

# Student Retention Through The Lens Of Campus Climate, Racial Stereotypes, And Faculty Relationships

Derrick Love, Ed. D., Grand Canyon University, USA

## ABSTRACT

*Higher Education Institutions are seeing increased retention rates among African-American college students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Institutional barriers such as unwelcoming campus climates, racial stereotypes, and faculty relationships have raised concerns as viable factors as to why the attrition rate for African-American students at PWIs is still on the rise. Ninety African-American college students participated in the Culture Attitude and Climate (CACS) survey. This study revealed a direct relationship between campus climate, racial stereotypes, and faculty relationships and student retention in African-American students attending a predominantly white institution. There was a statistically positive correlation between the perceptions of African-American students pertaining to student retention and campus climate, racial stereotypes, and faculty relationships at a predominantly white institution. African-American students want to be a part of an inclusive academic body that promotes diversity and student success.*

## INTRODUCTION

The recruitment and retention of minority students remains one of higher education's most pressing issues. As a result of this growing problem, conference leaders and educational stakeholders will receive detailed information on how to revitalize and reform educational diversity transformational leadership. Seventy percent of African-Americans who attended Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) did not complete their baccalaureate education, compared to the 20% of African-Americans who attended historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Davis et al., 2004). The Desegregation Act of 1964 perpetuated an ideology of equal representation and open-door admission for people of color into any federally funded public institution. However, the results of that effort fell short of proposed or projected estimates (Davis et al.). Research suggested that African-American students had not fared well in PWIs. These students had lower persistence rates, lower academic achievement levels, less likelihood of enrollment in advanced degree programs, poorer overall psychosocial adjustment, and lower graduation and occupational earnings (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991). In addition, African-American students were more likely to be the target of direct and indirect discrimination (Suarez-Balcazar, Orellana-Damacela, Portillo, Rowen, & Andrews-Guillen, 2003).

Since public education integration, PWIs attracted African-American students; however, their retention and graduation success rates continued to be problematic (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Davis et al., 2004; Farley, 2002; Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2001; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000; Schwitzer, Griffen, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999; Suarez-Balcazar, Orellana-Damacela, Portillo, Rowan, & Andrews-Gullien, 2000). Colleges and universities with fewer minority students treat these students as symbols. African-American students might experience isolation on campus rather than living as individuals sending a message, which suggested that maintaining diversity was not an institutional priority (Braddock II, 1981; Carter, 1999). Braddock (1981) noted that PWIs often promoted hidden agendas about curriculum regarding minority students (African-Americans, in particular), which were: (a) internal and external environmental factors of alienation, (b) anxiety driven behaviors, such as test anxiety, (c) social adjustment problems, and (d) overall acceptance. Therefore, these fundamental barriers promoted low graduation rates among African-American students. Because of the difficulties

in social and academic adjustments at PWIs, the probability of successful completion for many African-American students was slight (Braddock).

In contrast, HBCUs facilitated the academic development and socialization of African-American students, including their participation with peers, faculty and staff, engagement in the life of the campus, and feelings of academic success (Carter, 1999). Alienation, racially stereotypical behaviors of peers and faculty, and unwelcoming social climates do not promote graduation success of African-Americans seeking undergraduate degrees at PWIs. Braddock II (1981) posited that African-American students attending PWIs dropped out at a much higher rate than their white classmates and were less likely to complete four-year degree programs in four years than their African-American counterparts attending HBCUs. Carter (1999) noted that race, ethnicity and socioeconomic factors affected student retention reflected by the low completion rates of African-American students at PWIs. Furr and Elling (2002) claimed the educational disparity between graduation rates of African-American students and white students continued to present challenges in higher education.

### **SIGNIFICANCE TO LEADERSHIP**

All cultures coexist by collaborating, sharing, exchanging ideologies and theoretical perspectives, which represents the diversity that academia strives to achieve. Desegregation promoted progress toward a universal picture of diversity, but individual uniqueness and color still presented a problem for higher education (Hallenger, 2003). The recruitment, retention, and graduation of minority students were valuable concerns facing higher education and remained one of higher education's most pressing issues, as fewer minority students persevered to graduation (Holmes et al., 2001, p. 42). Higher education learning communities lack the diversity needed to infuse a multicultural society. Institutional barriers hindered diverse learning communities.

