Graduation Rate Gaps of African American College Students at Small Liberal Arts Colleges: Causes and Remedies

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There is a large discrepancy in the graduation rates of African American students attending small liberal arts colleges. An example of this discrepancy can be found with peer institutions Allegheny and Hamilton Colleges. Allegheny College has a graduation rate gap between African American and White students of 37 percent while Hamilton's gap is only one percent. This study explores the gap in African American graduation rates, identifying factors that contribute to it, as well as to student success, including: location, academic and social support programs, and endowment with the intention of providing a groundwork for administrators that can be used to increase African American graduation rates.

The task of retaining students through their graduation is something college administrators struggle with constantly. They have myriads of research available to help guide them towards paths that will theoretically increase their students' graduation rates. This research, however, is mainly helpful to those that are situated in one of the institutional types that are most commonly researched. These types are, without question, the large public universities and the highly selective private colleges. There is a large gap in the research when it comes to institutions that the Carnegie Foundation defines as private, not for profit colleges that are highly residential, more selective, and have no graduate environment. These institutions are presumably rarely investigated because of a combination of factors: the small size of their student population, the fact that there seems to be more to research within larger campus settings, and the fact that they do not represent the majority of students who attend colleges or universities. In fact, the students attending small liberal arts colleges make up "a miniscule 2 percent of total enrollments" (Breneman, 1994, p. 4) in the undergraduate culture.

Although the students attending these institutions make up only a sliver of the total undergraduate population, they are incredibly important nonetheless. The students attending these institutions are no less deserving of a great college experience than those

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who attend larger, sometimes better-known institutions. Not only are these students deserving, but they also pay significantly more money for their education than those students attending state run institutions; in some cases upwards of 400 dollars a week (Brewer, Eide & Ehrenberg, 1998). On top of the monetary reasons these institutions and their students deserve more attention in the research is "attendance at an elite private college significantly increases the probability of attending graduate school, and more specifically, attending graduate school at a major research institution" (Brewer et al., 1998, p. 2). Because these schools are more likely to produce graduate level students at top tier research institutions, it seems logical that there should be research focusing on selective liberal arts colleges. The lack of research geared specifically towards this special class of institutions, however, results in magnificent amounts of influential research that does not fit their institution type. Without policy research conducted on their specific institutional type there is room for the possibility of a sub-par educational experience for these students. It is for this reason that this study focused on small selective liberal arts colleges.

Not only did this study look at the graduation rates at marginally researched liberal arts colleges, but it also specifically looked into the graduation rates of African American students at these institutions. While some of these institutions managed to shine when it came to African American graduation rates, others continually fell behind. While the sheer number of African Americans attending these schools paled in comparison to the White student population, there is no reason they should suffer in their college careers due to the lack of research geared specifically toward identifying programs that increase their chances at graduation. This study examined the graduation rates of African American students at small liberal arts colleges with a goal of identifying factors that can and will increase the graduation rates of those students. The study examined a particular set of institutions that has a wide range of African American graduation rates, and identified what the schools with the lower graduation rates can do to increase the success rates of their African American students.

As Theresa Smith writes, "it will be an important challenge for colleges and universities to help underrepresented minority students bridge these gaps so that they can succeed (1999, p. 12). It is this challenge that this study will address. Using information gathered from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching gathered during the 2003-04 school year, and the National Center for Educational Statistics, a large discrepancy in the graduation rates of African American students attending different small liberal arts colleges was revealed. For example: Allegheny College's graduation rate for all students is 73 percent and for White students the graduation rate is 75 percent. Taken alone these numbers are not terribly depressing; however, the problem arises because for African Americans the graduation rate is only 38 percent. These differences represent a 37 percent gap in the graduation rates between African American students and their White counterparts. Allegheny's peer institution, Hamilton College, has an overall graduation rate of 93 percent, and a White student graduation rate of 89 percent; the graduation rate for African Americans students is 90 percent. Here, the gap between White students and African American students is a positive one percent compared to negative 37 at Allegheny College. This large gap in graduation rates is exactly what this project will address. Whatever Hamilton College is doing to retain and graduate African

American students, it is working, and this study will work to identify these factors so that institutions like Allegheny College can bring the graduation rates of their African American scholars up to or above the graduation rate of the rest of the student population. This problem will be explored through an extensive review of already existing literature regarding student retention and success and the results will be supported by the findings of this study.

