

# AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS: A COLLABORATIVE STYLE COHORT RECRUITMENT & RETENTION MODEL

**Amanda Eakins**

Interim Associate Director  
Graduate School  
Idaho State University  
Pocatello, Idaho

**Sheldon L. Eakins, Sr.**

Assistant Director of Educational Talent Search  
TRIO Access and Opportunity Programs  
Idaho State University  
Pocatello, Idaho

## ABSTRACT

*Recently the US have seen a movement of African American students demonstrating dissatisfaction with their treatment and presence at predominantly white institutions. Some of the common discrepancies from the students' perspectives have included the lack of student and faculty representation of color on these campuses. The model of cohort recruitment or cluster hiring has been a practice used to help diversify the faculty representation at PWIs. A similar model may be developed to recruit and retain African American students, but it requires synergy between schools, colleges, and the admissions department.*

Keywords: African Americans, Predominately White Institutions (PWI), (CSC) Recruitment Model, Residual Retention Activities, COMPACT Workshop Series

## INTRODUCTION

In recent news, the spotlight is on some of our top tier institutions in the nation that are plagued with matters about systematic racism. Students from underrepresented groups, attending universities across the country, are rallying together through social media platforms, as they demand changes to curriculum, social context, and other facets of higher education in hopes of a more equitable educational system. While the demands for change may deceptively appear to inflict an economic burden to the systematic ideals of normality on university campuses within the United States, these strains are cogent and apt in that they provide an opportunity for administrators to reexamine, modify and enact strategic initiatives on campuses that will hearten those diversity efforts at their institutions.

Racialism exists because of intolerance of others partially because of uninformed instruction embedded in our family structures, government, and economic systems. If colleges and universities are to revolutionize the systematic matters of racism that floods their institutions, they must be deliberate in their efforts. We must then translate those

efforts to reflect positive student experiences. This new concept of leading diversity efforts in recruiting and retention need to be innovative and introduced in a manner that will support African American students in achieving their greatest academic excellence. This theory is conceivable if universities implemented a recruitment model in which students would receive the support that they needed to combat their experiences of issues of adjustment, incongruence, isolation and all other academic and social difficulties (Tinto, 1993) they might experience.

In spite of Vincent Tinto's (1993) study that explains how the relationship between a student and their organization will influence the students' decision to continue their studies or encourage their departure, predominately white institutions are still failing to meet their promises in delivering diversity on campus; ensuring that the voices of minority students are heard; and ensuring that adequate support is available to assist the students in excelling during the next four years (Chen & Hamilton, 2015). As a result, African American students at PWIs continue to be at a greater disadvantage than their peers from other racial groups and are most likely to drop out of college (Grier-Reed, Ehlert, & Dade, 2011).

## ABOUT THE POPULATION

Blacks in America have endured a long history of oppression where they were captured from Africa and forced into the US as slaves. During this enslavement period, they were stripped of their culture, and many attempts were made by European settlers to erase their history (Godrick, Giordano, & Garcia-Preto, 2005). After many series of uprisings, slavery was abolished in America in 1865 with the Thirteenth Amendment. However, it was not until 1868 that blacks in America were considered citizens of the United States and in the 1980's the term African Americans were officially coined by Reverend Jesse Jackson (Hays & Erford, 2014).

According to the 2014 US Consensus Report, African Americans make up 42,158,238 of the US population, or 13% of the US population. However, only 5 million of the African American population currently have a four-year degree (Wilson, 2015). We cannot continue to underestimate how the psyche of this group of individuals are affected because of the enslavement of their ancestors who were the property of another racial group (Hays & Erford, 2014). The mentality of their ancestors was passed down from generation to generation, and the impact of these historical events can be seen in the African American Community even today.

## POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

The ambiguity in the long term effects of the post-secondary experience on student success remains scarce and without research. According to Pascarella & Terenzini (2005), research on student success often focuses on the stages of human development, rather than converging on the actual effects attendance at post-secondary institutions have on an individual's overall growth. As a result, researchers continue to struggle with the distinction between the growth that occurs naturally and growth through pedagogic training. Societal claims suggest that post-secondary instruction is necessary for a more positive economic impact in our labor markets. Pascarella & Terenzini (2005), further assert that a college degree will enhance the life of the student by affording them with more career options which then affects their socioeconomic background.

