Chapter 3

Sense of Belonging and Student Success at Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A Key to Strategic Enrollment Management and Institutional Transformation

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to posit sense of belonging as a key to educational success for all students, as well as a tool for strategic enrollment management and student success at HBCUs. Drawing connections between a recent survey of KIPP alumni and literature about HBCUs, this chapter reviews extant literature on the history and significance of Black colleges, the faculty and staff employed by HBCUs, and students educated at HBCUs. Then, the chapter posits sense of belonging as a critical factor in their academic success, using Strayhorn’s theory of college students belonging. Strong implications for policy, practice, and programs are included.

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INTRODUCTION

A recent survey of over 3,000 alumni of the country’s largest charter school network, Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), revealed that 72% of KIPP alumni attending historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) felt “like they belong at [their] school,” compared to just 61% of non-HBCU KIPP alumni enrolled elsewhere. News of these findings made national headlines in major venues such as Education Week, Chronicle of Higher Education, and even Inside HigherEd, with most reports subtly implying questions like: Could this be true? How could this be possible? And what’s the underlying cause? To fully appreciate the significance of the survey’s results and the many questions they raise, one must know a bit about the KIPP charter school network and even more about HBCUs.

KIPP is a public charter school network comprised of more than 200 schools nationwide. KIPP schools enroll nearly 90,000 students in grades pre-K through 12. KIPP students are predominantly low-income students of color: 95% are African-American or Latino and 90% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, as set by federal poverty guidelines. Approximately 11,000 KIPP alumni are enrolled in college, many at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), HBCUs, and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs). Generally, KIPP alumni graduate from 4-year colleges at rates higher than the national average and KIPP college graduation rates are nearly 4 times higher than that of students from similar economic backgrounds who attend non-KIPP K-12 schools (Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, Pathak, & Walters, 2012).

There are other things one should know about KIPP to appreciate the significance of the headlines about sense of belonging and student success at HBCUs. One study of KIPP students found that one in 4 KIPP alumni financially support other family members while in college. It also found that 40% of KIPP alumni struggle with food insecurity, skipping meals in college just to help make financial ends meet. Taken together, these data points make clear that KIPP alumni represent a demographic that likely face significant difficulties in college as low-income students of color with limited resources. With so many factors threatening their odds for academic success, how is it that 72% of KIPP alumni attending HBCUs feel a stronger sense of belonging than their KIPP alumni peers attending PWIs elsewhere? And how does this relate to their odds for success in college?

Quite frankly, I believe these are the central questions of a larger debate. Close analysis of headline stories, however, reveals an interesting (even if unobvious) pivot in perspective. Most published stories seem to ask: What about KIPP causes students to fare so well in and adjust so smoothly to college life at HBCUs? The question is rarely framed as what is it about HBCUs that seems to accommodate such students—students from all walks of life—so well? This is the relevant question. In fact, I believe that the polemics of the debate have more to do with student
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