

The Role of HBCUs in the College Choice Process of African Americans in California

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The significance of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the educational experience of African American students has been well documented. However, recent court decisions challenge these institutions' continued ability to fulfill their historical missions. Therefore, it is more vital than ever to understand the unique role played by HBCUs in the African American community, particularly in the educational plans of students and their families. The current study analyzes interview and focus-group data with African American students, parents, and counselors at 20 southern California high schools. While participants acknowledge that these institutions remain important educational and cultural resources, they also reveal surprising barriers to the accessibility of HBCUs.

Those are the colleges I can depend on. . . . we need to . . . start saving these Black Colleges 'cause that's one way that we know our children will be educated.

(The parent of an African American student)

BACKGROUND

The significance of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the educational experience of African American students has been well documented. In spite of their relative lack of resources, these institutions provide a supportive social environment conducive to personal and academic development, as evidenced in high levels of student achievement, as measured by their student persistence, graduation rates, and student satisfaction (Allen, 1992; Bonous-Hammarth & Boatsman, 1996; Fleming, 1984; Freeman, 1997; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002). For example, Jacqueline Fleming (1984) studied 2,591 African Americans attending HBCUs and predominantly White institutions and found that the students were more comfortable and successful in their HBCU environments. Moreover, African American students at HBCUs demonstrated higher academic achievement, greater college satisfaction, and had more satisfying relationships with faculty than students at the predominantly White institutions (PWIs).

Stewart notes that HBCUs "offer students a solid education in a nurturing environment—one in which their intellectual ability is not automatically questioned and their presence on campus is not part of an acrimonious debate" (Stewart, 1997, p. A24). The research conducted by Allen (1992) and Davis (1991) confirm that African American students find HBCUs provide a more positive campus climate than PWIs, which, in turn, results in their greater satisfaction with these institutions (Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002).

In many cases, student satisfaction is one element that has contributed to a higher retention rate. Constantine (1994) reported HBCUs have a higher African American retention rate than historically White institutions for two primary reasons: They provide "a supportive environment" and they offer "remediation for students who need it" (cited in Jackson, 2001, p. 129). In addition, these colleges and universities are considered the school of choice for a growing percentage of African Americans. In all, approximately 300,000 students attend HBCUs (Brown & Freeman, 2002). McDonough, Trent, and Antonio (1994) noted that from 1987 to 1991, enrollments at HBCUs increased by approximately 10,000 additional students each year. In 1995, 26% of all African American students enrolled at a four-year institution attended a HBCU (Jackson, 2001). The National Center for Education Statistics (1995) reported that approximately one third of all

African Americans received their bachelor's degrees from HBCUs, and these institutions continue to be the "primary undergraduate home of many Black Ph.D. recipients, army officers, federal judges, and medical doctors" (Brown & Freeman, 2002, p. 238).

Although there are no recent figures available, in 1993, the California Postsecondary Education Commission recognized that there had been "a significant out-of-state migration" to HBCUs (McDonough, Trent, & Antonio, 1994). In fact, 20% of first-year students at historically Black colleges traveled "at least 500 miles from home to attend college compared to 12.4% of college freshmen generally" ("Freshmen at Black Colleges," 2004, p. 33). Other studies confirm that African American students are more likely to travel to attend college than other ethnic groups (McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997; Tierney, 1980). Allen (1992) looked at the migration of African Americans specifically to HBCUs, citing statistics from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program that found that 52% of African Americans from California matriculate at HBCUs. It should be noted that this statistic reflects the college choices of African American teens prior to the passage of Proposition 209, a measure that prohibited the consideration of race in college admissions in California; consequently, that percentage may be even higher today. In summary, these HBCUs attract and graduate a growing number of African Americans, many of whom are from California.

Regardless of their success, HBCUs are threatened by court decisions that challenge their ability to fulfill their historical missions (e.g., *United States v. Fordice*, 1992). Other legal challenges affect college attendance by minorities at all institutions. As stated above, race-conscious admissions in California were severely impacted by the passage of Proposition 209 in 1996. The number of African Americans attending one of the University of California campuses declined since its high in 1995, the year UC-specific policies prohibited the consideration of race. Karabel (2000) notes that in 1999 minority enrollment on all eight campuses had declined 25% since 1995, and the numbers are even worse on the flagship campuses. The effect of the recent Supreme Court rulings remains unclear. However, it is clear that within a changing educational environment in which affirmative action and access to higher education for underrepresented students has been steadfastly under attack, it is critical that we understand the role played by HBCUs in the thoughts and educational plans of African Americans, because these institutions have played an important role in educating African Americans for more than 150 years (Jackson, 2001). The current study analyzes the perceptions of HBCUs held by high school counselors, African American high school students, and African American parents in post-affirmative action California.