Problem Statement

As seen in the introduction, although the Carnegie Institute defines many school as being equivalent to one another, there exists a large gap between the graduation rates of African American students and White students. This gap; however, does not exist at other equivalent institutions. The problem this paper investigated is why the African American graduation rates at some institutions lag so far behind the African American graduation rates of other equivalent institutions. Moving beyond this problem, this study will seek to reveal policies and programs that lagging schools can use to remedy their problems.

Research Questions

What causes institutions with high African American graduation rates to achieve those levels? What can institutions with low African American graduation rates do to increase their graduation rates? Within these two questions lie more specific questions that seek positive correlations between the African American graduation rate of the institution and factors such as: the overall student population, the African American student population, the White student population, the graduation rates of the institution for African American students and White students, the distance from a major metropolitan area, the existence of peer mentoring programs, and the existence of academic support programs.

Literature Review

Upon examining higher education literature, it quickly becomes apparent that underrepresented students often do not succeed at attaining a college education (Kezar & Eckel, 2007). In fact, although African American enrollment in college has risen 42.7 percent between 1993 and 2003, 30.1 percent of all African American students drop out of college before they attain a degree (Kezar & Eckel, 2007). Contrast this percentage to that of White students who persist and attain a degree 58 percent of the time (Kezar & Eckel, 2007). While over half of all White students succeed in getting their bachelor's degrees, less than half of all African American students can say the same. These figures clearly show a problem with the current state of affairs regarding African American student success. Further supporting the figures of Kezar and Eckel (2007), Vincent Tinto (1993) uses research conducted by Loo and Rolison and Attinasi to assert, "students of color, specially admitted or not, face particularly severe problems in gaining access to the mainstream of social life in largely white institutions" (p. 74). As seen in the problem

statement, graduation rates at the small liberal arts colleges within this study run the gamut from above, to far below the average graduation rates set out by Kezar and Eckel (2007).

Identifying programs and factors contributing to the successful retention and graduation of college students leads to a number of resources. In terms of overall student retention, the most prominent source was produced by Vincent Tinto (1993). From Tinto's work, I intend to draw some basic principles known to affect student attrition and graduation. These basic principles will serve as a jumping-off point for this study as they do not specifically address the population of students this study investigates. Some of the principles affecting student attrition found by Tinto include faculty involvement, a strong sense of community within the campus, and the campus's ability to assimilate the student into the campus culture. Tinto (1993) has identified the first years of students' college experiences as the most crucial in determining their success at the institution. In a succinct paraphrase of Tinto's main points, Guiffrida (2006) comments that, "according to Tinto, the more that students are academically and/or socially integrated into the university, the greater their commitment to completing their degrees" (p. 452).

While giving an address at Staffordshire University in Amsterdam about student retention and graduation, Tinto argues that students need strong support structures around them. He argues that especially in their first year of college, students are in need of specialized support. This support can come in the forms of "summer bridge programs, mentor programs, and student clubs" (Tinto, 2003, p. 1). Along with this structured type of support, Tinto claims that support can be found in the forms of student clubs or through the day-to-day activities of the campus. One way of achieving this day-to-day support is to foster strong relationships between faculty, staff, and students (Tinto, 1993). Tinto writes, "whatever its form, support needs to be readily available and connected to other parts of student collegiate experience, not separated from it" (Tinto, 2003, p. 1). In short, Tinto's theory calls for students to be integrated into the campus community and states that if they are fully integrated, they will persist and graduate at higher levels.

Tinto (1993) calls for several specific forms of intervention that he argues will enhance a student's chances at graduation. Some recommended interventions are pre-entry assessment programs that identify specific student needs; transition assistance programs geared toward helping students cope with changes in social, academic, and residential difficulties; and maintaining early contact in order to build community ties amongst new college students. With early contact and community-building in mind, Tinto (1993) warns against using faculty and staff in this role. He claims that students are able to learn best from other students who have already inserted themselves successfully into the campus community (1993).

Once students have been pre-screened for their strengths and weaknesses, are linked with those who have already become acclimated to the campus, and have begun managing the transition successfully, Tinto (1993) provides other recommendations for ensuring student success. The first of these is maintaining academic involvement, which can be fostered through specialized courses that "build learning and community membership" (Tinto, 1993, p. 169). Tinto (1993) also urges colleges to maintain monitoring and early warning policies. Linked to early warning mechanisms is the importance of counseling and advising (Tinto, 1993) on student success.

