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Selective HBCUs: A Competitive Option

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Conference paper presented at:

2011 ASHE Annual Conference

Charlotte, North Carolina

November 17-19, 2011

Abstract

Despite the number of arguments in support of or against the value and relevance of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), there is little literature that takes an in-depth look at the diversity among HBCUs and the students who choose them. The purpose of this study was to explore the college choice motivations and academic experiences of academically competitive students who attend selective HBCUs. The current study analyzes interview data from eight African American alumni of selective HBCUs. Participants reported their motivations for attending selective HBCUs hinged on their interest in enhancing their academic knowledge, as well as their cultural appreciations for HBCUs and their historical mission of providing culturally rich education to African Americans. Participants also reported positive academic experiences at these selective HBCUs, noting relationships with faculty and administrators, as well as opportunities to expand their social and professional networks.

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Introduction

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, African American college enrollment has shifted away from historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) toward predominately White institutions (PWIs) (Brown, 2001; Brown & Davis, 2001; Gasman, Baez, Drezner, Sedgwick & Tudico, 2007; Harper, 2001). As HBCUs fight to reverse enrollment patterns and attract academically competitive high school graduates (Freeman, 1999), supporters of HBCUs and the students who choose them have been increasingly scrutinized in the media despite the institutions' proven academic successes and student satisfaction (Bridges, Kinzie, Laird & Kuh, 2008; Gasman et al., 2007; Kim, 2004; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002). Jason Riley, of *The Wall Street Journal*, criticized President Obama's pledge of support to HBCUs, claiming that the

institutions are academically inferior (Riley, 2010). Soon after the media craze surrounding Riley's claim, the Internet community was taken over by blogs and opinion articles condemning the decision of an Atlanta teenager's choice to attend an HBCU over several Ivy League institutions that accepted him (Rogers, 2010; Shropshire, 2010; Williams, 2010).

We posit that this backlash against these institutions is a result of both the dearth of literature on the academic experiences of HBCU collegians and the consideration of HBCUs as a monolithic institutional group which caters to the academically unprepared (Allen, 1992; Brown & Davis, 2001; Freeman & Thomas, 2002; Gasman, 2008). Expounding upon Gasman's (2008) recognition that today's "leading Black colleges cater to those students who could excel at any top tier institution regardless of racial makeup" (p. 23), the purpose of this study was to explore the college choice motivations and academic experiences of academically-competitive students at selective HBCUs. This study was guided by the following research questions: *What are the motivations behind academically competitive students' choices to attend selective HBCUs?* and *What are the academic experiences of academically competitive students at selective HBCUs?* To investigate these questions, we began by reviewing the general college choice literature as well as that specific to HBCUs, followed by reviewing students' experience literature in each context.

College Choice

HBCUs have been a segment of American higher education since the mid 19th century (Wilson, 1998). Although there is a growing body of information about these institutions in general, little research has focused on HBCUs without comparing them to PWIs. Furthermore, the literature on HBCUs rarely considers the diversity within this institutional group (Brown,

2001). In this section we present existing literature on the college choice process for students who choose to attend HBCUs.

College Choice Models

There are two types of traditional models that have influenced the college choice models and studies in the literature: economic models of human capital investment, and sociological models of status attainment (Perna, 2006). The former considers the expected monetary and nonmonetary costs versus the expected lifetime monetary and nonmonetary benefits when making the decision of whether to attend college (Becker, 1993). According to the economic model of human capital investment, more education leads to more productivity, and more productivity leads to higher earnings (Becker, 1993). In this view, choosing to attend college based on human capital investment is considered to be a rational decision, where potential students weigh the cost and benefits of attending college. Conversely, McDonough (1997) argues that an individual's decision to attend college is not rational, but instead sensible, considering sociological factors such as an individual's internalized system of thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions. Traditional sociological status attainment models assume that in order for a student to aspire to and enroll in higher education, that student must have high levels of academic preparation and achievement, which leads to higher levels of encouragement by parents and teachers to pursue higher education, which influences college aspirations and enrollment (Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999). Studies using a traditional sociological model focus on factors such as socioeconomic status (Freeman & Thomas, 2002; Perna, 2006), cultural and social capital (McDonough, 1997; McDonough, Antonio & Trent, 1997; Perna, 2000; 2006), or race/ethnicity (Toblowsky, Outcalt & McDonough, 2005; VanCamp, 2010) and their influence on the college choice process.