BACKGROUND REVIEW

Understanding the college choice process and things that influence students' college decisions are crucial to providing a context for the comments made by students interviewed. In this section, we summarize these concerns while offering theoretical approaches to college choice.

College Choice Theories

The three stages of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) college choice model are: (a) predisposition (i.e., when students decide if they wish to continue their education beyond high school); (b) search (i.e., when students begin to investigate institutions); and (c) choice (i.e., when students decide on attending a particular institution). Several factors have been identified that influence students during the predisposition stage, including the socioeconomic status of the student, high school attended, family and peer attitudes toward education, student's academic ability, and understanding of costs and information regarding financial aid (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

After a student decides to attend college, the investigation of specific schools begins. At this stage, students turn to friends, parents and extended families, teachers, and counselors to provide information (Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1999). The search stage requires some thought by the student and his or her family regarding qualities they are looking for in a college. It is important to recognize that not every student goes about the search stage with the same interests and concerns.

Zemsky and Oedel (1983) found that the lower a student's SAT score and family income level, the narrower the geographical range and the quality of the institutions considered. Research also shows that students may have inaccurate information that limits their choices (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Therefore, variables in the search stage extend beyond the student measures in the predisposition stage to perceptions, accurate or inaccurate, about the school.

In the final (choice) stage, students narrow their choices based on the influence of their perception and assessment of institutional quality, the financial-aid package, the academic programs offered, and the institutions' attempts to attract the student (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Again, individual student differences come into play in this process based on the students' assessment of these issues. Yet, all students have developed expectations of the college experience at an individual school and their decisions are partially based on how well those expectations match their own perceptions of the experience (Tinto, 1993).

The Influence of Family and Race on College Choice

Hossler, Schmidt, and Vesper (1999) discuss additional factors that influence a student's college choice decision, such as the means by which "family background characteristics, especially parental education and income levels, along with student ability, exert a powerful effect on the plans of students" (p. 101). In their nine-year longitudinal study, initiated in 1986, Hossler et al. (1999) found that parental encouragement was the strongest predictor of educational aspirations. Although parental influence is very strong, it does not operate independently of other factors. For example, "socioeconomic status is known to influence both parental educational encouragement as well as educational attainment" (Conklin & Dailey, 1981, p. 258). Therefore, according to Conklin and Dailey, class issues have an impact on parental support and academic achievement. Still, parental encouragement is a stronger predictor of college than either socioeconomic status or the student's intelligence (Sewell & Shah, 1968).

Racial differences in the college choice process have been identified and explored as well. Litten (1982) found African Americans were more likely to rate the availability of financial aid as "very important" in terms of their college choice decision. He also found the college choice process itself varied by ethnicity. In his 1982 study, Litten found that African Americans started their college search phase later and that it lasted longer than White students' search process. Also, African Americans asked for college information more often than White students (Litten, 1982). This finding is particularly interesting in light of the work done by Hawkins (1993), who found that African American and Latino students who did not attend a four-year college based their decision on the fact that their high school counselors did not help them, and that they lacked information about colleges. Furthermore, Hawkins found that counselors did not help these students, because they did not conform to the counselor's notion of success.

Hossler, Schmidt, and Bouse (1991) contended that lack of information in itself may be a barrier to access, which seems to be a more acute problem for students of color. The work of McDonough, Antonio, and Trent (1997) echoes this finding. They found that access to information was a highly significant obstacle in the college-choice process for African Americans. McDonough et al. (1997) found further that African Americans were particularly influenced in their college choice process by the wishes of relatives. Additionally, research has shown that some African American students are influenced in their college choice process by their religious institutions. McDonough and his associates also found that a modest predictor for African American students to attend HBCUs was when they identified themselves as Baptist. McDonough's study also concluded that given the prominence of Black churches in African American life, it is not surprising to find churches as a common thread linking communities of origin and college campuses.

The literature shows that other influences on college decision-making are tied more directly to the college choice process itself, such as the student's year in school. By the junior year, many students have moved into the search state. The work of Hossler et al. (1999) bears out this point. They found that the students' search activities "dramatically increased" during the junior year (p.