While the bulk of Tinto's theory is geared toward majority college students, Tinto does offer brief recommendations regarding the increase of retention rates for students of color (1993). Because "students of color generally are less likely than white students to see themselves as being integrated within the mainstream of life in largely white colleges" (Tinto, 1993, p. 75), Tinto explores some specific interventions he believes will increase the retention of students of color. Tinto (1993) recognizes that "students of color are, on the average, more likely to be academically at-risk and to come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds than are white students generally" (p. 185). In light of these two assertions, Tinto (1993) argues that the main strategy campuses can employ to ensure their programs for students of color succeed is to "integrate those programs within the mainstream of the institution's academic, social, and administrative life" (p. 184). With regards to students of color, Tinto calls for an increased focus on advising and counseling that are specifically designed for these students. Tinto (1993) does not expand upon this need too deeply but does encourage campuses to hire staff members who are of the same ethnicity as the targeted students. Tinto (1993) also recommends building personal and social support structures and supportive student communities for students of color. However, Tinto (1993) also warns of "the dangers of excessive segmentation of institutional life that those programs may engender" (p. 186). Because of these "dangers," Tinto downplays their effectiveness in making students a viable member of the campus community (1993).

Tinto (1993) concludes that the most important way for an institution to keep students enrolled and on their path to graduation is for the institution to be fully committed to ensuring its students are assimilated into the college's culture. When speaking of the importance of institutional commitment, Tinto (1993) writes, "institutional commitment is the commitment on the part of each and every member of the institution for the welfare, the social and intellectual growth, of all members of the institution" (p. 212). Tinto (1993) cites a direct relationship between an institution's ability to retain students and its ability to "reach out and make contact with students and integrate them into the social and intellectual fabric of institutional life" (p. 204). If institutions make a concerted effort to engage and assimilate their students into the campus community, students will more likely be retained (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto's theory calls on students to be tied directly into the campus community and is supported by Jacobs and Archie (2008). In their paper, they find that a "sense of community was shown to be a positive predictor of student persistence in two diverse settings, indicating that sense of community is an important factor in student persistence research" (p. 284). These findings help to show how support programs geared toward familiarizing students to a campus can be incredibly helpful because they allow students to gain a full picture of what happens on a college campus.

Muraskin and Lee (2004) follow and support the theoretical footsteps of Tinto in a Pell Institute study where they examine student retention and graduation. They found that institutions with high graduation rates shared many characteristics. Beyond characteristics such as freshman orientation programs, personalized academic planning, merit-based financial aid for high achieving students, and virtually unchangeable institutional characteristics, Muraskin and Lee (2004) found that institutions fare better in terms of graduation rates if they maintain a faculty who knows the students personally

and are focused strongly on teaching. Muraskin and Lee (2004) also found that having small class sizes, a developmental education program, and a residential campus contributed to increased student graduation rates. The final factor that Muraskin and Lee (2004) found to favorably affect graduation rates was having an institution and administration that actively and explicitly works to increase student retention (Muraskin & Lee, 2004). Muraskin and Lee (2004) are supporting Tinto's (1993) theory by arguing in favor of leading students toward more campus engagement and integration. Muraskin and Lee (2004) are, in turn, supported by Demaris and Kritsonis (2008), who argue that it is incredibly important for students to be able to integrate and adapt to the campus culture because it helps with student retention.

Between Muraskin and Lee (2004), Demaris and Kritsonis (2008), and Jacobs and Archie (2008), there is strong support for Tinto's (1993) theory of student retention. These researchers determined that everything from student-oriented programs to institutional characteristics could affect student retention and graduation. However, upon further research, understanding the differences in cultures and the importance of a student's ability to have his or her culture supported by the campus climate also proves to be imperative to student success.

Although Tinto's theory of student retention is often revered within the field of higher education, Tierney (1999) offers one problem with it. In his study, Tierney argues that Tinto fails to account for the importance of cultural integrity within the African American community (p. 82). Tierney argues that Tinto's retention model calls for minority students to undergo "cultural suicide" (Tierney, 1999, p. 82). By cultural suicide, Tierney means that students are required to break from their own cultural norms and fully accept the norms of the campus they are attending. Tierney considers Tinto's model a false dichotomy for minority students that calls on students to either leave behind their cultural identities and fully assimilate into the college's culture or, if they fail to do so, fail at college (1999).