Drawing on the strengths and weaknesses of both the economic and sociological approaches, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) presented a three-phase model describing the college choice process. This model not only considers the choice to pursue higher education, but also the choice of which institution to attend. Predisposition, the first phase of the model, refers to the period when students begin to develop occupational and educational goals beyond secondary school (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1989). During this phase, the student begins to place value on a particular occupation, and makes decisions about the pathways necessary to pursue it. This phase is influenced by a student's family and personal background such as parental educational level and student academic ability (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Perna, 2006). Search, the second phase of the model, refers to the information gathering period. During this time, the student begins to make deliberate contact with different institutions (virtually or via campus visits) and begins to make judgments as to the type of institution that would be the best "fit" (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). The amount of sophistication in the student's search process is influenced by several factors including the availability of school and community resources, as well as the availability of information provided by the colleges and universities (Freeman & Thomas, 2002; Horvat, 1996; Nora, 2004; Perna, 2006). Choice, the third phase, refers to the period where a student evaluates enrollment options, ranks individual preference for an institution, and chooses to enroll. This phase is influenced by a student's perception of the institutional quality, institutional cost and financial aid offering, and communication with the institution (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; DesJardins, Ahlburg & McCall, 2007; Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs & Rhee, 1997). While this comprehensive college choice model is cited in various studies concerning the college choice process for students in general, low-income students, and students of color (Freeman, 1999; Hurtado et al., 1997; McDonough,

Antonio & Trent, 1997; Perna, 2000; Perna, 2006; Toblowsky, Outcalt & McDonough, 2005), it is limited in explaining the variances specific to students with various background characteristics or institutional type. Thus, we question its applicability to all groups of students, particularly high achieving African American students who chose to attend HBCUs.

Institutional Choice

Focusing on college type, recent literature has emerged investigating the decision to attend an HBCU. Using a national sample of over 200,000 freshman, McDonough, Antonio, and Trent (1997) conducted a quantitative study exploring the college-choice decisions of African American students. The researchers found geography, religion, college academic reputation, and fulfilling the desires of relatives, to be the most influential factors affecting college choice decisions. Adding to the significance of cultural and social influences, Freeman's (1999) qualitative examination of African American high school students' consideration of PWIs and HBCUs found that knowing someone who attended an HBCU, wanting to seek "African American roots", and having a lack of cultural awareness related to African Americans to be the strongest predictors of HBCU enrollment. Each of these studies utilized a comparative approach to viewing college choice decisions; highlighting the reasons for choosing HBCUs juxtaposed to the reasons for choosing PWIs. While informative, these comparisons limit the ability to have in-depth insight into the college choice process for students who chose to attend an HBCU. This limitation is addressed by Tobolowsky, Outcalt, and McDonough (2005) who specifically explore the influences of choosing an HBCU. Conducting a mixture of individual interviews and focus groups with 300 school counselors, African American high-school students, and their parents in Southern California, this study identified five factors that influence students to consider HBCUs as collegiate options: family legacy and expectation, academic prestige, non-

competitive admissions, interpersonal comfort, alumni representation, and campus tours. Academic prestige and non-competitive admissions were two conflicting findings that could lead one to assume that there are differences in prestige and selectivity among HBCUs. Thus, while Tobolowsky et al.'s study is specific to HBCUs, the authors' consideration of HBCUs as a monolithic group prevents the reader from gaining a nuanced understanding of the diversity across and within HBCUs, and how these differences may influence students' college choice decisions and the experiences that students have once they arrive on campus.