61). Researchers noted that students in their junior year gain valuable insight about institutions when they have the opportunity to visit a college campus, and many students take advantage of this information source. Hossler, Schmidt, and Vesper (1999) found that by the middle of the second semester of their junior year 55% of students in their sample had visited one or more campuses. Although campus visits are clearly valued by many students, African Americans rank campus visits higher as a primary source of information in terms of their college choice than White students (Litten, 1982). Thus, information, or lack of it, is a key factor in determining the college choice of African American students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

With this information in mind, the three primary research questions for this study are,

1. How did African American high school juniors and seniors, their counselors, and parents get information on HBCUs? Based on this information, what were their perceptions of these out-of-state institutions?
2. What barriers and obstacles do these parents and students perceive in terms of their college choice process and what role do HBCUs play in the students' college choice process in light of these obstacles?
3. Does California's post-affirmative action climate impact the students' perceptions of their college opportunities?

METHOD

These analyses are part of a larger study that focused on the attitudes of African American and Latino high school juniors and seniors, parents, and counselors in three Southern California counties regarding higher education access, generally, and the University of California system campuses, specifically. The data from the larger study consisted of 78 focus groups and 50 individual interviews at 20 Los Angeles-area high schools in both urban and rural counties. In all, 230 college-bound students (juniors and seniors who were Latino and African American), 63 counselors, and 87 parents (African American and Latino) participated. In total, 158 of these students, counselors, and parents were African American. The research resulted in rich and unique data focusing on perceptions of opportunity in California's post-affirmative action environment.

The study related here is only a segment of this larger work. The findings presented in this article are based on statements regarding HBCUs made by 63 (out of 110 total) African American students, 8 (out of 63) counselors, and 29 (out of 37) African American parents. Although both studies are interrelated because they explored issues related to college access and opportunity, this more focused work deals specifically with the attitudes expressed by the counselors and African American teens and parents who spoke about HBCUs. This subgroup of participants brought up HBCUs, even although these institutions were not specifically addressed in the interview protocol. It was the very fact that such a large number of African Americans chose to mention these institutions unprompted that struck researchers as a significant finding in itself and inspired this study.

The researchers determined that findings specific to California were of broader interest, because California often leads the nation, positively and negatively (e.g., abolishing affirmative action) in educational trends (Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, & Teranishi, 2001; McDonough, 1997). Also, Los Angeles county has the second largest African American population in the nation (Census, 2000). Thus, what happens in California is not only a bellwether for what often happens in the other states, but it also provides invaluable insight into the attitudes and actions of African Americans. As researchers attempt to understand the reasons why there is such an economic disparity between African Americans and Whites, it is clear that "a college education, more than any other factor, serves to break down racial stereotypes, increase opportunities for African Americans, and decrease the Black-White economic gap" ("Once Again," 2003, p. 7). Therefore,

the findings of this study are of significance to educators beyond California, because they offer a better understanding of the Black students' college choice process and their perceptions of access.

There were several criteria used to select participating high schools, including schools that had a high number of minority students and those with a high and low percentage of students who fulfilled the University of California (UC) eligibility requirements. Since the primary study was exploring attitudes regarding the UCs, it was determined that selecting schools that had both a high and low percentage of UC-eligible students would provide a wide cross-section of student, counselor, and parent participants.

Parents and college-bound students (juniors and seniors) were identified by gatekeepers at the high schools (i.e., teachers, counselors, and principals) and invited to participate in focus groups at the schools. There were only three criteria used in selecting students: The study sought our college-bound juniors and seniors, African Americans or Latinos, and an equal number of males and females. The nature of the student and parent interviews was specifically to get a better sense of their perceptions of college access in California after affirmative action and learn more about their own college choice process. In addition, counselors in each of the schools were asked to participate in individual interviews or focus groups to discuss their role in providing college information to students and their perceptions of their students' college choice approaches. Focus groups and individual interviews lasted approximately 1-2 hours. In total, there were 98 individual interviews conducted with 60 seniors and 38 counselors, and there were 28 focus group interviews with juniors, 30 with seniors, 29 with parents, and 17 with counselors. This process was the same for all institutions. The subset of individuals who are the focus of this study was selected in the same manner. It is their unique responses that singled them out for further analysis.

FINDINGS

Our findings fall into three major categories. The first area is the origins and stimuli of HBCU predispositions (RQ#1). The second category is the nature and intensity of both obstacles and attractions in the students' search phase (RQ#2). The final area relates to the role of affirmative action discourse in shaping African American students' college aspirations (RQ#3). Each area directly links to the primary research questions as noted parenthetically.

