

2016

The Influence of Historically Black Colleges and Universities Experience on First Year Retention

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Andrea White-McNeil

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Walden University
2016

Abstract

The Influence of Historically Black Colleges and Universities Experience on First Year
Retention

by

Andrea White-McNeil

MHM, University of Houston, 2003

BS, Huston-Tillotson University, 2001

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Walden University

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Abstract

Student retention in higher education, specifically after the first year, has long been a focus of institutional strategies, especially among students with financial, academic, and social risk factors. The issue of retention was a priority for administration at the 4-year private Sea Port University, a historically black university in the southern United States, which is the focus of this case study. The university has shown a rapid decline in its retention rate since the period 2008 – 2012. The purpose of this study was to identify students' perceptions of factors in their Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) experience and the influence on retention. The theoretical framework was Chickering and Chickering and Reisser's psychosocial theory of development. Terenzini and Reason's college impact model was the conceptual framework. A qualitative research design using case study methodology was utilized. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 8 African American full-time students who had completed at least one year at Sea Port University. Data analysis included an inductive thematic analysis. The findings indicated students were positively influenced by culturally responsive factors in their HBCU experiences such as developing a sense of lineage in the organizational context, which were reflective of elements of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. A white paper with suggestions for building organizational contexts was constructed as a project. The findings are central to the provision of an all-encompassing environment for the successful matriculation of African American students, thus influencing positive social change for the students at the institution, in the local area, and at other historically black colleges and universities throughout the nation.

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Dedication

I dedicate this body of work to my family, without whom my achievement would not have been possible.

To my dad, Claude, posthumously, who always encouraged me to get my doctoral degree;

To my mom, Estera, for her continuous love;

To my dearest siblings, Wayne, Kevin and Claudia, for their encouragement and support;

Most importantly, to my husband, Dwight, and daughter, Shantel, for enduring the sacrifices over the last five years.

I love you all.

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I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13). I first acknowledge God Almighty, without whom nothing is possible.

I express sincere appreciation to the members of my committee: Drs. David Mathieu, Edward Garten and Karen Hunt. Their expertise and criticisms were invaluable; the guidance, support and encouragement they provided were priceless. I was blessed to have such a committee, and I take all their lessons with me.

I extend deepest gratitude to my family, friends, colleagues and students, who in their constant queries, thoughts and prayers, kept me striving to the pinnacle. I must single out my colleague and sister, Ruth, for being my sounding board, friend and confidante; our friendship is greatly valued. Sometimes words fail to express our thanks to our immediate family, but I owe my greatest debt to Dwight and Shantel, because of your sacrifices, support and love, I have realized my ultimate educational goal.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

Student retention has been a focus of institutional strategies since the 1960s (Berger, Blanco Ramírez, & Lyons, 2012), especially among students with financial, academic, and social risk factors, and specifically after the first year. According to Engle, Tinto, and the Pell Institute (2008), 26% of low-income, first-generation students do not return to college after the first year, a major concern for historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in general, and Sea Port University (SPU) in particular. Since the establishment of the first institution, Cheyney University in 1837, HBCUs have provided educational opportunities for students of color, particularly low-income, first-generation students. Freeman, as cited by the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) Report (2010), indicated African Americans choose HBCUs for the personal affiliation, history, and legacy these institutions provide. The report further describes the environment as empowering, inspiring, movement centers, with a family-like atmosphere, a tendency to small class sizes, and congenial student-faculty relationships; fulfilling Chickering's (n.d.) assertion that institutions develop students as they advance "...in a social, historical and cultural context" (p. 3). This setting, called the HBCU experience, provides an atmosphere of belongingness and acceptance for African American students to develop and establish identities, intellect, and community.

However, Crow (2007) indicated first year students at HBCUs are more likely to drop out at rates higher than at other colleges and universities (p.1), as HBCUs saw approximately 33% first year students drop out annually over the past 50 – 60 years (p.