College Experience

Because literature on HBCUs are often comparative in nature and often do not provide an in-depth depiction of the student experience within a particular institutional context, relatively little is known about the college experiences of students who attend HBCUs in general, and selective HBCUs in particular. Thus, in order to gain a better understanding of these experiences, we begin with a review Tinto's (1993) theory of college student departure and the factors outlined within that make up the college experience of students, and present existing literature on the college experience of minority students, and students who choose HBCUs.

Academic and Social Integration

Tinto's (1993) theory of college student departure has been used as a framework for understanding the factors important for student persistence and success in higher education. The three major components in this model are goal commitment, academic integration, and social integration. First, Tinto's model asserts that student predispositions relating to their intention and commitment to degree attainment matter. In regards to intention, the "higher level of one's educational and occupational goals, the greater the likelihood of degree completion" (p. 30). Within this context, a student is likely to persist at a particular college, if they feel that their goals

are being met by their experiences within the institution (Astin, 1993). Second, academic integration is measured by student grade performance and intellectual development during their collegiate years. While academic integration is related to and influenced by past school performance and achievement (Allen, 1992; Astin, 1993; Berger & Millem, 2000), students, who are academically integrated on campus, find ways to be engaged in the classroom, achieve academically, and develop the study skills necessary to persist (Berger & Millem, 2000; Wenglinisky, 1996). Finally, Tinto argues that social integration is achieved through informal peer group associations, participation in extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and staff (Astin, 1993; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For students of color, this social integration is often achieved through participation in various racially/ethnically specific organizations and programs (Braxton & Lien, 2000; Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez & Trevino, 1997; Rendon, Jalom & Nora, 2000). Taken together, students who are successful have managed to become academically and socially integrated into the campus culture and feel that their institution is equipped to provide them with the skills and experiences necessary to fulfill their educational and career aspirations.

Student Experiences

Studies examining the experiences of students at HBCUs emphasize the importance of academic integration and social integration on student satisfaction and persistence. Previous research demonstrates that Black students attending HBCUs are better integrated academically and socially than their peers at PWIs (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). This academic and social integration is fostered by positive interactions with faculty and staff. Wenglinisky's (1996) study of the experiences of students attending HBCUs and PWIs found that African American students interact more with faculty than White students across institutional

groups. These interactions were both formal and informal in nature. Kim and Conrad (2006) found that students at Black colleges were more likely to be involved in research projects with faculty. Other studies report that students viewed professors as mentors and role models during their collegiate years (Berger & Millem, 2000; Bridges, et al., 2008; Brown & Davis, 2001; Fleming, 1984; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). These relationships often resulted in students being encouraged to maintain academic excellence and motivated them to expand their educational and career aspirations (Berger & Millem, 2000). Allen (1992) found that HBCU students are more likely to have high educational aspirations compared to Black students at PWIs.

Researchers have also consistently shown that Black colleges foster a nurturing and family-like environment for all members of the campus community (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Participants in Palmer and Gasman's (2008) study, 11 African American men attending a Black college, reported feeling valued, challenged, supported and nourished by their campus community. In regards to academic gains, while Wenglisky (1996) found that African American students at HBCUs were more likely to receive lower grades than their peers at PWIs, Berger and Millem's (2000) study provided evidence that students who attended HBCUs were more likely to rate themselves higher on academic ability four years after entering college than those who attended PWIs. Kim (2004) found that a much higher proportion of respondents in their study reported being enrolled in an honors program. Studies have also shown that African American students attending Black colleges report positive psychosocial adjustment, increased academic self-confidence, and greater leadership skills compared to their peers who attend PWIs (Allen, 1992; Berger & Millem, 2000; Fleming, 1984).