### Why Diversity Matters

According to Van Brummelen (2009), student's cultural upbringings and their environment can sometimes influence their performance in school. Moreover, students' social class affects their performance because parents from the middle-class families generally place emphasis on

competitive behaviors, while parents from working classes place emphasis on cooperation (Slavin, 2015). These components give students from the working class a disadvantage in education because the educational systems are made to imitate that of competitive actions. For the African American students, this theory will pose a key threat to their achievement in education. Thus, administrators will have to create programs to assist this student population in realizing academic success.

While the idea of transitioning to a more diverse population at predominantly white institutions are not without challenges (Hunn, 2014), the benefits are much more rewarding, in that students will receive a better quality of cross-group interaction; enhanced classroom discussions; stronger communities and the workplace; enhanced personal growth- and a healthy society; and a more economically competitive America (Morris & Grbic, 2015). To this end, the role of educators must extend to include advocacy for underrepresented student groups.

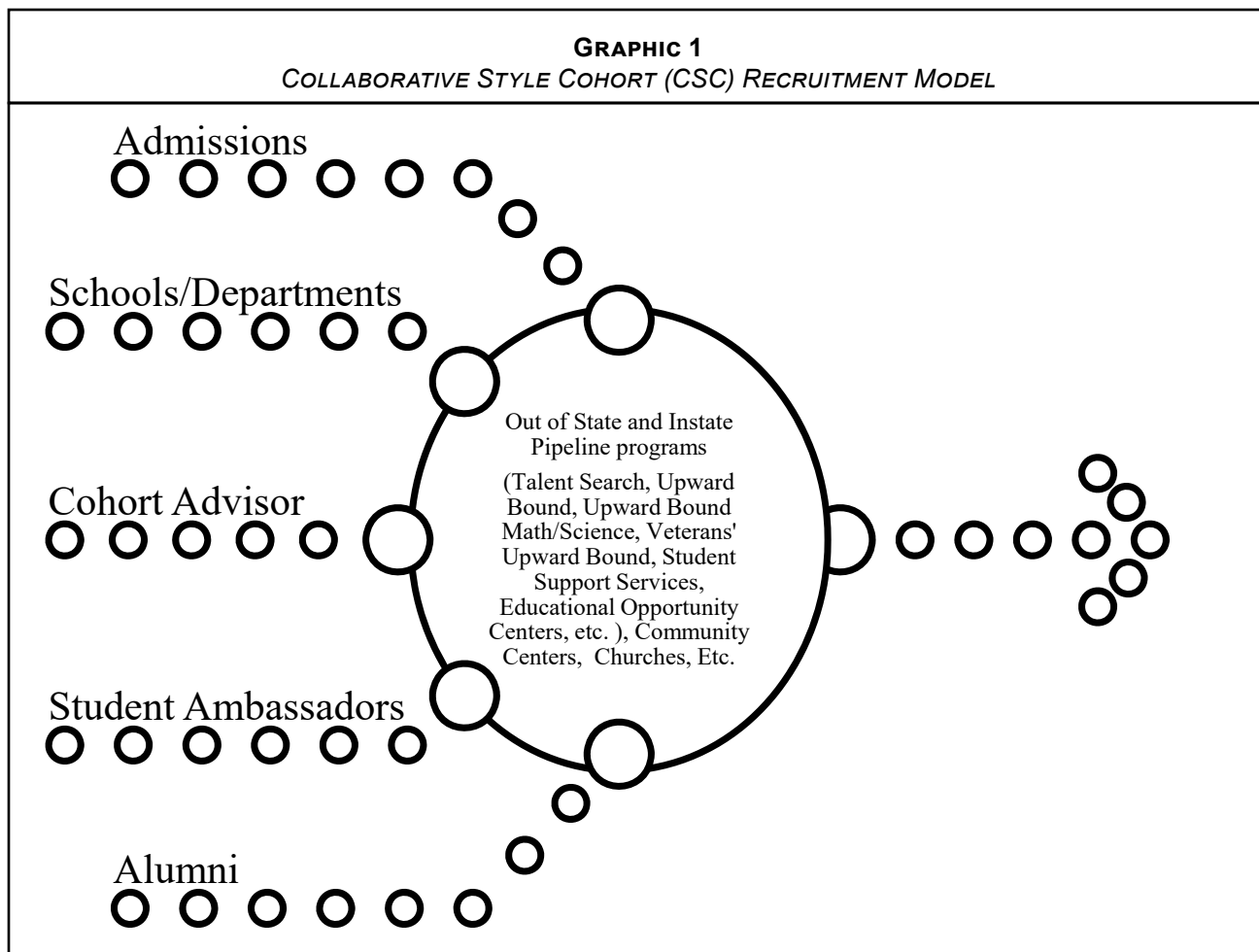
### Barriers for African American Students