The idea that African American students must undergo a certain "cultural suicide" in order to succeed in college is something Tierney disagrees with and instead prefers to support the idea that "when minority college students are able to affirm their own cultural identities, their chances for graduation increase" (p. 84). Instead of calling on African American students to wash away their cultural identities, Tierney argues that institutions ought to find ways to allow these students to affirm their identities. This affirmation, if done in accordance with strong academic and social learning goals, will help offer African American students a better opportunity to succeed at college (Tierney, 1999). After explaining the flaws of Tinto's (1993) theory of retention, Tierney argues his own revised strategy.

Tierney's theory is an "expanded notion of what Tinto has called academic and social integration" (p. 89). His expansion of Tinto's theory calls for a model where African American students do not divorce themselves from their culture; instead, they will be able to embrace their identities. Tierney calls for a break from simple assimilation in favor of a system of "contestation and multiple interpretations" (p. 89). This new system will not only benefit the African American students who are no longer being forced to change or fail, but it will also help the institutions as a whole (Tierney, 1999). By allowing African American students the opportunity to affirm their cultural identities,

"campuses themselves will become more democratic spheres of educational opportunity" (p. 89). Without this change from Tinto's (1993) model, Tierney believes campuses will continue to struggle with the same retention and graduation rate problems of the past (1999).

Tierney's assertion is supported by Kezar and Eckel (2007), who found that campuses should mold their cultures to fit those of students of color. If these changes are made, a campus could become a place where students of color are able to affirm who they are (Tierney, 1999) instead of committing cultural suicide, thereby allowing them a greater chance of success (2007). If this is done, Kezar and Eckel believe students of color will be more likely to succeed (2007). Tierney's (1999) suggestion also offers a way for campuses to move forward from the problems of a homogeneous student body, which is seen in Muraskin and Lee's (2004) study. Campuses must become places where multiple cultures are fostered instead of simply assimilated in order to avoid "cultural suicide" (Tierney, 1999).

Guiffrida (2006) also expands upon Tinto's theory on student departure much like Tierney. In short, he argues, "students can become comfortable in the college environment without abandoning supportive relationships at home or rejecting the values and norms of their home communities" (p. 457). Guiffrida, however, takes Tierney's theory of maintaining one's culture to the next level by revealing that "Tinto's interpretation excludes the well-documented benefits of connecting with people outside the university system who share the student's cultural heritage" (p. 485). He then argues that students should embrace the cultural connections they have at home as well as in the community and on campus. His argument also showcases the importance of student organizations that are geared toward African American students. Whether they are simply in place to celebrate one's culture or to try to enact specific social change, Guiffrida argues that student organizations can play a positive role in African American student retention and graduation (2006). Guiffrida's adaptation of Tinto's theory is aligned closely with that of Tierney's: They both cite that Tinto's theory calls for students to become fully integrated into the campus community, and this integration could prove to be more detrimental than beneficial for students of color.

Both Tierney and Guiffrida's critiques of Tinto's retention model are supported by Rodgers and Summers, who argue in favor of a highly included African American student community (2008). They write that increasing a student's ethnic identity can have myriad positive outcomes. This consideration mirrors the theories of both Tierney and Guiffrida because it calls for African American students not to be cut off from their cultural identities as Tinto suggests; instead, those identities should be affirmed. Further support for the necessity of colleges and universities to create an integrated environment for African American students is presented by Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, and Kuh (2008). Kinzie et al. found that first-year students who scored higher levels of engagement with the campus community were more likely to return for their second year (p. 26). Kinzie et al.'s findings suggest that students from underrepresented backgrounds should be the focus of campus administrators. This focus should seek to identify and implement early intervention strategies geared toward alleviating students' problems before they arise (2008).

More support for social programs geared toward underrepresented students and their success is found in Nagasawa and Wong's (1999) paper. They write, "ethnic subcultures that focus on academic effort and 'success' in college are more likely to facilitate integration of their members into the college social and academic systems (and thereby enhance survival in college)" (p. 82). This integration helps students feel supported throughout their transition into college. All in all, Nagasawa and Wong (1999) write, "for minority students then, ethnic social networks are likely to maximize success in college" (p. 83). Nagasawa and Wong (1999) also briefly consider the importance of critical mass. Critical mass is considered to be "the notion of what is a 'sufficiently large' number of minority students to form a viable community" (p. 82).