In summary, the research demonstrates that Black students attending HBCUs are better integrated both academically and socially than their peers at PWIs and this translates into gains in academic skills and the development of a positive self-concept (Allen, 1992; Berger & Millem, 2000; Fleming 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Kim & Conrad, 2006; Wenglisnky, 1996). These studies are limited, however, in that the vast majority of research examining the experiences of students at HBCUs are comparative in nature, and do not disaggregate the experiences of African Americans by a particular institution type, such as selective or open-admission. Furthermore, many of these studies were conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, and fail to document the experiences of contemporary students. Consequently, the present study seeks to fill the gap of knowledge in not only the academic experiences of students who attend selective HBCUs, but also gain insights into these students' motivations for choosing these institutions.

Method

Data Sources and Procedures

For the purposes of this study, the label “academically competitive” defines students who were offered academic merit-based undergraduate scholarships to attend both a PWI and an HBCU. The HBCUs under focus are limited to the top four, selective HBCUs according to *U.S. News & World Report - Best Colleges 2011*: Spelman College, Howard University, Morehouse College, and Hampton University. In view of the fact that the purpose of this study was to explore the college choice motivations and academic experiences of academically competitive students at selective HBCUs, participants eligible for the study met the following criteria for inclusion: (1) at least 18 years of age; (2) enrolled in/or attended Spelman, Howard, Morehouse or Hampton for their undergraduate education; (3) accepted to at least one HBCU with a merit

based academic scholarship, and (4) accepted to at least one PWI with a merit based academic scholarship.

Participant Recruitment

We used purposeful sampling techniques (Merriam, 2009) to select participants for interviews who met the aforementioned criteria. First, a convenient group of academic affairs professionals and alumni from the four institutions under investigation were contacted via email with details about the study and asked to participate. After making contact with eligible participants, we engaged in snowball sampling to increase the representation of students across the institutions of interest (Berg, 2007; Creswell, 2007). These strategies put us in contact with eight eligible participants.

Participants

A total of eight persons agreed to participate in the study: one from Spelman College, one from Howard University, two from Morehouse College, and four from Hampton University. Three participants were science majors; two participants were business majors; and two participants were liberal arts majors. Seven participants are recent alumni of the four institutions; graduating within the last six years. One participant was a graduating senior. Four participants identified as male; four participants identified as female. All participants identified as African American.

Data Collection

During the fall 2010 academic semester, we conducted eight individual, semi-structured interviews via telephone and video conferencing technology. The lead author individually interviewed six participants, while the secondary author individually interviewed two participants. Prior to beginning the interview, participants were informed of the nature of the

study, and were provided an opportunity to ask questions about the researchers and the study. Informed consent was received from each participant, and they received a copy of the form for their records. The semi-structured interview focused on the college choice process and academic experiences of these academically competitive students. Interview questions were developed based on the study's research questions: *What are the motivations behind academically competitive students' choices to attend selective HBCUs? What are the academic experiences of academically-competitive students at selective HBCUs?* We began each interview by establishing whether or not the participant self-identified as academically competitive. Participants were asked to provide their interpretation of academically competitive, and we disclosed our interpretation of academically competitive. We followed with open-ended questions exploring each participant's college choice process, academic expectations as an incoming college freshman, and actual academic experiences during undergraduate matriculation, including interactions with faculty and out-of-classroom experiences. The interview protocol provided opportunities for the participants to highlight positive as well as negative academic experiences. For example, we asked participants to describe academic achievements as well as academic challenges experienced during undergraduate matriculation. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. After the first two interviews were completed by the primary author and transcribed, the authors met to review the emergent themes. We individually read the transcripts and created analytic memos to document our perceptions of the emergent patterns, categories and concepts embedded within the data (Merriam, 2009; Saldana, 2010). Based on these early interviews, we made slight adjustment to the interview

protocol to gain a more in-depth understanding as to who and what influenced students' decisions to attend a HBCU, as well as of the types of experiences participants encountered while on campus.

Additionally, we used a step-by-step process of analyzing the data as suggested by Merriam (2009). We began with open coding of the data, and, using these codes, began grouping them into tentative categories of data referred to as axial coding. This was an interactive process done in collaboration with both researchers, which yielded an acceptable level of intercoder agreement (Yin, 1993). While participants did not have the opportunity to review their transcripts and assist in the coding process, they were provided a summary report of the emergent findings and asked to provide feedback as to whether our themes accurately captured their experiences.