2). To demonstrate, data at SPU reflect an average first year retention rate of 67% during the 2008 – 2012 period, with a decline from 70% in 2009 to 63% in 2012 (W. Walter, personal communication, June 26, 2014). Thus, addressing the issue of retention at the first year is a priority at SPU, a private, four-year, United Methodist-affiliated HBCU in the southern United States.

Section 1 of this project study on the HBCU experience and its influence on first year retention clearly identifies the problem of retention at SPU, presenting a rationale for examining this issue and the relationship of this issue to the larger sphere of HBCUs. In this section I present (a) definitions of key terms, (b) an explanation of study significance, and (c) the guiding research questions for the study. The literature review contains a critical review of first year retention, student development, HBCUs and the HBCU experience, alongside the conceptual frameworks of Chickering's (1969) and Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors of development model and Terenzini and Reason's (2005) college impact model. The section concludes with a discussion of the implications for conducting this research.

Definition of the Problem

First year student retention is a persistent issue, not just for SPU, but also for universities across the nation. Lee (2012) posited, "as the costs associated with gaining a higher education continue to increase, institutional effectiveness and efficiency as measured by first-year retention and 6-year graduation rates, is of major concern" (p. 8). As well, previous researchers have indicated low-income first-generation students face numerous obstacles to college success, are more apt to fail, and the retention of these

students may be impacted by the college experiences they undergo (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 1993). In Fall 2013, SPU enrolled 3,724 undergraduate students, 91% of whom were African Americans, 78% Pell Grant recipients, and attaining an average GPA of 2.76 (W. Walter, personal communication, March 31, 2014). Thus, according to W. Walter (personal communication, March 31, 2014), the issue of first year retention continues to be a focus of SPU's administration, because the institution serves a large economically and academically disadvantaged, first-generation college student population.

As stated by Berger et al. (2012), retention is a "...campus-based phenomenon" (p. 8), thus requiring individual institutions and campuses to fit *their* retention strategies to the needs of *their* students and the idiosyncrasies of *their* environments. Therefore, because SPU prides itself on an open admissions policy and attracts a population with a high percentage of low-income, first-generation, academically disadvantaged students, it is imperative that the institution improves its retention rate in order to prove its worth (W. Walter, personal communication, March 31, 2014). Additionally, because retention is a measure of efficiency and effectiveness (Lee, 2012), curtailing freshman dropout rates will improve academic excellence of students and enhance SPU's U.S. News and World Report Best College ranking. Continuing its service to the low-income, first-generation, academically disadvantaged student population will effect social change as the institution fulfills its mission to produce global leaders and social change agents. Thus, attention to the issue of retention will improve the institution's credibility rating, access to funding sources, visibility and options to survive a volatile market.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

According to the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems Information Center (NCHEMS), the average first-year retention rate for 4-year colleges in 2010 was 72.1% nationally and 77.9% in the state of Florida. The statistics for private, nonprofit institutions in 2010 were 79.4% nationally, 70.1% for Florida and 69% for SPU. During the period 2004 – 2010, the retention statistic for SPU fluctuated dramatically, consistently below the national average and surpassing the state average only one year. Additionally, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Data Center (IPEDS) reported SPU's retention statistics for the years 2008 – 2012, showing a steady decline since a peak of 71% in 2009 to 64% in 2012. Consequently, the institution's average retention rate of 67% is 18 percentage points lower than the national average of 85%, according to IPEDS.