Nagasawa and Wong (1999) also consider the issue of critical mass. They believe that critical mass is important to the success of minority students on campus as it is necessary to foster the formation of the social networks they argue are important. They contend that this critical mass must be made up of students "of their own ethnic group" (p. 86). Nagasawa and Wong argue that critical mass functions to "reduce not only the physical and social size of the campus but also isolation on campus" (p. 86), thereby helping with the success of minority students. Their argument in favor of critical mass, however, is not fully supported by the findings of this study. In fact, Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Hagerdorn (1999) write:

> [M]erely increasing the number of minorities on campus without the benefit of a well thought out strategy is inherently dangerous; research on school desegregation shows that discrimination and racial tensions climb as the proportion of minorities to whites decreases (p. 154).

When Nagasawa and Wong's (1999) argument is examined without considering other research, it becomes clear that it fails to take into account the importance of the theories put forth by Tierney and Guiffrida. Simply arguing in favor of a large number of African American students on campus does nothing to allow them to affirm their own cultural identities, especially if, as Tinto's theory suggests, those students are called upon to undergo "cultural suicide" (Tierney, 1999). Cabrera et al.'s (1999) study actually found that "disengagement with family, friends, and past communities is not a precondition for the successful adjustment to college; the reverse appears to be more truthful" (p. 152).

Once the case has been made that a) minority students do not need to divorce themselves from their culture and completely adopt the culture of the institution they are attending (Guiffrida, 2006; Tierney, 1999,), b) critical mass may not play the end-all role in minority student success (Cabrera et al., 1999), and c) there is a need for specific support programs designed to aid in student retention and success (Nagasawa and Wong, 1999), the need emerges to identify those specific support programs that can aid in increasing student retention. Support programs geared toward helping African American students succeed in college offer a way for students to remain connected (Cabrera et al., 1999).

Tinto (1993), Muraskin et al. (2004), and Kinzie et al (2008) are not the only scholars to support the idea that freshman orientation programs help African American students become more engaged in the campus community. A study conducted by Wilkie

and Kuckuck (1989) also shows "that high-risk college freshmen (N=74) that successfully completed a freshman orientation course were less likely to drop out and achieved higher grade point averages over a three-year period than students not in an orientation course" (p. 1). Although Wilkie and Kuckuck do not focus specifically on African American students, they do focus on high-risk students. The comparison between African American students and high-risk students is not difficult to make since African Americans are often categorized as a high-risk population in the college community (Gill, 1992). Smith (1999) also lends her voice to that of Gill's in terms of categorizing African American students as an at-risk (or high-risk) population. She explains that underrepresented students (including African American students) tend to do less well in the college setting than their white counterparts (Smith, 1999). Smith's findings support the categorization of African American students as a high-risk population, dispelling any concerns over the validity of Wilkie and Kuckuck's (1989) arguments in this study.

Peer mentoring programs have also been shown to have a positive effect on the success of students at the college level. Studies completed by Terrion and Leonard (2007) and Brawer (1996) help to define peer-mentoring programs and show the ways they can contribute to student success. Terrion and Leonard define peer mentoring as a program "in which qualified students provide guidance and support to vulnerable students to enable them to navigate through their education" (p. 149). Brawer's (1996) study also helps to support peer mentoring programs and the assertion that they can influence student retention. Brawer reports that Saint Clair County Community College's peer mentoring program proved effective in increasing the retention rates of the targeted population (1996). Brawer's results offer strong support for my inclusion of peer mentoring support programs in this study.

Academic support programs also play a major role in student success as supported by Harter (2000). Harter examines the Project Assuring Student Success program and its beneficial effect on the student population at Mercy College of Northwest Ohio. Harter (2000) describes how the program developed a center to focus on "skills development programs" (p. 3), a faculty training seminar, and a center offering remedial classes in reading, math, and writing skills (2000). Harter (2000) reports that as a result of the program's implementation, the institution's retention rate rose from 82 to 89 percent.

Method

The methodology used in this study began with selecting a group of institutions using the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's definitions. An extensive literature review was conducted in order to evaluate different retention strategies and their effectiveness on African American students. The literature review also identified what academic and co-curricular programs the study should focus on when looking at African American graduation rates. After identifying these programs and placing them into categories based on quality, a statistical analysis was conducted in order to find the direct correlations between identified factors.