Predispositions and Their Origins

In our study, students and their family members attempted to develop strategies for making the best possible choices regarding their higher education options. As part of this strategy formation, they sought information on higher education in general and HBCUs in particular. Unfortunately, information was far from accessible or reliable for many individuals in our sample. Both students and parents mentioned the difficulty they faced in obtaining accessible information regarding both in-state and out-of-state colleges, as well as the college choice process itself. In this passage, a senior expressed the difficulty she experienced in obtaining information on colleges: "It's just....stressful in trying to pick the right college. . . I don't like the idea that the Black colleges don't have enough information reference sources. . .it toughens my decision." The student continued, "When I write to a college, I don't get specifically what I ask for, what I wrote them for, and that's just like frustrating." As one junior stated succinctly about the college application process, "I'm just terrified by this whole process."

However, on a more positive note, students, their parents, and counselors commented on the importance of personal contact with HBCU representatives (who are frequently HBCU alumni) at their high schools and, even more frequently, the impact of student visits to HBCU campuses. Indeed, students and their parents reported that, in almost every case, a visit to an HBCU resulted in a favorable inclination toward that college.

One counselor noted that HBCU representatives attend local college fairs, which provides an important personal link to the school. She stated, "There's a college fair that the historically Black colleges have in the LA area, and so we encourage our girls to go there." However, a significant minority (approximately 10%) of the students and parents mentioned that campus tours helped

them in their decision-making process. As one senior commented, "That's really where I want to go [HBCUs]. . . 'cause. . . I went on a tour, last fall." Parents also saw the benefit of campus tours. As one parent stated, "She went on the Black college tour this summer. . . She fell in love with Clark Atlanta." Another parent commented about her daughter, "During her spring break I allowed her to go back to the Spelman campus, and she spent about three or four days on the campus in the dorm. She said that confirmed it for her that [Spelman] was the best choice for her."

In rare cases, a visit to a HBCU campus would lead to a negative impression. As a parent of a senior reported, "Well, I know her number one choice has always been [a northern-campus school]. But after we visited this summer, I'm not sure." Another parent recalled her daughter's experience on a campus visit. "She went [on the college tour] thinking that she would probably like [this southern school], but the presentation wasn't good that day, you know, so that just turned her away from [that school]." However, very few of the respondents shared similar negative impressions. In summary, the opportunity for personal contact with an institution, either through contact with an HBCU representative at a high school or a student's visit to an HBCU campus, was an extremely important factor in developing a usually positive impression of an HBCU, and fostering the inclination to apply to an HBCU.

Despite the importance of a campus tour, extra-educational factors, such as community resources, were significant influences as well. Particularly important were religiously oriented resources and the students' families. These findings are highly consistent with those of McDonough et al. (1997) in their quantitative analysis of African Americans' college-choice process. For example, churches, at times, played a significant role in making information accessible about the college application process, including the possibility of attending an HBCU. As one parent stated, "We also have scholarships at our church for the students, and we have different things that they give the kids. . . and information. Also, our church is involved with Clark Atlanta University. It's involved with a lot of other Black colleges too."

Woven throughout the respondents' comments on the college application process was a strong emphasis on the importance of positive family attitudes regarding education. Many of the students mentioned the role family expectations played in the formation of their intent to attend college. As one senior noted, "My entire family's been talking to me about going to college since I was about eight years old." The importance of family connections to particular HBCUs will be discussed in greater length below.

To conclude, African American students' college-going predispositions do reflect a familiarity with and interest in HBCUs often from a very early age. Strategies of particular importance for our participants were personal contact with HBCU representatives, visits to HBCU campuses, the supportive efforts of social institutions, and the presence of family ties.

The Role of HBCUs Within Personal Educational Plans

For some of the students, attending an HBCU was a lifelong goal. For example, as one student stated, "It's like a dream to get accepted to those colleges. It's just ever since I was little, it was either Spelman or Howard." Echoing this theme, a parent commented, "My daughter told me when she was eight-years old that she was going to be an OB-GYN doctor and she was going to Howard University. So, we've been knowing about going to [this HBCU] college for a long time."