These statistics indicate the institution's inability to retain students after the first year. Thus, administrators are concerned regarding this steady decline and have declared an emphasis on improving retention rates as a priority for the new strategic plan. It is imperative that administrators identify the causes of this issue, because, if unattended, the institution runs the risk of losing a healthy, stable student body and needed revenue. Additionally, improving the institution's retention rate will demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness, as the institution strives to accomplish its new vision of perfecting academic excellence and enhancing its U.S. News and World Report Best College ranking. Thus, an investigation of the HBCU experience at SPU and the influence on

retention will inform the institution's policies, practices, and retention efforts, guiding possible solutions to resolving this issue.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

The transition between high school and college can be a traumatic one for students and it is the responsibility of universities to reduce the stress factors related to the transition, while increasing student success and retention. Several researchers have identified academic, economic, institutional, and psychosocial variables, among others, as those that have hindered matriculation through the second year (Bennett & Kane, 2010; Broton, 2009; Moses et al., 2011). A student's college readiness level is indicated by the high school Grade Point Average (GPA) and scores of the standardized aptitude tests including the SAT and ACT. Sacks (2010) theorized that, in the higher education market, the use of SAT and ACT scores in the admission selection process is an indicator of institutional status. Therefore, the higher the SAT or ACT score, the more likely enrollees are to persist, which increases the retention rate, ranking, and status of the institution. However, the 2011 ACT results indicated that only 4% of African Americans met benchmarks in all four subjects, and that 50% did not meet any benchmarks (Paulson, 2011). Accordingly, African American students are at a disadvantage for identification by institutions that are more selective. Additionally, as stated by Broton (2009), the entire school system, from early childhood to college, showed evidence of an achievement gap by race/ethnicity and income levels. The low-income families are overrepresented in resource-stricken schools with low quality teachers and less challenging curriculum (Broton, 2009). As well, other researchers (Garcia Bedolla,

2010; Vance, 2009) also indicated that socioeconomic status (SES) is a factor in this under preparedness issue. According to Vance (2009), families with low SES live in communities with class-based perceptions that college is neither necessary nor attainable; a perception perpetuated by teachers and counselors in the schools. In addition, Garcia Bedolla (2010) posited this group would less likely have access to programs and services necessary to make the transition from high school to college. Therefore, these students approach college underprepared for the rigors of college education and are more likely to drop out.

According to O’Keeffe (2013), creating a sense of belonging is one way institutions reduce the stress factor for students and enhance the retention rate. Thus, when the Second Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1890 enabled the establishment of more higher education institutions especially for students of color, it created an educational environment in which African Americans felt a sense of belonging. Consequently, the Higher Education Act of 1965 defined HBCUs as institutions established prior to 1964, with the sole purpose of educating African Americans (Association for the Study of Higher Education Report, 2010, p. 2). As indicated by Freeman, cited by the ASHE Report (2010), African Americans choose HBCUs for the personal affiliation, history and legacy these institutions provide (p. 29). The report further describes these environments as empowering, inspiring, movement centers, with a family-like atmosphere, a tendency to small class sizes, and congenial student-faculty relationships. This creates an environment that fulfills Chickering’s (n.d.) assertion that student development occurs within social, historical, and cultural settings.

Wingate (1979, 2006), examined self-concept, selected demographic and academic variables, student expectations, and student experiences as they relate to attrition. Wingate (1979, 2006) concluded the HBCU experience develops a sense of pride and belonging in students who may be experiencing such for the first time, causing heightened ambitions and elevated self-concept (p. 113). Brown (2014) in interviews of present HBCU students highlighted their reasons for attending these institutions in the descriptions of the environment being friendly, embracing, and warm and that they were looking for a life-changing experience that would transform them as individuals. Another respondent related that stories and experiences he heard from older relatives, mentors, and alumni at his church, led him to the place where African Americans were in the majority and working toward academic excellence (Brown, 2014). Additionally, some classes and extra-curricular activities that directly relate to the African American culture provide a strong sense of community and involvement where there is an African American majority (Fletcher, 2014). Thus, the cultural influences, social organizations, small class sizes, student-faculty-staff relationships, family-like atmosphere, open-door policies of the HBCU all combine to provide a sense of identity and heritage within the goals of education, resulting in a unique experience.