To develop an effective retention plan, you must first understand the obstacles that will hinder the success of your African American student population. According to The American Council on Education (ACE), four factors add to attrition rates of African American Students (1) Sense of Belonging (Campus Climate and lack of diverse Faculty and staff). If students do not feel welcome on the Universities campus they will not return the following academic year; (2) Students are not prepared due to inadequate K-12 Education; (3) Large percentage of the African American student population are nontraditional students with little to no family support with their academic studies; (4) Finances; in fact, 2/3 of African American students does not complete college because of finances.

## RECRUITMENT PLAN

If institutions are serious about increasing the diversity of their student population, first they will need to implement diversity strategies for recruiting and retention in their strategic planning to ensure accountability of their efforts (Student Affairs Department at Minnesota State Colleges and University, 2015); Wilson, 2015). These efforts have to be seen as more than just the responsibility of the admissions department (Bugeja, 2013).

Second, universities will need to create a recruitment plan in which synergy exists between schools and colleges and the admissions division. In addition, students and alumni should also be represented in those materials; in fact, in a study conducted by the Student Affairs Department at Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (2015), the re-



searchers found that the best recruitment tool for recruiting students from diverse populations will be the support of current students and alumni that identifies as the same racial group of the targeted population. Furthermore, ensure that your recruiter and recruitment material resembles the target audience. This form of marketing is called emotional marketing.

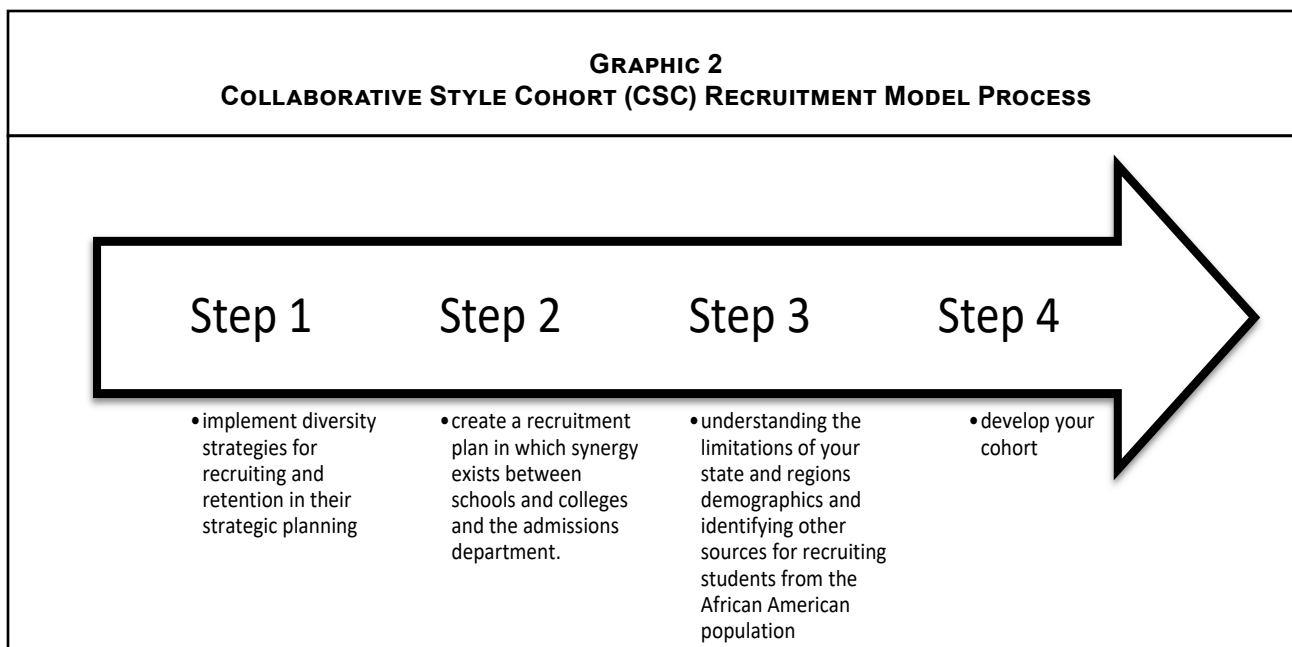
The third step in the CSC recruitment model will be understanding the limitations of your state and regions' demographics and identifying other sources for recruiting students from the African America. While college fairs and high school settings are all prodigious sources for engaging with prospective students, recruiters can also scout community centers, churches, and bridge programs such as TRIO (Student Affairs Department, at Minnesota State Colleges and Universities 2015) as they work on recruiting a more diverse student population.