Limitations

With the nature of qualitative research being interpretive (Berg, 2007), the threat of misinterpretation and cultural biases were taken into account. As a form of member checking, participants were forwarded a copy of the summary report to review. The composition of the research team also helped to minimize the threat of misinterpretation and cultural bias. One of the researchers is a graduate of an HBCU, while the other is a graduate of a PWI. We each have extensive knowledge of the higher education literature as it pertains to college access, choice, minority serving institutions, and the experiences of minority students in higher education. Our combination of theoretical and practical knowledge relative to the topic allowed us to interpret the data in a way that challenged existing scholarship and our preconceived notions (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002).

Finally, although the sample is representative of various genders, majors, and backgrounds, the small sample size and ethnic homogeneity is limiting. Future research, inclusive of larger samples and ethnic diversity, is needed to provide a more comprehensive picture of the college choice process and collegiate experiences of academically competitive students who attend selective HBCUs.

Findings

The findings of this exploratory study provided evidence of a unique college choice process for a select group of academically competitive African American students. We review similarities and differences in reference to the prevailing models of college choice

Motivations

Participants cited four sources of motivation to select HBCUs over other options for college. These were family, influence of alumni, the academic reputation of the institution and the perceptions of campus fit.

Family

An overarching theme that emerged was the influential role that family had in motivating students to attend selective HBCUs. The participants' families directly influenced them by taking them to visit selective HBCU campuses. Family members, who were alumni of HBCUs, indirectly influenced some participants by talking openly about their alma maters. Lamont, an accounting graduate of Hampton commented, "Cousins and aunts and uncles...some of them went to Howard; the other half went to Tuskegee or FAMU [Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University], and that's how I learned about HBCUs." Malcolm, who studied engineering at Howard, spoke openly about wanting to be able to share the experiences of his family members saying, "My sister went to Howard, and my mom and dad went to Spelman and

Morehouse. So, Howard was a must over any majority institution, ‘cause I had to have that experience to share.”

Although institutional legacy was motivational factor for some, it was just the opposite for one participant. Shannon, who earned her physics degree from Hampton, did not want to share the college experiences of her parents admitting, “My parents both went to predominantly White institutions, and they didn’t seem to have the most fulfilling experience; so I kind of wanted that nurturing experience that you get at an HBCU.” Shannon’s parents took on the role of supporters in her decision to attend a selective HBCU. Lisa’s father also played this role in her decision to attend Spelman. Lisa, who majored in international studies, shared, “My father graduated from Morehouse College...one of the top HBCUs in the country...so [he was] supportive of my decision [to attend Spelman].”

Alumni

Not only family, but teachers, counselors, and friends who attended HBCUs greatly influence students’ decisions to consider enrolling at selective HBCUs. Positive representation of these institutions by alumni persuaded one participant. Thomas, who studied political science at Morehouse, shared, “I was consciously aware that some of my mentors were Morehouse alums...It was just the type of people in my life who I knew had gone to those institutions [Morehouse and Spelman] specifically...I said, okay this is where I’m going.”

Some alumni played a more active role in the college choice process of participants. One participant referenced Black college tours organized by HBCU alumni. Others talked about support and guidance they received from HBCU alumni during the college application process. Reflecting on this process, Lisa stated, “I had an amazing [high school] counselor, and she was an African American woman. She graduated from an HBCU...When I told her I was interested

in Spelman, she would make sure that I was keeping up with the deadlines.” Similarly, Lamont admitted that he did not seriously consider Hampton until he was able to speak with older Hampton alumni, whom he knew through various community associations.