As indicated by Nelms (2010), HBCUs serve 12% of all African American undergraduates, but are responsible for 30% of all African American baccalaureate graduates, continuing their mission to "...enroll and graduate...this traditionally disenfranchised minority" (p. 15). This, a direct response to legislation such as *Brown v. Board of Education, 1954* and The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which opened the doors of

predominantly white institutions (PWIs) to students of color (ASHE Report, 2010, p. 8).

Therefore, HBCUs do not have a monopoly on the education of African American students, and must compete with PWIs in attracting and retaining students. To this end, HBCUs provide its students an environment labelled the HBCU experience. Previous research (ASHE Report, 2010; Palmer & Gasman, 2008) indicate HBCUs provide a family-like atmosphere, are empowering, nurturing, inspiring, movement centers, and foster the history and legacy of the African American ethnicity and identity.

Consequently, these institutions produced social change agents such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Thurgood Marshall, and Jesse Jackson, whose names and actions are synonymous with the education, identity development, equality, and civil rights struggles of the African American people; SPU boasts founding by a civil rights activist, and produced some influential advocates in its time. Hence, researchers posit, African American students of HBCUs are more socially and community conscious, culturally aware, with higher career aspirations and more graduate and professional degrees than those of PWIs (Palmer, Davis, & Gasman, 2011). Yet, HBCUs, and SPU specifically, still struggle with the issue of student retention, especially after the first year.

As HBCUs compete for students, the institutions recognize the expanding competitive field in which they operate. As indicated by Newman, Couturier, & Scurry (2004), the higher education industry is changing to one in which there is more dependence on market forces (p. 9), and HBCUs must adjust to operate within this market. Therefore, an examination of the students' perception of the HBCU experience and its influence on retention will assist the preservation of an institutional environment

that projects a sense of belonging for African American students to develop and establish identities, intellect, and community. Thus, this preserved institutional environment developing African American identities, intellect, and community, may be a recruiting tool as the institution competes for students. Additionally, SPU will be able to apply Berger et al.'s (2012) concept to create an institutional retention strategy that fits the SPU environment and student.

Definitions

First year student: A student who has completed less than the equivalent of one full year of undergraduate work (U.S. Department of Education, <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/glossary/>, 2014)

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs): Institutions established prior to 1964, with the sole purpose of educating African Americans (ASHE Report, 2010)

Retention: Ability of an institution to retain a student from admission through graduation (Berger et al., 2012)

Retention rate: A measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution, expressed as a percentage. For four-year institutions, this is the percentage of first-time bachelors (or equivalent) degree-seeking undergraduates from the previous fall who are again enrolled in the current fall. (U.S. Department of Education, <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/glossary/>, 2014)

Significance

This case study was an analysis of students' perceptions on the influence of the HBCU experience on their decision to return to SPU at the end of the first year. The

identified gap in practice was the absence of attention to the total development of the young adult in retention strategies. According to Chickering and Goddard Coll. (n.d.), the total college environment needs knowledgeable and meticulous consideration when providing service to all the vectors of development of a young adult. The term “vectors,” as adopted by Chickering (1969) and Chickering and Reisser (1993), aligns the development process with a journey along highways, because the authors do not profess development in stages or as age-specific; thus, the highway allows for interaction with groups and society, impacting the individual, but not limited by time. Previous researchers have focused on the historical context of HBCUs, student development theories, and retention strategies for solving academic and financial issues (ASHE Report, 2010; Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; Seidman, 2012). There are no studies on the influence of the HBCU experience on retention. This information is central to the provision of an all-encompassing environment for the successful matriculation of African American students. At SPU, 2012-2013 institutional statistics indicate 78% of first-year students are African-American, with an average GPA of 2.76, and a freshman retention rate of 64%. Additionally, 98% of the total student population received financial aid in the form of grants, scholarships, and/or loans. As administrators adopt programs to address the academic and financial risk factors, examining the SPU students’ perceptions on the influence of the HBCU experience on their decision to return, will assist in the preservation of an institutional environment that projects a sense of belonging to enhance retention in the first year. Thus, applying Berger et al.’s (2012)

concept to create an institutional retention strategy that fits the SPU environment and student.

