

Chapter 9

In Sync: Online Learning in Teacher Education at an HBCU

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the concept of student involvement in distance education, and whether or not it is possible for HBCUs to provide an online learning environment that upholds their traditional ideals of a close and personalized educational experience, particularly in a teacher education program that requires field experiences. Based on responses from 269 student surveys, the key factor appears to be the extent to which instructors recognize that online students are individuals with genuine concerns that deserve similar attention as their classmates on campus. This includes being flexible, assisting students who are not as skilled at setting and/or maintaining a pace, establishing and maintaining lines of communication, providing transparency with course grading, being prepared and organized, making themselves available, providing multiple levels of support and interaction, and dealing effectively with technical problems. Faculty at HBCUs should remember that teaching online is still teaching, and be careful not to remove the human element from the process.

INTRODUCTION

The success of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) is well documented by research acknowledging their supportive and nurturing environment and their commitment to the personal and academic development of their students (Cross & Slater, 2001; Flowers, 2002; Tobolowsky et al, 2005). HBCUs are commonly defined as institutions established prior to the Civil Rights Act with the primary mission of educating African Americans by providing access and equal opportunity. Traditionally, this mission has been fulfilled through an atmosphere of culture, history, and engagement, frequently supported by smaller classes and personalized attention from professors. Over time, HBCUs have become increasingly diverse as students of other races and ethnicities recognize the dedication to student achievement and individual development these institutions have to offer (Cole, 2008). Additionally, as

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more non-traditional students are considering higher education as a choice for a variety of reasons, the demographic continues to change with respect to student age, schooling experiences, life experiences, and extra-curricular commitments. These students are often in search of new ways to create the university experience while managing responsibilities such as jobs, families, and a physical commute to the school's campus.

Distance education has emerged as a practical option for many students pursuing higher education, in both traditional and non-traditional settings. Distance education is also recognized by other titles, including distance learning and online learning. According to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) Commission on Colleges, distance education is defined as “a formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction occurs when student and instructor are not in the same place” (SACS 2000, p. 1). The commission focuses on the *online* perspective of distance education, noting that instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous, and may utilize correspondence study or computer technologies. Other definitions expand the concept of *distance* to include those courses and experiences held at sites other than the traditional college campus classroom (e.g., Cosgrove, 2002; Weinberger, 2000), making this delivery mode more feasible for commuters and for courses with a heavy field experience or clinical component. Greenberg (1998) provides a modern and reasonably comprehensive view of distance education, stating that it is “a planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning” (pg. 36).

As the push for distance education offerings becomes stronger across college campuses nationwide, HBCUs must consider their positioning in the shift – which may be even more critical for these institutions because they tend to have smaller populations and thus greater funding needs for supporting a major change in infrastructure. Moreover, HBCUs must determine how to maintain and increase student enrollment within the parameters of an online educational environment which, at the surface, seems antithetical to their historic mission. In other words, can HBCUs simultaneously employ distance education formats and uphold the ideals of a close and personalized educational experience? Moreover, can distance education be effective in an HBCU teacher education program (TEP), which relies heavily on face-to-face instructional modeling and on-site interactions with P-12 students? To determine an answer to these overarching questions, the following subordinate questions were explored:

- Who is choosing distance education courses in our TEP?
- Why have they chosen the distance education platform?
- Which distance education components have they found most beneficial?
- What do they believe to be barriers to student success with distance education?
- What are some recommendations for making distance education more appealing for a diverse group of aspiring educators?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Student Involvement: Then and Now

Astin's (1984; 1999) widely cited theory of student involvement refers to “the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience” (1999, p. 528).

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