

Chapter 5

Mentoring Graduate Students at HBCUs: Strategies for Engagement and Success

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ABSTRACT

Several scholars contend that the reason for success of African-American graduate and professional students at HBCUs is that the students receive better support than they do at PWIs. Thompson (2009) describes the HBCU environments as an “academically rigorous and socially conscious environment that challenges in shape students intellectual as well as the social, political and spiritual lives” (p. 30). But a thorough examination of the essential support structures for African-American graduate students is generally lacking in the empirical literature. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to discuss the role of a mentoring, a particular type of support structure that has been shown to impact engagement, retention, and completion for graduate students. Given the limited research around mentoring for African-American students, including graduate students, we seek to highlight the impact that this particular type of relationship has for graduate students attending HBCUs.

IMPACT ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Doctoral education can be conceptualized as a socialization process between the faculty member and a graduate student. Building relationships with faculty, receiving adequate levels of social, psychological, and intellectual support, and feeling cared for are important components of this socialization process. The climate and culture at an HBCUs is likely to facilitate doctoral student socialization by creating a sense of belonging, fostering ongoing relationships, and ultimately creating a culture that leads to academic engagement and success. Within the culture of HBCUs, students and their faculty can share a deeper understanding of the role and relevance for African American culture in defining the sense of self for both parties involved in the mentoring relationship. In the culturally homogenous and supportive environment of the HBCU, and at the hands of a caring and supportive mentor, protégés may feel safer

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to take risks in the academic, social, intellectual, and professional development. Given the increasingly vital role that HBCUs are playing for graduate students, it is incumbent that greater attention is paid to the role that mentoring can play in student engagement, which ultimately leads to the personal and professional success of these students.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the role and components of mentoring as a particular type of support structure that has been shown to positively impact engagement and success for graduate students. Over the past few decades, researchers have been paying closer attention to graduate student experiences. Scholars have examined students' attrition and completion rates (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001), socialization processes (Antony, 2002; Austin, 2002; Ellis, 2001), advising relationships (Baird, 1995), disciplinary differences (Gardener, 2007; Golde, 2005; Golde & Walker, 2006), and concerns involving the dissertation (Boote & Beile, 2005; Nettles & Millett, 2006). However, there continues to remain minimal research on African-American students' experiences in graduate and professional programs (Howard-Hamilton, Moerlon-Quainoo, Winkle-Wagner, Johnson, & Santiago, 2009). The lack of emphasis on African-American students is problematic given that there continues to be a long history of significant disparity in terminal degree completion between African-American and White students in the United States (Thomas, 1992). Blacks comprised over 12% of the United States population in 2010, yet only earned 6% of the conferred doctorates in the U.S. in 2010 (National Science Foundation, 2011). In comparison, Whites comprised approximately 72% of the population, and earned 74% of the doctorates during the same year (National Science Foundation, 2011). For those African-American students who do earn doctoral and professional degrees, they are increasingly likely to have graduated from an Historically Black College or University (HBCU) than they are from a predominantly White institution (PWI) (Gasman, Baez, Drezner, Sedgwick, Tudico, & Schmid, 2007). According to the 2009 Survey of Earned Doctorates, between 2009-2013, 21% (N=613) of the 2,836 doctorates awarded to African American students were done so at one of three HBCUs: Howard University, Morgan State University, and Jackson State University; furthermore, out of the 103 HBCUs in the U.S., there are currently 21 that award doctorates in a multitude of fields.

Palmer and Gasman (2008) contend that the reason for success of African-American graduate and professional students at HBCUs is that the students receive better support than they do at PWIs. Thompson (2009) describes the HBCU environment as an "academically rigorous and socially conscious environment that challenges and shapes students' intellectual as well as social, political and spiritual lives" (p. 30). But a thorough examination of the essential support structures for African-American graduate students, particularly those attending HBCUs, is generally lacking in the empirical literature. One of the key factors that has been shown to lead to success for graduate students of color is mentoring (Herzig, 2006; Milner, Husband, & Jackson, 2002; Patton & Harper, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, Johnson, Morelon-Quainoo, & Santigue, 2009). Yet little empirical data exists exploring the nature of graduate student-faculty mentoring relationships at HBCUs. Given the limited research around mentoring for African-American students, particularly graduate students, this chapter aims to highlight the functions of mentoring and the impact that this particular type of relationship has for graduate students.

BACKGROUND

Much of the literature on the experiences of graduate students of color has emphasized increased recruitment efforts, financial and academic support, the presence of faculty and administrators of color, and

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