Increasing Retention Rates of African American Males through Student-Faculty Interaction

During Study Abroad Excursions

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Chapter One

Introduction

As many predominantly White universities continue to place emphasis on the importance of diversity and multiculturalism, the recruitment and retention of students of color has increased. In 2008, nearly 15% of college students identified themselves as African American (U.S Department of Education, 2010). In 2004, only 39% of African American students, the majority being females, completed their degree-seeking program within a six-year period compared to the significantly higher 62% of their Caucasian counterparts (US Department of Education, 2012). While this statistic is dated, the mission of an institution of higher education from an administrator's perspective is still to prepare all students for personal growth and professional success. As such, the significantly lower retention rates of African American males, a historically marginalized population, remain a pressing issue in higher education.

In spite of the plethora of research regarding academic-based retention programming, there remains an apparent need to investigate the unique needs of African American students and further understand non-academic factors than can positively influence retention rates. For instance, research that focuses on experiential learning also exists, primarily research on living-learning communities as a retention strategy, due to the level of student-faculty interaction. However, researchers often fail to acknowledge the benefits of frequent student-faculty interaction during study abroad excursions. The purpose of this review is to examine student-faculty involvement during faculty-led study abroad as a potential benefit to retention of African American males. A review of literature related to student-faculty involvement, African American male retention and study abroad outcomes will follow to provide a context for the study of this research problem.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

African American males differ from Caucasian males in the level and type of support that they require to achieve academic success and degree completion. Several explanations have been offered regarding the degree and type of support required for African American males. First, Hughes (2010) found that African American males are often underprepared for college. He suggested that this may be due to the large number of first generation students who typically do not have access to the same amount of resources, support, and parental guidance as compared to non-first generation students. Second, African American males have significant identity development challenges due to negative stereotyping by peers and faculty which leads to decreased self-esteem and lack of confidence (Hurtado, 1992; Strayhorn, 2008). During an interview conducted by Hughes (2010), one professor noted that "not everyone is mentally equipped to have so many doors slammed in their faces, and to bounce back with a smile, determination, agency, and willpower. Other folks don't do it" (p. 57). It is difficult for students of color to feel a sense of belonging when faculty members are not diverse and make minimal effort to understand how the college experience of African American males differs from others (Robertson & Mason, 2008). While under-preparation and identity development appear to be insignificant challenges, they still have the potential to greatly impact African American males and ultimately lead to either drop out or persistence (Strayhorn).

African American Male Retention

Retention is primarily defined in two different ways: the rate at which first-year students return after completion of their first year of college or the number of students who complete their degree seeking program (U.S Department of Education, 2012). In this literature review,

retention will be defined as the persistence of students to graduation. The retention of students should be guided by both academic and non-academic initiatives from an institution of higher education with the goal of maintaining engagement throughout a student's college career (Meztger, 2006). Additionally, Hurtado (1992) noted that the campus environment influences the retention of students of color. Hurtado contended that the perception of a hostile campus climate resulted in feelings of alienation whereas the perception of a diverse campus climate resulted in feelings of inclusivity and validation.

The central theme present in research regarding retention has been the importance of student involvement, including, but not limited to, living-learning communities, athletics, student organizations, and student-faculty interactions (Astin, 1984; Hughes, 2010; Robertson & Mason, 2008). In "Student Involvement: A Developmental Theory for Higher Education," a seminal work in the field, Astin (1984) defined student involvement as the amount of time and energy that a student invests in his or her academic experience. Student involvement as reflected in active, participatory learning is beneficial for all students, but is especially important for African American males who are at-risk for graduation. Students who remain involved both academically and socially demonstrated a greater overall satisfaction with their college experience and were more likely to persist (Astin).

In an effort to further explore effective retention methods, Hetzel and Laskey (2011) conducted a survey of one hundred and fifteen at-risk students in the Midwest who enrolled in a one year Conditional Acceptance Program. During the course of the program, students met with a tutor once a week, attended meetings with a group of peers, and enrolled in a variety of skill-building classes. Aside from confirming the positive impact of tutorial services in relation to retention, the results also shed light on the importance of the relationships that students formed

during these sessions. This study revealed that it is unreasonable to focus solely on academic

retention methods and that a more holistic approach should be taken, as students do not learn and

develop in isolation (Hetzel and Laskey).