Sample

The institutions investigated within this project were identified using classifications from The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching[1]. By selecting the desired variables, the Carnegie Foundation produced a list of institutions fitting the requested prerequisites. The variables were chosen based upon the categorization of one of the focus institutions. Every variable that the Carnegie Foundation attributed to the single chosen institution was selected for the query. This particular institution was chosen as it represents a small liberal arts college known to the author. The resulting list included 42 institutions that matched every trait of the single institution, of which became this study's focus. Once the list of focus schools was identified, each school was evaluated to determine the gap between the African American and white graduation rates. The study's focus schools were then narrowed down to the institutions with the largest gaps falling between 31 and 10 percent and the institutions with the smallest gaps ranging from a positive twelve percent gap to negative six percent. There are a total of 21 schools identified with either high or low gaps with the breakdown being twelve high gap and nine low gap institutions. The chosen criteria met by all focus schools are: four-year or above and private not-for-profit, arts and science focus with no graduate coexistence, exclusively undergraduate four-year, full-time four-year with a more selective admissions policy, low transfer in-rate, small four-year (1,000 – 2,999 students), highly residential, and baccalaureate College – Arts and Sciences.

Units of Institutional Measurement

The focus institutions were compared using the following factors that were identified based upon the literature as factors that could contribute to retention and graduation rates, as well as on the overall necessity of gaining the information: overall student population, African American student population, white student population, overall graduation rate, African American graduation rate, White student graduation rate, distance from a major metropolitan area, and the types and quality of support programs offered.

The data pertaining to graduation rates, student demographics, and population numbers was obtained from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), a division of the U.S. Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics[2]. The samples used were gathered by the government using data from the 2006 academic year.

Data referencing the distance institutions are located from major metropolitan areas was obtained using Google Maps[3]. For the purpose of this study, major metropolitan area can be defined as the nearest city with a population over 95,000 residents as defined by the United States Census Bureau, and based off the 2000 US census. The nearest metropolitan areas were located, and driving directions were then

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[1] Available at http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/

[2] Available at *http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/*

[3] Available at http://maps.google.com/maps?client=firefox-a&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&hl=en&channel=s&tab=wl&q=

obtained using Google Maps. After calculating the approximate distance from the institution, the nearest metropolitan area was added to the data.

The data pertaining to student support programs and services was obtained from each institution's website. Institutions were evaluated based on their having or not having the following resources: a staffed multicultural center, a pre-freshman orientation for incoming African American students, a peer mentoring system lasting at least through the freshman year, more than one student organization focusing on African American culture, and academic programs or concentrations centered on African American studies. Institutions were then coded using these indicators. In order for the data to represent the opportunities of all African American students attending the institutions, federal and state funded programs were *not* included in the data. These state and federal programs include but are not limited to TRiO[4] and POSSE[5]. While both programs aim to help underrepresented students and it would seem this purpose would make them ideal for this study, they do not necessarily help every underrepresented student on campus. Because both programs have only a limited number of slots available, they cannot serve the entire population, and therefore were not included in the study. Instead, the only programs counted in this study were programs available to every underrepresented student on campus.

Institutions with at least four of the five factors were assigned as a level one institution. Institutions with none of these factors, or institutions that may have only had one or two were assigned as a level three institution. Level two institutions were designated as such because they did not have enough programs to be considered a level one, but they did have significantly more than a level three institution.

Limitations

The main limitation this study faces is the lack of large numbers of students for the sample sizes. Since this study is examining African American students at small liberal arts colleges, the numbers of students are limited. Not only are there few students within this institutional type, but as they are all predominantly White institutions, the numbers of African American students are low. However, this being said, there still existed statistically relevant correlations, even with the limited numbers of students.

Another possible limitation of this study was the availability of program data. The data regarding the type and number of student-oriented programs was gathered using the institutions' websites. It is possible that some of the institutions had programs that were not on their websites. However, as seen in Kezar and Eckel (2007), in order for an institution to best move toward becoming a place where all students can fit their cultural selves the entire institution must be behind the change. This raises the question, how much institutional buy-in can there be if, in our digital age, key underrepresented support programs and services are not represented on the institution's website? Given the

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[4] The Federal TRiO Programs are educational opportunity outreach programs designed to motivate and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Available at
http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html
[5] The Posse Foundation identifies, recruits and trains student leaders from public high schools to form multicultural teams called "Posses." Available at http://www.possefoundation.org/main/learn/index.cfm

research on the matter, an institution's website was taken as a reasonable representation of an institution's actual resources; if a program was not accessible via the website it was concluded not to exist. While this may not necessarily be the case, this study assumed it was for the purpose of data collection.

Statistical Interpretation of the Data

The statistical analysis was performed using basic statistical methods. In this study, the dependent variable is always African American graduation rate, while the independent variables include the distance the campus is from a major metropolitan area, overall graduation rate, total number of students including overall, African American and White. Other independent variables considered were the type and quality of programs offered, as well as the White student graduation rate. In order to test the various hypotheses, the independent variables change. Using SPSS statistical software, the variables were manipulated in order to find possible correlations. Specifically, Spearman bivariate correlations were sought. The Spearman method was chosen over Pearson because it is not a random sampling of schools involved in the study but instead was decided based upon institution type.

