Chapter 1
Improving Minority Student Persistence:
An Institutional Factors Approach

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ABSTRACT

Student persistence in college is a major concern for every institution of higher education. Statistics show that the greatest percentage of attrition occurs after the freshman year. Many studies surrounding this phenomenon tend to focus on pre-college predictors to gain knowledge into mass premature departure during the freshman to sophomore transition. However, very few have looked at institutional factors and how they may explain the problem. Further, most research studies have been done at relatively large and predominantly white institution. This chapter investigates student satisfaction with institutional factors at a small Historically Black College and University (HBCU). Specifically, it looks at how the campus environments may impact freshman students' decisions to return for their sophomore year. While freshman students were dissatisfied with certain aspects of the university they consider to be important, the results precluded good prediction in a practical sense if they influence their decision not to return.

INTRODUCTION

Retention and attrition rates in higher education are at the forefront of discussions among stakeholders such as students, parents, educators, administration and policy makers. Attrition is a matter with detrimental results for the individual, colleges and universities, and the country as a whole. For example, in today's knowledge-driven economy, most jobs require some postsecondary education and/or training. Regardless of the type and size of the tertiary institution, retention and attrition issues are common to all. Therefore, these discussions will continue as strategies are developed to encourage students to persist through to graduation.

Over the past four decades, many studies have been conducted in an attempt to identify possible predictors of degree completion. For the most part, studies have been carried out at mid-western and southwestern institutions in the United States (U.S.) where African-American students are in the minority. In addition, the vast majority of studies reported in literature have focused on the use of pre-college predictors such as high school rank, grade point average (GPA), standardized test scores (e.g., SAT/ACT) and socio-economic profile to determine the probability of student success. While these are important factors in the selection of students, they may not reveal much about what an institution can do to retain students once they have been admitted. The objectives of this chapter are to explore the factors of retention and attrition at a small Historically Black College and University (HBCU) and to elucidate how institutional environment impact freshman to sophomore college departure decisions.

Background

Only about fifty percent of students entering U.S. colleges and universities graduate (Athreya & Eberly, 2015). Degree completion affects not only the individual but the society as a whole. In terms of earnings differentials, on average, persons who complete at least an undergraduate degree make about one million dollars more than high school graduates over their lifetime (Tinto, 2012). On a larger scale, college completion translates to human capital accumulation at the national level. Societal benefits range from informed voting, low unemployment and incarceration rates and improved community health to how well-prepared the next generation will be to enter formal schooling (Baker, 2014; Hout, 2012; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). Institutions with knowledge of the catalysts for premature college departure can begin to make the changes necessary to help increase student retention and simultaneously decrease attrition rates. In the long run, these changes will serve to protect and strengthen the academic and financial integrity of the institution, improve the future viability of the students and their respective communities and increase the

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