In examining retention of African American student success in college, many researchers

focus on the challenges of dropouts rather than the successes of high achieving graduates

(Harper, 2008). Harper investigated the level of social and academic involvement in high

achieving African American males at predominately White institutions in the Midwest. Utilizing

a qualitative research design, Harper requested that administrators at six public, research

universities interview high achieving African American males at their institutions. Harper

defined high achieving students as students with a minimum 3.0 GPA who participated in

leadership and educational enrichment experiences and established peer and administrative

relationships. Following face-to-face and telephone interviews, Harper gathered a list of five

factors that nearly all of the thirty-two interviewees mentioned. These factors included

intentional opportunities for engagement in educational activities, support and feedback while in

leadership positions, peer mentoring and establishing a relationship with faculty members.

Similarly, Tinto (1999) highlighted six conditions that support student success: institutional

commitment, high expectations, academic, social and financial support, frequent feedback and

academic and social involvement.

Importance of Student-Faculty Interaction

The level of student involvement based on student-faculty interaction has been the most

emphasized condition in research regarding the retention of African American males (Goode,

2008; Hetzel & Laskey, 2011). According to Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1984),

student-faculty interaction, particularly the student-faculty ratio, was a crucial factor in

persistence. The lower the student -faculty ratio is, the higher the level of learning and personal development will be. Some professors find it difficult to engage students in a meaningful way when large classroom settings are inevitable. In the context of a classroom environment, faculty members can engage students by encouraging them to share personal experiences and analyze those experiences to make meaning of them (Kazmi, 2010). Faculty members must place less emphasis on the rigidity of the course content and center the students at the core of the learning experience to increase student satisfaction (Kazmi).

Guiffrida (2005) conducted a grounded theory study to examine African American student's expectations of faculty. Students reported that they would like to work with faculty who are truly invested in their personal, academic, and professional development and success (Guiffrida, 2005). Most importantly, students noted that they would appreciate a more diverse body of faculty members who challenged themselves to eliminate negative stereotypes and demonstrated positive belief in the student (Guiffrida). African American students were more inclined to draw closer to faculty members who showed a personal interest in them and who treated them as individuals rather than a number (Strayhorn, 2008). Retention outcomes of African American males can be positively influenced by introducing students to upper level administrators of diverse backgrounds as well as balancing the amount of challenge and support administered by faculty members within the university setting (Hughes, 2010; Strayhorn, 2008).

Study Abroad Outcomes

Philosopher John Dewey stressed the value of the experiential learning model, characterized as an engaging, cognitive process driven by conflict and environmental differences stimulating thought and reinforcing previously gained knowledge (Katula & Threnhauser, 2003). Examples of high impact experiential learning activities include internships, service-learning and

study abroad. While internships and service learning have been long-standing, well-developed

programs on a college campus, study abroad programs have become increasingly popular among

institutions of higher education across the country. Participation in study abroad has quadrupled

in the last two decades, with over 260,000 students studying abroad in 2008, compared to a mere

62,300 in 1988 (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Study abroad programs are varied in

nature but typically provide the level of academic and social involvement that Tinto (1999)

deemed essential for student success. The most noteworthy benefits of study abroad have been

described as three fold: acquisition and reinforcement of knowledge, validation of career field,

and development of identity (Young, 2008).

   First, study abroad as a method of experiential learning allows students to apply academic

knowledge hands-on while being immersed in the culture, customs, and language of a foreign

country (Schuh, Jones & Harper, 2011). The informal, cultural context of study abroad

excursions facilitated a different type of learning environment, arguably one that was more

conducive to retaining and making meaning of knowledge instead of memorization (Pagano &

Roselle, 2009). Second, study abroad also has the potential to affirm or validate a student's

career field, specifically for first generation students. As students are able to practice classroom

knowledge such as language acquisition in a less structured setting, they may view their potential

career field differently. Finally, study abroad experiences are beneficial as they encourage

identity development. The outcomes of traditional study abroad excursions were linked to some

aspects of identity development due to the culture shock and feelings of loneliness, guilt and

hopelessness. While some students' experiences abroad may have reinforced negative

stereotypes, most students reported a positive experience and noted a shift in their own

worldview as a result (Wells, 2006). When students were invested in their experiences and

developed an attachment to a culture or a social justice issue, they were more likely to become confident, engaged in the classroom and motivated to succeed academically (Wells).