Why did students and their families dream of attending HBCUs? Their reasons can be categorized into several broad areas: familial, academic, interpersonal, and institutional. Students with family members who had attended an HBCU were especially likely to express an interest in these institutions. As one student stated, "My mom wants me to go there [Southern University], because she went there." Another student expressed how family ties contributed to her positive regard for Hampton; as she states, "I really liked it and I have a couple of cousins who go there, so I can see myself there." In addition, other respondents cited Tuskegee, Morris Brown, Morehouse, and several other HBCUs, as institutions to which their families had strong ties. Thus, whether it was through general familial expectations or specific experiences as an alumnus or alumna of an

HBCU, consistent throughout our sample, was the important role family played in shaping the educational plans of students.

Many students commented on the high quality of HBCUs' academic programs. Those institutions with reputations for academic prestige, such as Spelman and Howard, were especially prominent. A senior explained how a school's reputation figured into her college-choice decision. "I was considering Spelman, because that's one of the most prestigious Black universities." Another stated, "For the longest, I wanted to go to Howard, because I know that they have a medical school, and they're really well known for putting students, putting physicians, into the workforce."

For some students, HBCUs were seen as especially valuable because of the particular academic programs they offered. As one student stated, "I like Xavier because of the pre-med programs they offer." Another student echoed this emphasis on programmatic offerings: "Personally, I'm saying Spelman, because it's a Black college and I plan to major in Black studies."

However, despite the opinions of some students that HBCUs were academically rigorous and offered specific programs of interest, a limited number of students mentioned that they were interested in HBCUs because they perceived them to have easier admissions requirements. As one young woman explained, "I heard a lot of the girls talking about it. . . They were gonna apply to Howard and Spelman, because it's easy to get in, and if you have just a 3.0 you can get a scholarship." These seemingly contradictory findings—an interest in the high quality of some HBCU academic programs and a belief that some HBCUs have non-competitive admissions requirements—are consistent with the varied nature of HBCUs. Some are selective institutions; while others serve the underprepared.

In addition to their academic offerings, HBCUs were perceived to offer another advantage: more personalized instructor attention and more supportive environments than other institutions of higher education. One parent explained why she encouraged her daughter to apply to a HBCU. "I wanted her to go to Xavier, because I felt like here was a Black college that looked at you as an individual." Another parent spoke directly to her perception that HBCUs have a caring faculty. "I kind of like small classrooms and more intimate contact with the professors. So that's basically what we wanted to get her to a place that really cared." These findings are similar to those of other researchers (e.g., Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002) who found that HBCUs provide a particularly supportive social environment for their African American students.

A number of students favored HBCUs because they believed the campus to be primarily African American. One senior noted, "A lot of people, a lot of Blacks, they say, when I get out of school, I want to go to a Black college. I want to go to a Black college and be around my people." Another student reiterated this theme when discussing the possibility of attending Spelman, "It would be cool to go to Atlanta, you know, hang with. . . a lot of Black people that you feel more like. . . comfortable." Another student was direct in explaining her reasoning: "I'm applying to the historically Black colleges for one because I'm Black and I'm female."

In contrast to those students who sought a predominantly African American interpersonal environment at the HBCUs, a handful of students were dissuaded from applying to an HBCU because of this perception. For example, one student stated, "I don't want to go to a Black college, because I figure when you get out of college you're not going to be living in a Black world, and I want to interact with everybody. I just don't want to be just one race of people." Another commented, "That's not for me. . . I want to be around different cultures." A parent had reached a similar conclusion regarding her daughter's choice. "She don't want to go to a Black college." A junior stated, "The color of campus never really appealed to me. It wasn't something that I felt was mandatory, that a college be all Black or predominantly Black or predominantly Caucasian or Asian. I never really bought into any of the stereotypes."

Importantly, students expressed fears of isolation regarding the racial composition of public university campuses in California as well. For example, one young woman commented, "It could be weeks [at a predominantly White campus] before you see another Black person." Therefore, the

racial balance of a campus, whether predominantly Black or White, impacted some students' college choice.

Finally, we found several institutional practices that contributed to the positive perceptions students and their families held of HBCUs. As we mentioned, in-person visits by HBCU representatives to high schools were highly effective in making HBCUs visible and viable educational options for students in our sample. Campus tours only added to this process of familiarization. Additionally, HBCUs have been exceptionally skilled at making use of their alumni as recruitment officers within the African American community, both as formal campus representatives and as informal informational resources.

Obstacles to College Access

As stated above, for many of the African American student participants, HBCUs were a top choice for postsecondary education. However, obstacles of several types, including location and misperceptions of costs of HBCUs, threatened to intervene between students' stated interest in HBCUs and their plans to apply to and attend them.