School’s Academic Reputation

For this group of academically competitive participants, the academic prestige of the institution or a particular program was highlighted multiple times as a determining factor in choosing to enroll in their respective selective HBCUs. Each participant verbally admitted to valuing academic achievement, and considered this personal value throughout their college-choice process. Malcolm’s decision to attend Howard was strongly influenced by the university’s engineering program saying, “It was obvious to me that they were preparing their students to be successful.”

For Renee and Tasha, they considered the reputation of Hampton’s academic programs as well as the special opportunities each program offered. Renee, who majored in business, liked the idea that she could “finish early and have a master’s degree only after like five years, instead of doing it in six.” Tasha who studied biology as an undergraduate, planned on attending medical school after earning her bachelor’s degree. After learning that Hampton had “pathway programs like the one in Boston to help students get into medical school,” it was easier for Tasha to make a decision to enroll. Conversely, Kenneth’s decision to enroll at Morehouse was not based on a specific program or opportunity. The overall reputation of the institution was enough; stating, “Morehouse is a world renown college...[they] foster excellence. They had what I was looking for.”

Campus Fit

Considering the institution in its entirety, one influential factor that emerged from the interviews was the consideration of campus fit. Campus fit, or the degree to which a student perceives he or she belongs to, can adjust to, is comfortable with, or is suitable for a particular campus environment, and how this perception of fit relates to a student's college-choice process is understudied in college-choice literature. Tobolowsky and associates (2005) do identify interpersonal comfort with faculty and peers as a factor in considering HBCUs; however this factor does not receive much focus.

Many of the participants shared that they had the opportunity to evaluate their perceptions of campus fit by visiting their undergraduate institutions before enrolling. These visits were either organized by the students themselves, were a part of large campus tours, or were informal visits to siblings and family members who attended these selective HBCUs. In an attempt to articulate her sense of campus fit, Tasha said, "I can't really describe it. I just liked the feel of the people; it was welcoming." Going beyond the traditional campus tour, Malcolm was able to participate in an overnight visit to Howard that influenced his enrollment decision. Malcolm said, "I did visits...I sat down with the engineering department...I knew that Howard's environment was generally what I was looking for ... I was fortunate enough to stay with a student who had my exact interests."

Experiences

We asked participants to describe some of their academic experiences on campus, in light of their expectations prior to attending a selective HBCU. We also asked them to reflect on the value of these experiences, given their current educational and professional statuses. The themes that emerged were presence of a like-type community, value in out-of-classroom experiences, and a sense of preparation for the "Real World."

Like-Type Community

Consistent with the literature on the experiences of students attending HBCUs, participants described their campus community as being nurturing, supportive and empowering. For participants who attended predominately White high schools, the opportunity to attend an HBCU was their first chance to be a part of an academic community in which they were not the token Black person. As Lamont, stated, “I think it’s just a very empowering feeling to be in an environment where you’re not the minority.”

Furthermore, participants recognized the diversity of their campus environment, and described how their perspective and appreciation of “diversity,” particularly racial and ethnic diversity, was enhanced during their collegiate years. After years of viewing the African American community as a monolithic entity, Kenneth, a graduate of Morehouse noted that he had a greater appreciation of not only the diversity within this community, but also for his own uniqueness as an African American male. He stated:

The demographic of HBCUs is not one type of person; you have [students from] different family backgrounds...nationalities...and it gives you an opportunity to appreciate individuality that much more.

Faculty and Classroom Experiences

Given these participants identified themselves as being academically competitive in high school, they entered college expecting a certain level of academic rigor from their courses. According to Kenneth, “Knowing the quality and character that Morehouse produced, I knew it was going to be academically challenging.” However, the degree to which these expectations were met was mediated by the courses taken and the professors themselves. Renee, a Hampton business major, described her frustrations with the lack of rigor and challenge in some of her

classes. “I was given [the information]. However, I feel that I wasn’t challenged to retain the information in my mind, because you are given cheat sheets and things like that.”

