

## Chapter 2

# Regenerating HBCU Persistence and Retention: Rethinking the First-Year Experience

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The public discourse on postsecondary education emphasizes the ability of minority-serving institutions to improve the national status of college completion. As incubators for a large proportion of African American professionals, HBCUs play a critical role in meeting the nation's goals for degree attainment. However, these institutions are susceptible to challenges including recruitment, retention, and pipelining. To ensure sustainability in the contemporary marketplace and produce workforce-ready alumni, HBCUs must innovate and assess to strengthen the educational process. This chapter examines the significance of nontraditional students and contextualizes targeted retention efforts. The author highlights comprehensive pedagogy and practices, including learning communities, first-year programs, and mentorship. The work addresses two goals: (a) to understand conceptual bases on which retention strategies for at-risk students are developed, and (b) to isolate effective practices for improving academic and professional, success outcomes for these students.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the past decade, the public dialogue on higher education has shifted to include discourse on the infrastructure, capacity, and ability of minority-serving institutions (MSI) to change the national status of college retention and graduation. As incubators for a large proportion of African American college graduates, the nation's historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) play a critical role in meeting this challenge. Indeed, these institutions, which include public and private, 2-year and 4-year institutions, medical schools, and community colleges, are a cohort comprised of over 80% ethnic and racial minority students. HBCUs serve more than 300,000 students annually, and more than 60% of these students are the first in their families to attend college (Taylor, 2010).

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## ***Regenerating HBCU Persistence and Retention***

In February 2011, President Barack Obama signed an executive order reauthorizing the White House Initiative on HBCUs. Congress also passed the President's historic Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act, which appropriated more than \$40 billion in Pell grants for eligible students, many of whom are enrolled at HBCUs. The majority of these Pell-eligible students are from low-income minority households; in fact, the White House has projected that nearly 60,000 additional Pell Grant awards will go to African-American students, and 21,000 awards will go to students at HBCUs (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). According to the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES, 2007), HBCUs represent one-fifth of institutions serving low-income students, compared to 1% of PWIs. On average, low-income serving institutions also tend to have fewer full-time equivalent undergraduate students than other institutions. Thus, low-income students and the universities that serve them have a vested interest in student retention and graduation.

### **The State of Postsecondary Enrollment**

In the midst of national economic decline, the gradual closure of the gap between socioeconomic classes and racial groups may be augmented by a renewed examination of the institution of higher education. During the 1999–2000 academic year, 34% of all Latina/Hispanic and 40% of all Black students were enrolled in 4-year colleges, as opposed to 46% of all White students (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). In a 2006 article the *Journal on Blacks in Higher Education* (JBHE) reported that the college graduation rate among Black men has increased by one percentage point every year since 2000. Today, White students still represent 72% of those at all 4-year colleges nationally, whereas Black students represent 11% and Latina/Hispanic students represented 6% of enrollees nationally (Melendez & Melendez, 2010).

### **THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY HBCU**

Historically, acceptance of the value of higher education has been a widely held social norm. The twenty-first century has ushered in social, class, and economic shifts that have proven that assumption to be flawed. Simply put, the rules of engagement for institutions of higher education and the families they served have drastically changed. Education is still an economic imperative; according to a Washington Post report, graduates earned on average nearly double the hourly rate of non-graduates. Yet, the population of college applicants, time to completion, retention and persistence rates have all taken a sharp turn for which institutional infrastructure has been less than prepared. According to the NCES (2014), only 59 percent of students who begin seeking a bachelor's degree at a 4-year institution complete that degree within 6 years. The 6-year graduation rate for Black students at these institutions is more alarming. Between 2001 and 2004, the graduation rate at nearly half of the 37 HBCU's surveyed, was 33% or lower.

First-to-second year retention, a primary concern for most colleges and universities, is undergirded by unique disparities among institutional size and type. While some reports indicate persistence rate of 80 percent or more, others suggest that retention is still relatively low. Student retention among first-time, full-time students who enrolled at 4-year degree-granting institutions in 2012, about 80 percent returned the following fall (in 2013). At public 4-year institutions, the overall retention rate was 80 percent, with a range from 60 percent at the least selective institutions (those with open admissions) to 95 percent at the most selective institutions (those that accept less than 25 percent of applicants). Retention rates for first-time students at private nonprofit 4-year institutions followed a similar pattern: the overall retention

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