Table 1

Focus Institutions

School	Distance From Major Metropolitan Area	Overall Number of Students	Overall Graduation Rate	African American Graduation Rate	White Graduation Rate	Number of students: African American	Number of students: White
Wellesley College	17 Miles Boston, MA	2331	94%	96%	91%	133 5.7%	1044 44.8
Lafayette College	19 Miles Allentown, PA	2346	92%	95%	91%	113 4.8%	1945 82.9
Swarthmore College	20 Miles Philadelphia, PA	1479	96%	94%	92%	102 6.9%	700 47.3
Amherst College	26 Miles - Springfield, MA	1612	96%	93%	96%	151 9.4%	724 44.9%
Claremont McKenna College	35 Miles – Los Angeles, CA	1140	84%	90%	89%	50 4.4%	641 56.3%
Grinnell College	54 Miles – Des Moines, IA	1577	92%	90%	89%	66 4.2%	1056 67%
Hamilton College	48 Miles – Syracuse, NY	1809	93%	90%	89%	69 3.8%	1322 73.1%
Pomona College	33 Miles Los Angeles, CA	1533	100%	90%	96%	100 6.5%	812 53%
Wheaton College	40 Miles Boston, MA	1569	86%	87%	75%	52 3.3%	1236 78.8%
Allegheny College	93 Miles – Pittsburgh, PA	2053	73%	38%	75%	31 1.5%	1909 93%
College of Wooster	60 Miles – Cleveland, OH	1846	88%	52%	79%	68 3.7%	1384 75%
Denison University	36 Miles – Columbus, OH	2328	90%	52%	81%	121 5.2%	1943 83.5%
Beloit College	75 Miles – Milwaukee, WI	1385	85%	61%	74%	36 2.6%	1163 83.6
Carleton College	44 Miles – Minneapolis, MN	1936	97%	63%	89%	108 5.6%	1413 73%
DePauw University	49 Miles – Indianapolis, IN	2397	92%	64%	80%	132 5.5%	2061 86%
Davidson College	23 Miles – Charlotte, NC	1683	95%	71%	88%	99 5.9%	1312 78%
Colby College	186 Miles – Boston, MA	1871	94%	76%	91%	33 1.8%	1553 83%
Union College	20 Miles – Albany, NY	2252	91%	77%	85%	58 2.6%	1851 82.2%
Haverford College	12 Miles – Philadelphia, PA	1168	98%	80%	89%	74 6.4%	809 69.3%

Results

The focus institutions used in this study, along with their distance from a major city, overall graduation rates, African American graduation rates, White graduation rates, overall number of students, number of White students, and the number of African American students as obtained through The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Google Maps, and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System are represented in Table 1. Using the results found in this table this study used the Spearman statistical technique in order to find correlations between the different factors found in Table 1.[6]

There is a moderately strong negative correlation (ρ=-.588, p <.01) between African American graduation rates and the distance the institution is located from major cities. It also shows the lack of a significant correlation between the number of African American students and their graduation rates at any alpha level below .05.

There is a strong positive correlation (ρ=.726, p<.01) between the graduation rates of White students and the graduation rates of African American students. It also shows that there is a week negative correlation (ρ=-.488, p<.05) between the graduation rates of African American students and the number of White students.

There is a moderate negative correlation (ρ=-.528, p<.05) between the graduation rate of African American students and the types of programs the schools have available as measured by the amount of outreach the programs provide. The correlations found based off the information regarding the focus institutions' program types, which were ranked on a scale from one to three, where one represents an institution with a high level of quality outreach programs and three represents an institution lacking in outreach programs.

There exists a weak negative correlation (ρ=-.451, p<.05) between the graduation rate of African American students and academic programs in African/Africana Studies. It also shows a moderate negative correlation (ρ=-.516, p<.05) between the graduation rate of African American students and the institutions having a peer mentoring program geared specifically towards African American scholars. The other factors within the program group that were analyzed and showed no significant correlations were: whether or not there was an: orientation program, more than one student organization, or a staffed multi-cultural center. The staffed or non-staffed distinction was made as it is difficult to imagine a non-staffed multi-cultural center filling the same need as a center with a staff.

