a grim picture of the barriers and challenges that must be faced by African Americans who may wish to enter college, and there are additional challenges that must be met by those who gain entry to institutions of higher education. Much more must be done, on all educational fronts, to level the playing field and to ensure that once students gain entry to a college or university they have every opportunity to succeed.

Recommendations

There is a clear need for college retention programs. Therefore, the first recommendation is to pass and fully fund the William Gray III College Completion Challenge Grant Program legislation. Second, The college retention programs will be of little use if adequate numbers of African American, other minority and economically disenfranchised students are not graduating from our high schools. The academic achievement gaps must be closed by, among other things, funding increases and re-allocation and redistribution of per pupil funding formulae for education resources. Third, Bunker Hill Community College has an exciting and viable “Minority Teachers Program,” in which potential and future minority teachers are recruited into the college and are supported through their tenure here. These students are linked by articulation agreements to completing their bachelors’ degrees at a university level. The program should be expanded and replicated throughout the college and university system. Fourth, community colleges like BHCC are entering into more articulation agreements with four-year colleges and universities. These agreements ease the path and provide a mechanism for community college students to transfer into four-year institutions of higher education. There is an ongoing attempt to increase the number of these transfer agreements; that work should continue. Fifth, no one should be left behind. More work should be done to recruit African American women into our college and university systems. However, the need remains for special emphasis to be placed on the recruitment, retention, preparation for and promotion of academic excellence and graduation of African American males.

Endnote

¹ The five reports are:

Reaching the Top A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement (New York: The College Board, 1999).

Deborah J. Wilds, *Minorities in Higher Education 1999-2000 Seventeenth Annual Status Report* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 2000).

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