Chapter 5
Factors That Influence the Retention of Freshmen Students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A Theoretical Assessment

Samuel L. Hinton
Independent Researcher, USA

ABSTRACT
The research study was guided by such theories as social interactionist, student involvement framework, and student attrition framework that were to form the frame of references or foundation for the study. The social interactionist framework used students’ backgrounds characteristics; shared values and a friendship to explain behavior while the student attrition framework used intentions attitudes and beliefs. In integrating the two theories, the researcher was able to predict or explain the study outcomes and link them to the existing body of knowledge. This research presented the theoretical framework of the study on factors that affected retention among freshmen students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The research problem in this chapter was factors that affected retention among freshmen students at HBCUs. This research problem anchored the entire study and formed the basis of constructing the study’s theoretical framework. The key variables in this study were the freshmen students, theories, retention rates, and the factors affecting retention.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE RETENTION OF FRESHMEN STUDENTS AT HBCUS: THEORETICAL EXPLANATION

This chapter outlines the issues and challenges that influence the retention of freshmen students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s). A brief review of the literature yields numerous theoretical frameworks that have been studied and applied to determining the various factors that

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2998-9.ch005
affect the rate at which HBCUs are capable of retaining Black students. This chapter explores various studies, approaches and strategies that have been utilized to substantiate solutions and that underscore the importance of retention work specific to the HBCU setting. Exploring and understanding the work of a range of scholars and experts strengthens the perspective and recommendations outlined within the paper. This chapter methodically outlines these theories, their importance, how they apply to the topic of retention, how they apply to first-year students, and then explores the application of these theories and approaches to students at HBCUs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first year of a student’s college career is critical for long-term success and instrumental for future positive academic experiences. Students incorrectly perceive their admittance to college as the single most difficult element of the college-going process, but first-year students are often confronted with negotiating new responsibilities as well as developing a new identity as a college student. In the first year, students make the transition to college; hence, they must find their place within the greater campus community. Notably, there has to be social, academic and emotional adjustments, which depend on the students’ ability to manage their own limited resources, their course work as well as changing family relationships. Broadly speaking, freshman success entails developing academic and intellectual competencies, negotiating relationships, developing own identity, establishing a healthy lifestyle, pursuing a career choice, and developing a personal sense of civic duty.

The first-year in college is a challenging period for students, and it is particularly difficult for non-traditional students who may have come from underprivileged backgrounds. One of the important obstacles for these groups of students is a social, intellectual, and cultural disequilibrium within the college environment. Disequilibrium challenges students’ earlier assumptions as well as beliefs as they meet new people, ideas, and experiences. Secondly, the tension between challenge and support is equally important for traditionally under-represented groups. Institutions have the chance to express commitment to their students by continually communicating the high level of concern that exists for the well-being and development of its students. Ability of a student to adapt to college will depend more on the student’s perception of an institution’s level of commitment to the welfare of its students (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004). Nicpon et al. (2007) noted that students with high-perceived level of social support are less likely to feel lonely, but commit to higher levels of educational goals. However, another study by Conley & Hamlin (2009) revealed that a student of color who is from first-generation background encounter compounded obstacles to completing their college degree because most of college campuses expect such students to adapt successfully on their own to the new, often puzzling and culturally alienating environment.

Among freshmen Mexican American and Latino students, a successful first year is noteworthy. It is because of demographic trends as well as persistent educational gap between Mexican Americans and other Latinos, and Latinos with the White majority. Even though Latinos make up the largest as well as the fastest growing minority group in the US, their level of educational attainment remains lowest among other ethnic groups (Liu, 2011). Therefore, rising Latino enrollment presents a unique opportunity for HBCUs to attract these students to their institutions. HBCUs have, for a long time, been known for offering an education that not only uniquely meets black students’ aspirations, desires and goals but is also culturally relevant to them (Esmieu & Martinez, 2014). Previous studies have, however, failed to