The final step in this recruitment model will be developing your cohort. The Cohort Style Recruitment Model already exist; we see it in the recruitment efforts of Fac-

ulty at research institutions, in Graduate Schools and in some undergraduate programs such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), in which universities are focused on recruiting underrepresented students for those programs (Student Affairs Department at Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, 2015). We can use this same concept to recruit African American students for journalism, education, counseling, business, and other programs that are offered at the institution. However, it is important to note that schools and departments should not focus solely on disciples instead, they should broaden their scope to include all majors within a particular college or school.

### RETENTION ACTIVITIES

While all students regardless of their racial background face numerous challenges at post-secondary institutions, the challenges that African American students face as mentioned prior, are unique to their population (Grier-Reed, Ehlert, & Dade, 2011). Hence we must create social



support programs that will act as a buffer against high-stress levels that these students will face during their academic trajectory (Grier-Reed, Ehlert, & Dade, 2011; Chiang, Hunter, & Yeh, 2004; Edwards, Hershberger, Russel & Markert, 2001).

African American students typically do not feel welcome and wanted at university events (Hunn, 2014) consequently we can see them on campus, often with their heads down to avoid eye contact with others. This behavior creates a sense of invisibility for the student (Grier-Reed, Ehlert & Dale, 2011). However, research has shown us that an active and involved student on campus will equate to a successful student. “When students are academically and socially integrated, they form positive attitudes about the institution which influences their intent to persist, and ultimately, their actual persistence” (Rodgers & Summers, (2008); Bean & Eaton, 2000). If we are to assist this student population in realizing academic excellence in higher education, we must then create programs, events, and opportunities to facilitate this growth.

### **New Student Orientation**

Advisors should ensure that they are hosting events specific for the African American population as early as new student orientation. This experience allows opportunities to hold events like meet and greets for students to get to know other African American students, Faculty and Staff as well as friends and allies on campus. Outings such as these can help to create a sense of cultural communities for the students. Further, this is also an inordinate oppor-

tunity to provide students with Resource Books on *who is who* in their community, where they can get their hair done, purchase cultural foods, necessities, etc.

### **Academic Advising**

Assign all first-year students to a cohort advisor who will maintain regular contact with them and supervise time management and study habits and academic performance through an individual success plan. Incorporate an early alert program and conduct reviews of student performance at the end of the first three weeks and midterm to evaluate interventions necessary to maintain on, or restore students to, successful track. Collaborate with the Universities Diversity Center (tutors) and create various training models to meet the needs of all students e.g. face to face tutoring, online tutoring; distributed tutoring, etc. Work with Deans, Department Chairs and students to ensure that courses compulsory for graduation are provided and taken in appropriate sequence to facilitate timely graduation.