Students were most appreciative of the faculty on campus who maintained high expectations and would challenge them to do their best. As Renee stated, “There were some [professors] that definitely challenged me more than others. And honestly, I can say, those are the professors that I enjoyed the most.” This sense of high expectations and challenge was also viewed as professors caring about the quality of work students produced and wanting students to become responsible for their learning. This is exemplified by Lisa’s experience at Spelman College. Lisa shared, “My professors did not allow anything mediocre to pass their desk without saying, ‘you know what, you need to go back.’” Furthermore, Lamont stated, “I definitely feel that my expectations were met, if not exceeded by some of my professors...they would push you - not only academically, but professionally as well.”

Out-of-Classroom Experiences

Participants described their out of classroom experiences in three major areas, opportunities for undergraduate research, internships, and opportunities to study abroad. These often were a direct result of access to networks provided by members of the campus community, particularly faculty. These experiences expanded students’ view of their post-undergraduate opportunities, and helped reinforce plans to attend graduate school, work in various fields, or travel abroad. This was particularly important for students interested in pursuing graduate study, as shared by Shannon, who is currently pursuing her PhD in science, “If it weren’t for Hampton, I wouldn’t have done so much [undergraduate] research, and everyone I’ve talked to, here at graduate school, is amazed at how much research I’ve done.” Malcolm described an opportunity to complete a five-month study abroad experience at the University of Cape Town in South

Africa as “life-changing” and “eye-opening.” Through a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant that Howard University received, Malcolm worked in partnership with University of Cape Town students to organize an engineering research program for a local high school in Cape Town.

Preparation for the Real World

Finally, students noted that beyond their academic experiences, they felt that their time in college afforded them the opportunity to gain the professionalism and personal confidence necessary to succeed in the “Real World.” This sentiment was best typified by Lamont, who stated:

I think the beauty in going to an HBCU, and it may just be Hampton, but it could just be a general thing at HBCUs, is that at Black colleges...you're taught the small things...that carry you...further in life.

These little things included teaching students how to interact with job and graduate school recruiters, how to present themselves professionally in dress and speech, and how to cultivate professional networks. Moreover, at these selective HBCUs, students were taught and encouraged to appreciate their culture as African American students, fostering the cultivation of a positive sense of self as a type of armor. As Lisa described, “I left [Spelman] with the confidence that I could go anywhere and do anything. I almost felt unstoppable. Being a black woman is beautiful!”

Discussion

The findings of this study provide support for previous research on the college choice motivations and academic experiences of students at HBCUs, but also provide some contradictory evidence as well. First, consistent with previous studies on the college choice process of African American students, participants were encouraged to consider selective

HBCUs by members of their family as well as HBCU alumni (Freeman & Thomas, 2002). As academically competitive students, participants engaged in a sophisticated college choice process that involved considerations of the academic reputation of the college, the geographic location, perception of fit with campus community, and considerations of cost and availability of financial resources (McDonough et al., 1997; Freeman, 1999; Tobloski et al., 2005). As academically competitive students, participants also applied to a range of institutions, but primarily focused on selective PWIs and selective HBCUs at the top of their list. This pattern of selectivity mirrors Freeman's (1999) findings that high achieving students were more likely to consider more selective institutions.

The findings of this study are also consistent with those of researchers who described HBCUs as fostering supportive and nurturing environments for their students (Allen, 1992; Berger & Millem, 2000; Fleming, 1984; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). The participants indicated that opportunities to work closely with faculty, staff, and peers helped foster this sentiment. Through these relationships, students became aware of and were encouraged to be involved in student organizations, engage in undergraduate research, and pursue internship and study abroad opportunities. In other words, these students were encouraged to maximize the social networks available to them through their membership at the HBCU (Brown & Davis, 2001; Gasman & Palmer, 2008). While the overall campus environment was nurturing, some participants felt that the teachers could have expected more of them in the classroom. Specifically, these high achieving students sought out a selective college because they were looking to be challenged academically.