Since our sample came from southern California, enrolling at an HBCU would necessitate moving away from the state and home, and the immediate family. Although, earlier research found that non-White students were most likely to travel greater distances from home to attend college (Tierney, 1980). As a counselor stated, "Most kids, in any state, in any city, pretty much stay close to home." A student continued this theme, stating, "I would like to have an experience of going out of state but right now, I'm sort of, I don't know, I think I'd get homesick maybe and I like living in California." A parent told us that her daughter did not want to leave home. "I'm trying to encourage her to do everything [at Howard] but she doesn't want to leave the state." Other parents shared similar opinions. "Well,...I don't think she wants to go out of state," and from another parent, "Well, at one time she did say she wanted to go out of state, but I guess now she's not leaning that way of going out of state or if so, it's iffy." The presence of extended family in the South, in close proximity to at least some HBCUs, seemed to mitigate this potential drawback for some students. As one parent commented, "Grambling, that's what I hear her talk about." The parent continued to state that her daughter would be joining family members in Florida.

Despite the commonly cited hesitation about moving away from home, a few students saw the possibility of moving out of state to attend an HBCU as an advantage. As one junior said, "Just gotta get away. I don't wanna be around all these people. I'm tired of them." Another student spoke just as directly, "I wanna go out of state. I wanna go to an HBCU." Finally, distance was no obstacle for some students, such as the senior who reported, "To me all that matters is the quality of the school. If it's a good school, I wouldn't mind traveling. . .halfway around the country to go to that school."

The cost of attending college figured into the college-choice process for students and families in our study. Students provided wildly varying and inaccurate estimates of the cost of attending an HBCU: "Morris Brown is about twenty-five thousand, thirty thousand (inaudible). . . It's a lot, but you know, I heard probably like fifty thousand dollars. I'm like wow!" The actual cost of tuition and room and board at Morris Brown for the 2003-2004 academic year is \$14,242, excluding incidental fees (Morris Brown, n.d). One student stated that cost issues alone had convinced him not to look at any non-California colleges. Counselors expressed they had also noticed similar financial concerns. As one counselor reported, "Now, one of the main drawbacks to that [attending an HBCU] is that they want to go, but they may not always have the finances to get there or to afford the tuition." One counselor told us that she had worked with one student to try and overcome any financial hardship, but to no avail.

I knew a girl... I talked to her all year long, and she was going to Howard, going to Howard, going to Howard, and I kept trying to talk to her. I said, "Well, you know, you know, I'm going to make sure you have everything in line. Have you done your financial aid because I know some of the private colleges... Black colleges are expensive, and even if you get the full financial aid, you're going to have to have some money, \$3,000, \$4,000, you know. So I kept talking to her about it, "Yes, yes, yes, yes." And so I worked with her this summer, she had an internship at a local business, and so... I knew she was earning some money, you know, and I'm hoping that she's putting this money

towards her [college]... and so anyway I didn't see her at the end of the summer. One of her friends came in and told me, I said, "Okay, how's so and so," I said, "Did she get to Howard?" "No, she didn't have enough money. She went to [a technical training school]."

Compounding the difficulty created by these misperceptions of the cost of HBCUs was a belief for some students and their parents that these institutions were not likely to award financial aid. As one student stated, "I wouldn't apply to Spelman or any of these colleges because, they don't have a whole lot of money; so their tuition is like [motions upward]. . . And they don't really give you scholarships and stuff like that." Thus, incorrect perceptions of cost may well affect college choices.

In conclusion, those students who were oriented toward HBCUs during the predisposition stage of their college-choice process were influenced by a wide variety of factors that impelled them toward, or sometimes dissuaded them from applying to an HBCU. Some students treasured a dream of attending an HBCU, often because of parental or other familial ties to these schools. For some students, the academic reputation of HBCUs, especially those with prestigious reputations, was important. Also important was the expectation that HBCUs would provide supportive academic and interpersonal environments. Students were divided on the value of what they perceived as a non-diverse student body at HBCUs, with some looking forward to what they expected to be an all-African American campus and others put off by this expectation. HBCUs, for their part, were not passive institutions—through their system of alumni as official representatives plus campus tours, they often took active steps to position themselves as viable college choices. Finally, misperceptions of the costs of higher education, in general, and HBCUs, in particular, seemed to discourage some parents from considering HBCUs for their children.