### **Peer Mentorship**

A Peer Mentorship program specifically for the African American population will help to build leadership skills and soft skills amongst others for the students; and will ensure that students are engaging in positive relationships with their peers. These relations will encourage residual retention and help to decrease the attrition rates of the freshmen population.

### **Gender-Specific Programs**

While African American women have made significant strides in their pursuit of a postsecondary education, African American men account for 4.3% of the total enrollment at 4-year postsecondary institutions in the United States, which is the same percentage enrolled in 1976. Given the stagnation of African American male enrollment in higher education, scholars have worked tirelessly to produce critical information to help educators, policymakers, and stakeholders increase the success of African American males in K-12 and higher education.

Create programs such as Women of Achievement to provide mentorship from faculty and staff for the female students; and programs such as Black Men Alliance for the male students. Moreover, Universities can invite historically Black Greek Sororities and Fraternities to the campus to help develop brotherhood and sisterhood initiatives amongst the student population.

### **Career Counseling/ Internships**

Counseling sessions with students allow opportunities to discuss role models that may have played an instrumental role in shaping their decisions about their career, religious affiliation, and spirituality. When we take the time to get to know our students as a whole instead of just seeing them as having a problem, we provide ourselves with better opportunities to serve them, also, understanding the student's decision-making process allows the cohort advisor to develop and utilize appropriate strategies in assisting the client.

### **Workshops**

Retention is not only affected by the support or lack thereof from the institution, student's behaviors, motivations, skills, and abilities will be a factor in their success (Rodgers & Summers 2008; Bean & Eaton 2000). If a student lacks confidence in their competency, their academic performance will likely decline. Creating a series of workshops such as COMPACT (Communication, Opportunity, Money Management, Personal Image, Accountability, Cultural Competency, and Time Management) that focuses on soft skills and college survival tips that students can enroll in throughout the AY will encourage academic success. Further, these workshops will assist students in recognizing areas of intersection between their interests' goals and opportunities while embarking on their scholastic journey.

### **Communication**

Communication involves (1) Nonverbal Communication and cues, (2) Verbal Communication, (3) Written Communication, and (4) Visual Communication. For students to excel, academically, socially, and professionally they must become effective communicators. In the communication workshops, students will be able to identify and describe nonverbal cues; they will learn how to write an effective resume, the impact of social media on one's personal, professionally and academic lives.

### **Opportunity**

Students will learn to seek opportunities on their own without being prompted by their faculties, advisors and other university staff—this is the nature of higher education. In this workshop, we will also discuss the benefits and purpose of (1) Professional organizations, (2) Honor societies, (3) Civic Engagements (4) Greek organizations and (5) Faculty office hours

### **Money Management**

During the Money Management workshops, advisors will want to focus on: (1) Financial Aid, (2) Scholarships, (3) Work-study and (4) Personal Finance. These components are imperative for the African American Student population to understand because Personal Finance is one of the contributing factors to the attrition rates of African American students at post-secondary institutions.

### **Personal Image**

Self-expression continues to dictate the way that we dress; the way we wear makeup, our choices in shoes, body piercings, tattoos and a host of other factors. While personality is important, it is also important that we teach our students the importance of personal image and the manner in which our choices can influence our individual social and professional endeavors. This topic connotes a very sensitive matter for the African American population. For this reason, it is important that the advisor presenting on this subject matter understands the issues within the community for them to successfully reach the student population, without offending the students.