As higher education seeks to diversify its student population, the current study aids the reform process by presenting quantitative data to enhance, redirect, and shape policies of colleges and universities in achieving diversity (Brotherton, 2001). Educational leaders, college presidents, and administrators can utilize the research in creating change at their respective institutions. Implementing policies and programs to increase student retention was the key to building learning communities that reflect a diverse society (Braddock, 1981). Integration of diverse components, such as cultural events, mentoring programs, and professional development workshops, builds a framework for transformational leadership, bridges gaps that encompass the whole person rather than partially connecting individuals and cultures and creates changes to increase minority retention. The cornerstone of education is diversity and the equality of all involved in the educational process (Hallenger, 2003) and change builds through transformational leadership. Transformational leadership permits educational institutions to enact institutional change through a shared and authentic vision; it creates a learning environment that engages a shared community.

### **THE PROBLEM**

Higher education communities struggle with the pressing issue of student retention and academic success of African-American students attending PWIs (Hallenger, 2003). Numerous researchers contributed significant studies regarding African-American student failures at PWIs (Allen et al., 1991; Davis, 1994; Davis & Lasane, 1994; Holmes et al., 2001; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Nettles, 1990; Pascerella & Terenzini, 1991; Turner, 1994). Fleming (1984), in a comparison study of HBCUs and predominantly White institutions, found that African-American students on White campuses felt the campus environments were hostile and unsupportive of their social and cultural needs. Lewis et al. (2000) described the dynamics of racial stereotyping, pressures of assimilation, exclusion, interpersonal awkwardness, affirmative action, institutional context, the college curriculum and faculty as barriers that hindered African-Americans and minorities from achieving academic success at PWIs. Patterson-Stewart, Ritchie, and Sanders (1997) cited the experiences of recent African-American doctoral graduates at PWIs. The researchers found that students had difficulty maintaining and establishing interpersonal relationships with non-minority students in the academic community.

Several researchers found that racial discrimination, both inside and outside the classroom, social isolation, exclusion, institutional abandonment, and lack of consistency between the institution and the student, impacted student retention (Allen et al., 1991; Davis, 1994; Davis & Lasane, 1994; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Nettles, 1990;

Pascarella & Turner, 1994). According to Allen et al., Davis, Davis and Lasane, Loo and Rolison, Nettles, and Pascarella and Terenzini, these factors affected the formation of relationships and hindered interpersonal relationships with faculty, peers, and academic staff, which contributed to the adverse experiences of minority students at PWIs.

**CAMPUS CLIMATE**

Racial tension resurfaced in the late 1980s and 1990s on college campuses in the United States, with students protesting about the inequalities at PWIs (Lewis et al., 2000). This tension began in the 1960s, with African-American students stereotyped by their white peers and faculty and received as conditional admits (Cabrera et al., 1999; Davis et al., 2004; Farley, 2002; Holmes et al., 2001; Lewis et al.). Stereotypical views and unwelcoming campus climates create hardships for African-American students at PWIs. From an African-American perspective, the racial climate at PWIs was never good (Lewis et al.). In a study by Mow and Nettles (1990), ninety percent of African-American students claimed that feelings of alienation and loneliness promoted reasons for dropping out.

Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) validated that African-American students faced more negative experiences than any other minority group. The exclusion from mainstream activities, access to academic networks, financial support, and isolation were several themes that continued to be problematic for African-American students. African-American students expressed their lack of access to campus networks that were available to their white peers. White students rarely associated with them or attempted to include them in study groups, in class activities, and other social networks. Thus, African-American students viewed themselves as invisible and not a part of the broader culture (Ancis et al.).

**RACIAL STEREOTYPES**

Racial stereotypes are identifiable factors that create unsupportive learning environments for African-American students at PWIs. Racial segregation and stereotypical behaviors marked a history of unequal treatment and inequality for African-Americans. African-American students spend an enormous amount of time trying to establish their credibility at PWIs. Constant opposition caused African-American students to internalize the stereotypes from their white peers, which might have an affect on their intellectual functioning and performance. These various racial constructs affected the motivation, morale, and success of African-American college students (Fries-Britt, & Turner, 2001).