The Role of Affirmative Action Discourse in Shaping College Aspirations

The participants in this study echoed the educational literature that attests to the value of HBCUs within the African American community. Perhaps the simplest demonstration of this fact comes from an examination of the colleges to which students were considering applying other than HBCUs. The participants included the most prestigious HBCUs in the same choice set as the top-ranked institutions in California (especially Stanford and the University of California, Berkeley). One mother related that her daughter had selected Spelman over Stanford. As the mother explained, "She wanted to go to Spelman, and it was always going to be a choice between Spelman and Stanford." Another parent stated, "Her very first choice, even before Berkeley came to mind, she...was applying... to Spelman."

Additionally, our participants identified HBCUs not only as colleges they considered attending, but as important educational resources for the African American community. Frequently, parents in the sample spoke of HBCUs not only as high-quality colleges and universities, but also as key institutions in promoting the well-being of African Americans. This finding is consistent with previous studies that concluded that HBCUs can provide a more supportive, less racist interpersonal environment for the African American students (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984). As one parent stated,

Those are the colleges I can depend on. And when you look at it, our professionals, our doctors, lawyers, engineers come out of basically Black colleges. More so than . . . other colleges. . . we need to . . . start saving these Black colleges 'cause that's one way that we know our children will be educated. They're wanted and they're nourished and they're encouraged [at the HBCUs].

Furthermore, they extended the findings of this literature by asserting a renewed interest in HBCUs, especially in the wake of affirmative action retrenchments. Moreover, counselors observed a resurgence of interest in HBCUs recently. For example, one counselor stated that more students were choosing HBCUs in the last ten years than in the past. As she said,

The past ten years, there's been this overwhelming response for historically Black colleges. Now, I've been in counseling for over 20 years and I can remember in the 70s, they [the students] didn't want to hear about it...All of a sudden it changed and they all wanted to apply.

Both counselors and parents suggest that affirmative action cutbacks, especially in California, are partially responsible for the growing interest in HBCUs. Several parents mentioned a relationship between Proposition 209 (i.e., the 1996 ballot initiative that ended affirmative action in California's public colleges and universities) and their hope that their children would attend an HBCU. This point was also voiced by counselors, who noted the significance of news media coverage that suggested that public higher education in California has been made less welcoming for students of color. For some parents, affirmative action retrenchments seemed to make it less likely that their children would be accepted to selective public universities in California. For others, Proposition 209 made California's public campuses less diverse and, therefore, less desirable. As one parent explained, "I see the disadvantages of the UC campuses like especially with 209 there's not a lot of diversity." One parent's historical perspective led her to encourage her child to go to an HBCU. "My child is looking more or less at the . . . Black colleges. . . the reason being with Prop. 209. . . see those kinda things don't bother us. Being a 60s child, I expected that stuff coming out. . . [so] I've always geared her to going to Black schools." Students, too, were mindful of the effect of Proposition 209. One senior went so far as to make plans to study abroad because of the impact of affirmative action cutbacks. He stated that he decided to attend college abroad because he believed it would be "easier to get into one of those [colleges] than stay in California and try to tackle all this." Another student was explicit in stating the relationship between changes in California's affirmative action policy and the attractiveness of HBCUs: "So, I prefer to go to an HBCU, where it's all minorities, and they wanted me then and they're gonna want me now. So that's my reason."

It is uncertain at this time how the Supreme Court rulings on the Michigan cases will impact African Americans' perceptions of opportunity. One thing is clear that many of the African Americans who participated in this study feel their opportunities are limited and that HBCUs provide an important avenue to an education and, in turn, a better life. Significantly, our respondents tied their perceptions of HBCUs to political concerns. Thus, HBCUs seem to be assuming an even more critical role in students' educational plans in the wake of affirmative action retrenchments. Not only are these schools perceived to offer opportunities for high-quality educations, but also they are seen as particularly welcoming by the African American men and women in our sample.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Our findings yield several suggestions for those HBCUs interested in increasing their accessibility for African American high school students. The students in our sample would benefit if more effective channeling and educational resources (particularly in the form of information) were available to them. In addition, our respondents pointed, sometimes unconsciously, to a desperate need for changes in the campus climate for African Americans within elite public colleges and universities, especially in California. Undoubtedly, these are concerns for African Americans outside of California, as well. Therefore, colleges and universities need to make it clearer that they welcome students of color on their campuses. The recent Supreme Court rulings in Michigan should positively impact African Americans' attitudes. However, the effects of that decision are yet to be seen.