### **Accountability**

One of the most important workshops in the series is accountability because it drives us to accomplish our goals. In this module, students will learn that regardless of their experiences, they have been given a clean slate to create the life that they desire. We will discuss: (1) responsibility,

(2) short and long-term goals (3) and the importance of Mentorship

### Cultural Competency

The US has five federally recognized racial groups; Blacks, Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, Whites and Asians. These groups are further divided by ethnicities that are further broken down by culture (symbols, values, language, religion, social organization, education, politics, and aesthetics). Tolerance for all groups of individuals regardless of their cultural makeup is essential if students are to become successful, professionally, academically and socially. This module will focus on educating students on micro-aggressions, anti-oppressions, beliefs, and values that impede our tolerance for others

### Time Management

The ability for students to successfully manage themselves will be a major factor in their overall success both throughout their academic studies and throughout their professional career. In this module, we will discuss the importance of setting priorities, organizing assignments/Tasks and methods to increase one's productivity.

### CONCLUSION

As more protests and outcries for systemic changes occur at predominately white institutions, higher education administrators have begun to develop strategic plans to implement change. However, these changes must be developed through careful consideration of the specific groups that are affected on these campuses. African American students that enroll at predominately white institutions have expressed their feelings of ostracism and lack of sense of belonging. Research has indicated that being involved on campus leads to higher success and persistence.

Moreover, many PWIs have developed cohort or cluster-hiring practices in which they attempt to recruit and retain faculty of color to help diversify their institutions. A similar strategy can be implemented for recruiting students of color and retaining them beyond their first year. The idea of enrolling more African Americans as a means to increase the percentage of the overall population is not beneficial to retention. How feasible is it to enroll an additional 100 African American students to an institution that will rarely see each other and consistently experience being the only student in their classes? Instead, the recruitment strategy should develop cohorts or clusters of African American students that are interested in the same field. With this approach, the students are more likely to be enrolled in the same classes. This cohort will need to be

provided with opportunities to interact with each other and develop the social belonging necessary for persistence.

Similar to the methods of STEM programs that target women or people of color to spark interest in these fields, other colleges must follow suit. It should not be the sole responsibility of the admissions department but a university-wide strategy plan that develops synergy between the various departments and programs. Once the recruiting plan has been established, the retention stratagems need to be implemented. New student orientations, academic advising, peer mentorship, gender-specific programs, career counseling/internships, and workshops that are specific to African Americans will aid in academic success and persistence.

### REFERENCES

- American Council on Education (2012). On the Importance of Diversity in Higher Education. Board Diversity Statement.
- Brummelen, H. V. (2009). *Walking with God in the Classroom* (3rd ed.). Colorado Springs, CO: Purposeful Design Publications.
- Bugeja, M. (2013). The New R&R: Recruitment and Retention of Students. *The Education Digest*, 78(7), 25-28.
- Grier-Reed, T., Ehlert, J., & Dade, S. (2011). Profiling the African American Student Network. *The Learning Assistance Review*, 16(1), 21+.
- Gutek, Gerald L. (1995). *A History of the Western Educational Experience*. Prospect Heights, Illinois. Wave-land Press, Inc.
- Hays & Erford, *Developing Multicultural Counseling Competence* (2014).
- Hedlund, Nancy, M.B.A., R.P.H., Esparza, Angelina, M.S.N., M.P.H., Calhoun, Elizabeth, Med, PhD., & Yates, Jerome, MD, M.P.H., C.P.E. (2012). The importance of staff diversity to address disparity. *Physician Executive*, 38(5), 6-10, 12.
- Hunn, V. (2014). African American Students, Retention, and Team-Based Learning: A Review of the Literature and Recommendations for Retention at Predominately White Institutions. *Journal of Black Studies*, 45(4), 301-314.
- Morrison, E., & Grbic, D. (2015, July). Dimensions of Diversity and Perception of Having Learned From Individuals From Different Backgrounds: The Particular Importance Academic of Racial Diversity. *Academic Medicine*, 90(7), 937-945.

Rodgers, K. A., & Summers, J. J. (2008). African American students at Predominantly White Institutions: A motivational and self-systems approach to understanding retention. *Educational Psychology Review*, 20(2), 171-190.

Slavin, R. E. (2015). *Educational Psychology: Theory and practice*.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes of Student Attrition*, (2nd ed). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Student Affairs Department at Minnesota State Colleges and Universities. (2015). A Summary of “Best Practices” for Recruitment and Retention of Students of Color.

U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, June 2015