

A Review of African American Graduate College Choice

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Choosing to obtain a 4-year undergraduate degree is often noted as the gateway that leads to new and unforeseen opportunities. However, it has not always been a common initiative that a college education should be available to anyone who wanted it. As in the 1960s, college was limited for people of color, and prior to the 1940s, it was reserved for the elite and White males (Kinzie et al., 2004). Nonetheless, given America's change in ideology on who should and can attend college and an increasing minority population—both in higher education and nationwide—a focus on issues of access and equity in higher education has emerged, and researchers have concentrated on exploring the college enrollment decisions of students of color (Bergerson, 2009).

Substantial research exists that examines the undergraduate college choice process (e.g., Perna, 2006); additionally, there has been a growing body of research that investigates the influence of race/ethnicity on 4-year attendance (e.g., Carter, 2001). However, little research has been dedicated to investigating the graduate and professional school choice process of college graduates, and more specifically, Black collegians. Furthermore, highlighting the themes that enhance the likelihood of Black students attending graduate/professional school would assist in the overall progression of fulfilling the educational goals and aspirations of a historically underrepresented population in higher education, thereby increasing the nation's pool of Black medical doctors, attorneys, college professors, and other educated workers (Carter, 2001; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify factors (e.g., academic achievement, background characteristics, undergraduate institutional characteristics) that contribute to graduate college choice.

Drawing on Perna's (2006) proposed college choice model, this study explores and identifies the characteristics (e.g., academic achievement, financial aid, background characteristics, higher education context, ect.) that may influence Black students' decisions to enroll in graduate education, and investigates if attending a historically Black college or university (HBCU) as an undergraduate student influences enrollment choice decisions. Inasmuch, this study seeks to answer the following research questions (RQ):

RQ 1: How does attending a historically Black college or university influence Black students' likelihood to enroll into graduate education?

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RQ 2: How does academic achievement, financial aid (i.e., Pell Grant), background characteristic (e.g., age, gender), social and cultural capital (i.e., parental educational level), undergraduate major, and institutional characteristics impact Black, baccalaureate degree earners' decisions to enroll in graduate education? How do these factors vary across gender?

Method

The Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study 1993/2003 (B&B: 93/03) was used as the dataset (Wine, Cominole, Wheless, Dudley, & Franklin, 2005). The B&B: 93/03, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, followed a cohort of students who earned 4-year degrees during the 1992-93 academic year. The B&B: 93/03 study consists of data from students who were first interviewed as part of the 1993 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, which focused on how students and their families financed their postsecondary education. The students were interviewed and undergraduate transcripts were collected during the first B&B: 93/03 follow-up study in 1994 (Wine et al., 2005). Three years later, in 1997, a second follow-up was conducted, and the final follow-up took place in 2003 (Wine et al., 2005). Approximately 8,970 students responded to the B&B: 93/03 (Wine et al., 2005). However, this study includes only those students who identified as Black, non-Hispanic, of which, about six percent or 560 students identified as such.

Binary logistic regression was used to analyze the data; logistic regression is a type of regression analysis used when the dependent variable is categorical. The logistic regression model estimates the odds-ratio of an outcome occurring (e.g., enrollment into graduate school) relative to the baseline category (e.g., never enrolled in graduate school).

Results

RQ 1 examined the role attendance at an HBCU has on students' decisions to matriculate into a graduate degree program before and after controlling for the remaining college choice independent variables. The results of RQ 1 yielded no significant difference. Findings suggest that students who attended an HBCU as an undergraduate, are just as likely or unlikely, to pursue a graduate degree as students from a non-HBCU, with or without controlling for variables such as GPA, financial aid, gender, age, parental support, parental education level, academic discipline, and institutional control (i.e., private, public). Also analyzed by logistic regression, the results of RQ 2 indicated that the likelihood of graduate school enrollment for Black students was positively related to GPA, Pell Grant awards, and parental education. In addition, the likelihood of Black males enrolling in graduate school was positively related to GPA at a significant level, whereas, the likelihood of graduate school enrollment for Black females was positively related to parental education and GPA at significant levels.

Discussion

What motivates graduate college choice is an emerging topic of interest to educational researchers who seek to comprehend the determinants of educational attainment. It also concerns institutional officials who look to improve recruitment strategies, enrollment models and admission policies, as well as policy makers who seek to improve the nation's access to higher education. The implementation of effective educational policy—whether at the institutional level to improve recruitment, or at the state and national levels to equalize educational opportunity—will depend on varied research explorations to help all students matriculate (Bergerson, 2009).

This study's investigation of the propensity of Black students to pursue graduate education was influenced by three variables: academic achievement, financial aid (i.e., Pell Grant), and cultural capital (i.e., parental education level). Perhaps the most apparent policy implication that can be derived from this study is sustaining the need-based Pell Grant award, as research notes that federal financial assistance such as this greatly increases minority higher education enrollment (Kinzie et al., 2004; Roebuck & Murty, 1993).

Additionally, the importance of HBCU undergraduate attendance to such issues as social integration, academic achievement, and persistence to degree has been established in prior studies (Allen, 1992; Lundy-Wagner, 2012; Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995); however, the relevance of these institutions is often a topic of contention. One potential reason why HBCU attendance was not a significant contributor to Black students' graduate choice may be due to the relative sample size of this population in comparison to those Blacks students completing their undergraduate degrees from a non-HBCU.

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