There is also a moderate positive correlation (ρ=.687, p<.01) between the size of an institutions endowment and the graduation rate of African American students. It shows another moderate correlation (ρ=-.526, p<.05) between the types of programs a school offers specifically for African American students and the size of the institutions endowment.

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[6] Any time a correlation is referred to it was found using SPSS statistical software with the Spearman statistical technique.

Discussion

Although it may seem that some of the factors influencing African American graduation rates are unchangeable, like the size of an institution's endowment or its location, this study has found factors that the literature suggests are stronger than the concrete situation of an institution. These factors are the key to overcoming the hurdle some institutions face when it comes to their African American graduation rates. Take for example, the correlation between program types and African American graduation rates. Even without nearby major metropolitan areas, schools are able to overcome the lack of cultural activities allowing African American students to "affirm their own cultural identities" so that "their chances for graduation increase" (Tierney, 1999, p. 84). This can be accomplished by introducing and supporting strong social and academic programs geared towards the African American community (Cabrerra et al., 1999; Guiffrida, 2006; Tierney, 1999). Most specifically, peer mentoring and academic programs were found to have the strongest correlation with African American graduation rates when examined one at a time. They are also perfect examples of a social and an academic way for African American students to maintain close ties with their culture, as this is an invaluable factor in determining the success rates of these students (Guiffrida, 2006; Tierney, 1999).

Although this study found a significant correlation between African American graduation rates and the distance an institution is located from a major city, there are institutions, like Grinnell College ranking seventh from the bottom in terms of its distance from a major city, who manage to make up for their distance from a major city with their superior on-campus resources.

Recommendations

The results of this study can and should be used by administrators in order to increase the graduation rates of African Americans at their institutions. The first recommendation is to implement a peer mentoring and orientation program for incoming African American students. This will allow students the ability to form bonds with student mentors as well as gain a better understanding of the campus before the rigors of the academic year begin. Secondly, institutions should strive to incorporate academic programs geared toward African American students into their curriculum. These programs will help students affirm their cultural identities (Tierney, 1999) in an academic way. Examples of these academic fields of study include Black Studies and Africana Studies programs. The creation of a multicultural center is a third important recommendation. This center should serve as the center of cultural, academic, and social change on campus and will allow students a recognized outlet for their activities. The final recommendation of this study rests less on the creation of programs and more on the importance of having a caring and thoughtful staff on campus. Campuses should make sure they have a dedicated staff that is devoted to working towards making the campus a place where African American students do not feel the need to commit "cultural suicide" (Tierney, 1999). The following is a concise list of the above recommendations that will serve institutions in providing a campus community that serves to increase the graduation rates of African American students: implement a peer mentoring and orientation program

for incoming African American students, create academic programs geared toward African American students (e.g., Black studies, Africana studies, etc.), create a multicultural center as a location able to act as the center of cultural and activist events on campus, and hire a dedicated staff whose personal goals align with the goal of increasing the graduation rates of African American students.

Future Research

This study could become more comprehensive in a number of ways. One of the most important advances this study could undergo would be a more in-depth investigation into the academic and social programs the schools offer to their African American population. This could include, but is not limited to, the creation and distribution of a survey to students and program staff at the institutions in order to get a firsthand account of the quality of the programs. It would also be beneficial to conduct exit surveys at the focus institutions on both graduating and departing students in order to gauge their complete experience with the campus environment. Another factor that could be helpful in this study would be to explore a possible correlation between African American graduation rates and the number of minority faculty on campus. Further exploration into the area of endowments would also be an interesting and possibly important addition to this study.

Conclusion

The gaps in graduation rates between African American and White students shown in this research represent a significant problem administrators face when trying to make their campuses viable educational communities for all of their students. As the literature reveals, there are many policies and programs that campuses can enact to enhance the chances of their students graduating. More specifically, the data collected shows clear gaps in the graduation rates of White and African American students at some institutions and no gaps at others. By examining correlations between African American graduation rates and different institutional factors this study identified many areas where institutions are able to change their policies and services offered in an attempt to increase the graduation rates of their African American students. By developing orientation programs with peer mentors, adding academic programs such as Black studies, and by incorporating a staffed multicultural center into the campus community, small private liberal arts colleges with low African American graduation rates can shrink those gaps and move toward a more equitable educational system. Without these changes, the gaps will remain, and countless African American students will not only be missing out on the same educational experience as White students, but more importantly will be missing out on a quality college education. This inequity is something the educational community and, more specifically, college administrators must not allow.

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