Overall, the increased popularity of study abroad raises questions regarding the potential relationship between student involvement through study abroad and the retention and persistence of students. Young (2004) performed a quasi-experimental study to evaluate student persistence following participation in study abroad in Rome. Among the 1,237 students selected to participate in the study, 1007 students, referred to as the treatment group, chose to study abroad in Rome for one semester and the remaining 230 students, referred to as the control group, did not. During their stay abroad, students lived on the same campus as faculty, enrolled in courses and participated in excursions in Rome. Using sequential analysis method, Young found that 79% of the treatment group persisted to graduation compared to only 51% of the control group. This study was limited due to the small amount of participants in the control group and the lack of information about the demographic makeup of the group. Nevertheless, the significant gap in percentages noted in the findings suggests that study abroad could be an effective retention strategy.

African Americans and Study Abroad Outcomes

As African American males struggle more so than other student populations in terms of identity development, they may benefit from heritage study abroad excursions. Heritage trips are a way for students of color to explore non-traditional study abroad locations and typically serve as a more welcoming, 'homecoming' experience (Goode, 2008). Non-traditional locations are typically non-English speaking third world countries where very few American students chose to study (Wells, 2006). When African American students participate in a heritage trip, they learn about political, social and religious aspects of their ethnic background, which is often overlooked

and undervalued in the classroom setting. This knowledge may trigger emotions which, when

processed, can lead to affirmation of identity and development of a sense of pride based on

cultural background (Wells).

 African American male students greatly benefit from frequent interaction with faculty

members. Study abroad also offers an opportunity for student-faculty interaction through

multiple avenues including teaching, counseling, and mentoring. Robertson and Mason (2008)

contended that the extent to which faculty members promoted learning experiences such as study

abroad impacted the academic, social, and personal development of African American males.

 Strayhorn (2008) indicated that African American males thrived academically and

experienced increased satisfaction in a college setting when they had a variety of supportive

relationships with students, administrators, and faculty. Frequently, in larger general education

courses, students feel insignificant and spend little to no time one-on-one with their professors.

In contrast, the limited amount of students selected for a study abroad excursion group allows

students to have a shared experience with the faculty members, building the foundation for

positive student-faculty interactions. In a classroom setting, a student may perceive a professor

as an intimidating, authoritative figure and find it difficult to get to know him or her. Frequent

interaction in an intimate, informal setting may increase a student's comfort level with faculty

and vice versa (Goode, 2008).

 During the course of a study abroad excursion, faculty members shifted their primary

concern from the academic welfare of the student to the personal welfare (Goode, 2008). In

Goodes's mixed methods study, eight faculty directors of study abroad at North American

University were interviewed and asked to complete an Intercultural Development Inventory

(IDI). They identified the *dimension of Dean of Students* as the most challenging and valuable

dimension of their role because their connections with students during study abroad were more intimate than those in a campus setting (Goode). While the number of participants in this study was limited, the results indicated that faculty directors of study abroad excursions willingly took on the role of a student affairs professional to get to know their students in a different light, demonstrating interest in their emotional and physical wellbeing and personal and social lives Miller-Perrin and Thompson (2010) reported that students' participation in study abroad serves, for some, as a series of temporary crises that can only be overcome with reflection. While studying abroad, faculty members are largely responsible for the creation of an inclusive environment that encourages personal growth by means of skepticism and faculty facilitated reflection sessions (Woolf, 2006). The reflection period between each crisis instills the desire to begin to explore one's identity by recalling experiences, placing values and belief systems into context, and reevaluating their world view (Pagano & Roselle, 2009). It is also important for faculty to evaluate a written reflective component in study abroad programs as the external processing allows students to make meaningful connections based on their experiences. Reflection sessions allow faculty members to learn about the student's motivation and interests and foster in-depth thinking about a specific mindset or behavior with the objective of producing dramatic personal growth in a student. Ideally, the result of this experience would be increased self-confidence and the creation, recreation or affirmation of the students' identity (Miller-Perrin & Thompson).

Summary

Additional research is warranted to determine if a causal relationship exists between student involvement through faculty interactions, African American male retention and study abroad outcomes. Research, however, has shown that the level of student–faculty involvement

can positively impact the success of African American college students. Study abroad affords

students the opportunity to frequently engage their faculty members in a different capacity.

When faculty are more accessible and are focused on the holistic development of students,

students are more likely to seek to establish rapport with the faculty member and build a mentor-

mentee relationship. The faculty student relationship should be maintained well after the study

abroad experience has concluded so that students continue to feel integrated into the university

community, resulting in increased self-worth and motivation to excel in his or her academic

coursework. As noted by Astin (1984), students are much more likely to continue to be involved

if they feel a sense of belonging in their college environment. As overall student satisfaction

increases, there is potential for retention outcomes to increase dramatically (Strayhorn, 2008).

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