**FACULTY RELATIONSHIPS**

Faculty relationships were an essential component in assisting African-American college students at PWIs to achieve success. Guiffrida (2005) argued that faculty relationships affected student satisfaction, academic achievement, and retention. Research showed an increase of interaction amongst African-American students and white faculty at PWIs (Eimers, & Pike, 1996; Fries, & Turner, 2002; Guiffrida, 2004, 2005). Although African-American students responded favorably to the increase in faculty interaction, the quality of conversation going beyond the surface was minimal (Eimers, & Pike, 1996). African-American students noted the unprecedented absence of faculty relationships due to a lack of quality time spent in and outside the classroom. The findings within this research study yielded significant findings linking student retention to campus climate and racial stereotypes as indicated in table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Overall Regression Coefficients for Student Retention to Predictor Variables**

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Campus Climate	1.382	.389	.485	3.526	.001
Racial Stereotypes	.348	.158	-.301	-2.207	.032
Faculty Relationships	3.900	.275	.192	1.419	.162
GPA	.033	.277	-.016	-.118	.907

Specifically, campus climate ( $t(54) = 3.526$ ) was significant and positively related to student retention; racial stereotypes ( $t(54) = -2.207$ ) was significantly and negatively associated with student retention.

The significant levels for African-American students at PWI fell under the  $p < .05$  significance level for campus climate ( $p = .028$ ) and racial stereotypes ( $p = .042$ ). Faculty relationships were not significant ( $p = .200$ ). On the other hand, racial stereotypes ( $p = .939$ ) and faculty relationships ( $p = .633$ ) were not significant predictors for HBCU students. Campus climate approached significance ( $p = .056$ ). Although there was evidence of significant relationships between student retention and the perceptions of African-American students, the significant predictor variables differed for students at the PWI compared to students at the HBCU. The most significant variable predicting student retention for students at the PWI and at the HBCU was campus climate (see Table 2).

**Table 2**  
**HBCU and PWI Regression Coefficient for Student Retention and Predictor Variables**

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<b>HBCU</b>					
Campus Climate	1.329	.643	.649	2.069	.056
Racial Stereotypes	-.033	.421	-.023	-.078	.939
Faculty Relationships	-.221	.454	-.121	-.488	.633
<b>PWI</b>					
Campus Climate	1.533	.665	.348	2.306	.028
Racial Stereotypes	-.424	.199	-.328	-2.129	.042
Faculty Relationships	.847	.346	.391	2.448	.200

The composite outcome variable (overall satisfaction) was significant ( $p = .001$ ) indicating a difference in performance factors (GPA and graduation rates) for African-American students at the HBCU and PWI. The composite C (overall student experience) was also significant ( $p = .001$ ); this suggest a trend in the data for supporting the alternative hypothesis regarding performance factors (GPA and graduation rates). However, the models as a whole were not significant.

**SOLUTION**

The findings were consistent with previous research. Davis et al. (2004) noted that more HBCUs are graduating more African-American students than PWIs. In addition, African-American students at PWIs experience unwelcoming campus climates. African-American students represented on these campuses feel isolated from the general body. These students become racial stereotypes due to their skin color and receive minimum interaction with faculty outside the academic classroom (Allen et al., 1991; Davis, 1994; Davis & Lasane, 1994). The data yielded a relatively high correlation between faculty relationships and student retention for African-American students. Guiffrida (2005) noted from his research that faculty relationships were an essential component of student satisfaction, academic achievement, and retention.

Determining the appropriate diversity initiative for PWI campuses is paramount in retaining African-American students. Institutional leaders, campus policy makers, and teachers can better understand how to develop and implement diversity initiatives by looking at current and past research and taking active measures such as semiannual meetings, open forums, and student and faculty surveys regarding the academic and racial climate on college campuses. These types of ongoing dialogues and surveys explore possibilities and solutions to create harmonious learning communities. Open dialogue and ongoing evaluations provide awareness was the hallmark of Luhmann's social systems theory, which allowed educational leaders and institutions to craft training and educational programs and forums to create an educational ethos that is conducive, equitable, and fair for all minority students. Policymaking is about creating effective change for all minorities at PWIs who feel their campus climate is unwelcoming, who endure racial stereotypes, and feel a lack of satisfactory faculty relationships.

## CONCLUSION

Over 50 years later, African-American students are still not receiving equality and equitable treatment at PWIs. The time for change is critical as more African-American students are entering PWIs. The shortage of African-American graduates from these respective college campuses, compared to HBCUs, created a 40% graduation rate gap (Davis et al., 2004). The development and successful implementation of diversity programs is critical for student success. The current study will help to develop for change at PWIs as it pertains to African-American students and student retention. Institutional leaders will be able to use the project data to reinforce why African-American students entering their respective colleges and universities should not feel alienated or subjected to racial inequality but embraced by an academic community that respects and welcomes diversity. In addition, institutional leaders and policy makers can use Luhmann's social systems theory to create effective change that will enrich the lives of institutions and improve their educational mission, vision, curricula and teaching practices. This will help the academic community understand the need for student, faculty, and support staff of diversity initiatives as it seeks to meet the needs of African-American students.