A finding inconsistent with previous research was that for several participants, cost and availability of financial aid were not the primary factor for students' choice to attend a selective

HBCU. The academic reputation of the institution, the perceived benefits of attending and familial influences seemed to be more important to students than financial considerations. In fact, many of the students ultimately decided to attend their respective institutions despite receiving little to no financial assistance in the form of scholarships and grants. This finding supports McDonough's (1997) notion that students make their college choice decisions based a variety of factors, including personal preferences regardless of perceived ability to pay. This finding is contrary to previous research that cites cost of attendance as a primary factor for students choosing HBCUs (Freeman & Thomas, 2002; McDonough et al., 1997).

Another unique finding was that students described often having to justify their college choice decision to others, long after earning their bachelors' degrees. Some students commented that given their academic success in high school, they were expected by their peers as well as some members of their families to attend predominately White institutions because of their perceived superiority. For participants who attended single-sexed institutions, Morehouse College and Spelman College, they described having to justify why these institutions were relevant and how these institutions could prepare them academically and professionally for the real world. Participants linked their decision to attend a selective HBCU back to their sophisticated choice process, and reiterated that they didn't go to a Black college simply because it was a Black college, but they purposefully sought out information about the best Black colleges in the nation.

Implications for Research and Practice

Several implications for research and practice can be derived from this study. First, the lack of research on the experiences of students attending selective HBCUs highlights the need for further research in this area. These research endeavors should move away from converse

comparisons – the inaccurate designation of something that is opposite of the Black college for purpose of analysis. Brown (2001) argues some researchers assume that predominantly White enrolled institutions are a natural comparative for Black colleges; this is not so.

Additionally, this study highlights the need for the development of college-choice models informed by qualitative research, particularly focused on the reasons why students continue to choose HBCUs in the 21st century (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Through our investigation, we developed a modification to the model designed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), which takes into consideration that some students, particularly academically competitive students, are predisposed to college and particular institution types very early on. Our proposed model of college choice that has three phases: 1) institutional predisposition phase, where students become interested in a particular institution type(s) (e.g. selective, 4-year, HBCUs; 2) broad search phase, where students seek out information about, visit, and apply to, an array of institutions that fit their predisposed categories; and finally 3) selective choice, weighing perceived costs, benefits and personal preferences, fit and institutional characteristics to make a final, well-informed college-choice decision.

From a practitioners perspective, this research highlights the disconnect between students and high school guidance counselors during the college choice process. Many of the participants in this study made their college choice decisions in the absence of the support from school teachers and guidance counselors, unless these individuals were HBCU alumni (Freeman & Thomas, 2002; McDonough, Antonio & Trent, 1997). In fact, these participants primarily became aware of HBCUs thanks to personal connections with alumni (Freeman, 1999). Given the finding that these high achieving students are interested in attending selective institutions, admissions representatives from selective HBCUs should develop partnerships with competitive

and college preparatory high schools to recruit and attract these individuals to their campuses. As these students may be drawn to selective schools due to their national ranking and reputation, various academic programs, as well as the availability of scholarships, admissions representatives from selective HBCUs should highlight their added benefit for students interested in learning in an environment that promotes the academic, intellectual, and social development of African Americans. The next generation of high achieving college students need be aware that attending a selective HBCU is indeed a competitive option.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the college choice motivations and academic experiences of academically competitive students who attend selective HBCUs. The findings of this research support previous studies about the positive benefits of African Americans who attend Black colleges. We found that participants reported their motivations for attending selective HBCUs hinged on their interest in enhancing their academic knowledge, as well as their cultural appreciations for HBCUs and their historical mission of providing culturally rich education to African Americans. We also found that participants reported positive academic experiences at these selective HBCUs, noting relationships with faculty and administrators, as well as opportunities to expand their social and professional networks.

In order to further explore the themes that emerged in this study, additional research is needed across various types of HBCUs, both selective and open-admissions, to gain a better understanding of the college choice motivations and academic experiences of contemporary college students across institutional contexts. This would not only highlight these students and their stories, but also serve as empirical evidence for the competitiveness and relevance of HBCUs as a significant player in higher education.

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