Furthermore, our study confirms Litten's (1982) earlier findings that visits to HBCU campuses can be invaluable opportunities for African American high school students to learn about these institutions. For many of the students in this study, the campus visit was critical in their selection of an HBCU as the school of choice. Additionally, these students cited the importance of visits to their high schools by HBCU representatives. In other words, it is possible for HBCUs to come to students, as well as for students to go to HBCUs. Both HBCU representatives and high school counselors have roles to play in encouraging more interaction between high schools students and HBCUs, both in the form of visits to college campuses and visits from these campuses to high schools. Of course, the importance of parents and family members in encouraging these visits cannot be overstated. Moreover, our findings indicate that

parents already are quite supportive of HBCUs, in general, and of visits to these campuses, in particular.

Despite the importance of in-person visits, HBCUs would do well to increase the availability of printed and web-based information. As some students stated, they have a great deal of difficulty in obtaining information from HBCUs, and their written requests do not yield the specific information they need to make informed choices. This finding is consistent with Hawkins' (1993) conclusion that African Americans lacked adequate access to information on college admissions. Again, high school counselors have a role to play here, particularly in ensuring that information from HBCUs is accessible at high schools.

Of particular urgency is better information on the cost of higher education. More than twenty years ago, Litten (1982) found African Americans believed that financial aid is a very important factor in deciding on college options. Decades later, we found that the need for greater information on college costs remains a pressing issue since it was common for our respondents to have misinformation regarding the cost of college attendance.

As students and their families told us time and again, HBCUs are perceived as being more welcoming for African Americans than California's public institutions. The educational literature (i.e., Allen, 1992; Bonous-Hammarth & Boatsman, 1996; Davis, 1991; Fleming, 1984) shows that this perception is widespread. While our first set of recommendations for practice was aimed at HBCUs, our second major recommendation is meant for public institutions, especially in California. These schools must improve their outreach efforts. Numerous respondents told us that they perceived California's public colleges and universities in the wake of Proposition 209 as unwelcoming to African Americans and other students of color, and, as predominantly White campuses, when in fact they are among the most diverse in the country. The institutions must do a better job at letting students of color know that they are indeed welcome on their campuses.

LIMITATIONS

Our study contains two primary limitations. First, as stated, the goals of the larger study from which we drew our data were not directly related to an analysis of the role of HBCUs. Therefore, the comments analyzed were subject-driven, rather than researcher-driven. They were not the result of a protocol designed to tease out attitudes about HBCUs. Nevertheless, the fact that so many respondents spontaneously spoke about the role of HBCUs reflects the importance of these institutions to them and is in itself significant and worthy of analysis. Second, this study, like other qualitative studies, makes no claims regarding its generalizability (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The goal is to more fully understand the attitudes and perceptions of HBCUs that were discussed by our particular sample. In short, while we believe that the themes we uncovered have significance for HBCUs and the African American community in general, we acknowledge that our findings should not be interpreted as representative of the broader African American community. Indeed, some of our findings, such as students' reluctance to move away from their home state to attend an HBCU, have most immediate relevance for our California respondents and may not be an issue for those African Americans who live closer to HBCUs, which are concentrated in the southeastern United States. Nevertheless, much can be learned from the lessons of California in terms of perceptions of opportunity and access.

CONCLUSION

There were three primary questions for this study. The first dealt with perceptions of HBCUs by participants; the second explored perceived barriers in terms of college choice; and the third focused on specific attitudes regarding access in a post-affirmative action state. The overarching goal was to shed light on the ways in which HBCUs are perceived by students, counselors, and parents who might benefit from these institutions, but who do not have direct access to them because of the physical distance between them and the regions of the country in which HBCUs are located. The findings suggest that there is some difficulty gaining sufficient information on these schools; therefore, perceptions are based on attitudes and beliefs developed through anecdotal

information rather than solid information, in many cases. It was also found that students and parents do feel in this post-affirmative action climate that their options are limited and that these schools are there to serve them, when other institutions are not.

If these findings can help HBCUs (and California's public universities) discover how they can become more accessible to potential applicants, then the educational universe of those African American students who might be in the greatest need of more educational choices could be broadened. Furthermore, the study suggests more about the ways in which students choose their educational choices. It is hoped that this research can provide ideas for informational strategies of HBCUs as well as the counseling practices for those who work with the African American community. In conclusion, this research study indicates that information is the most precious commodity for would-be college students, and that the tendency to believe oneself to be "college material" must be developed and supported with every means available.

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