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

**Derrick Love** is a native of Spencer, Oklahoma. He currently resides in Lewisville, Texas, as an elementary school principal and online faculty member at Grand Canyon University, where he teaches undergraduate and graduate level courses in education, business, and communication. He has an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from the University of Phoenix, an MA in Communication Arts from Southwestern Theological Seminary, and a BA in Psychology from Langston University. Derrick has spent the last ten years working in the field of education. He has taught school at the elementary, middle, high school, and collegiate levels in the public, private, and charter sectors

## REFERENCES

1. Ancis, J. R., Sedlacek, W. E., & Mohr, J. J. (2000). Students' perceptions of campus climate by race. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 78*, 180-186.
2. Allen, W. R., Epps, E. G., Guillory, E. A., Suh, S. A., & Bonous, M. (2000). The Black academic: Faculty status among African-Americans in U. S. higher education. *The Journal of Negro Education, 69*(1/2), 112-127.
3. Allen, W., Epps, E., & Haniff, N. (1991). College in black and white campuses: What quality the experience? In M. Nettles (Ed.), *Toward black undergraduate student equality in American higher education* (pp. 57-86). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
4. Anderson, J. D. (1988). *The education of blacks in the south, 1860-1935*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
5. Austin, A. W. (1996). Involvement in learning revisited: Lessons we have learned. *Journal of College Student Development, 37*(1), 123-134.
6. Brotherton, P. (2001). It takes a campus to graduate a student. *Black Issues in Higher Education, 18*(18), 34-43.
7. Bristow, M. (2002). Subjective well-being of African-American students attending historically black colleges and white universities: A qualitative research. *XULAnEXUS: The Internet Journal by Xavier University Students, 2*(2), 1-11. Retrieved February 11, 2006, from <http://www.xula.edu/xulanexus/issue2/Bristol.html>
8. Davis, M., Dias-Bowie, Y., Greenberg, K., Klukken, G., Pollio, H. R., Thomas, S. P. et al. (2004). A fly in the buttermilk: Descriptions of university life by successful black undergraduate students at a predominantly white southeastern university. *The Journal of Higher Education, 75*(4), 420-445.
9. Fries-Britt, S. F., & Turner, B. (2001). Facing stereotypes: A case study of black students on a white campus. *Journal of College Student Development, 42*(1), 420-430.
10. Gloria, A. M., Kurpius, R. S., Hamilton, K. D., & Wilson, M. S. (1999). African-American students' persistence at a predominantly white university: Influences of social support, university comfort, and self-beliefs. *Journal of College Student Development, 40*(1), 257-268.
11. Hallenger, P. (2003). Leading educational change: Reflections on the practice of instructional and transformational leadership. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 33*(3), 329-351.

12. Holmes, L. S., Ebbers, L. H., Robinson, D. C., & Mugenda, A. B. (2001). Validating African-American students at predominantly white institutions. *J. College Student Retention*, 2(1), 41-58.
13. Lewis, A. E., Chesler, M., & Forman, T. A. (2000). The impact of colorblind ideologies on students of color: Intergroup relations at a predominantly white university [Electronic version]. *Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1/2), 74-91.
14. Mow, S. L., & Nettles, M. T. (1990). Minority access to and persistence and performance in college: A review of trends in the literature. In J. Smith (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 35-105).
15. Sedlacek, W. E. (1999). Black students on white campuses: 20 years of research. *Journal of College Student Development*, 40(5), 538-551.
16. Schwitzer, A. M., Griffen, O. T., Ancis, J. R., & Thomas, C. R. (1999). Social adjustment experiences of African-American college students. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 70, 18-197.
17. Terenzini, P. T., Yeager, P. M., Bohr, L., Pascarella, E. T., & Amaury, N. (1997). *African-American college student's experiences in HBCU's and PWLs and learning outcomes*. Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U. S. Department of Education.
18. Wilds, D. J. (2000). Executive summary. In *Minorities in higher education 1999-2000: Seventeenth Annual Status Report* (pp. 1-8) Washington, DC: American Council on Education.