Guiding/Research Questions

In spite of efforts of administration at SPU to stem the attrition of students after the first year, the issue continues to persist. Although past researchers reflect institutions applying retention strategies aimed at the issues of financial and/or academic weaknesses (Porter & Swing, 2006; Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006), there are no studies on the unique opportunity of HBCUs influence on retention strategies. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the students' perception of the influence of the HBCU experience on their decision to return to SPU at the end of the first year. This will assist the institution in assessing the experience and its influence in fulfilling the mission to educate, develop and empower the African American population. Therefore, the questions guiding this study were:

1. What are the perceptions of African American students of the HBCU experience at SPU?
2. What are the perceptions of African American students on the influence of the HBCU experience on their decision to return to SPU after their first year at the institution?

A qualitative research case study design was most appropriate as, according to Merriam (2009), it (a) focuses on a specific situation, place, or event; (b) provides rich, thick description of the concept; and (c) offers concrete and contextual information to enhance the learning of the reader. Thus, a description of the students' perceptions of the

HBCU experience at SPU may provide insights about the influence the HBCU experience has on the students' return decisions. This is intended to illuminate the success, or failure, of SPU in fulfilling the mission to educate, develop and empower the African American population, and will assist in the preservation, or enhancement, of a caring and welcoming institutional environment that augments retention in the first year.

Review of the Literature

This review is a comprehensive summary of the literature on the HBCU experience and the influence it has on the return decisions of African American students. Database searches were conducted using the Walden University online library, textbooks, and Google Scholar. The Walden University online library provided access to several databases, including Academic Search Complete, ERIC, ProQuest Central, PsycINFO, and Thoreau that were used in this proposal. Saturation was achieved when search terms continuously returned the same articles within the databases.

There is very little research incorporating all elements of the proposal topic. A search for the HBCU experience returned several articles; however, only four combined the terms HBCU and experience, three of which looked at football and marching bands. Additionally, though there is a plethora of research on retention and first year retention, the term first year retention at HBCUs yielded no results while a search for retention at HBCUs yielded articles on retention in STEM areas and gender-based studies. The use of Google Scholar with the same terms resulted in a cornucopia of textbooks, and a repeat of articles.

Theoretical Frameworks

Chickering (1969) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) posited a psychosocial theory of development, especially applicable during the early adulthood life stages. According to Chickering and Reisser the journey toward individuation comprises a set of vectors through which students' progress in a complex, non-linear fashion. These seven vectors are (a) developing competence, (b) managing emotions, (c) moving through autonomy toward independence, (d) developing mature interpersonal relationships, (e) establishing identity, (f) developing purpose, and (g) developing integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, pp. 38-39). These seven vectors provide a foundational theory applicable to all students. Thus, it is inclusive of emotional, interpersonal, ethical and intellectual development (Evans et al., 2010, p. 67) and addresses deficiencies of other theories, such as race, gender, age, and sexual orientation (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 35). Additionally, though the progress is not sequential, each vector builds on the other, increasing skill, awareness, and confidence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 34) as the individual grows in strength, adaptability and versatility (p. 35).

Chickering and Reisser (1993) further posited seven key ingredients for institutional environments since human development should be their organizing purpose. Thus, educational environments positively influence student development using (a) institutional objectives, (b) institutional size, (c) student-faculty relationships, (d) curriculum, (e) teaching, (f) friendships and student communities, and (g) student development programs and services (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 265). As well, Chickering and Reisser indicated "...a positive identity is enhanced by an awareness of one's cultural background, an immersion in the social world of one's ethnic group, a

valuing of the rituals, traditions, and artifacts of one's extended family or adopted network, and a sense of one's lineage" (p. 194). Therefore, the HBCU experience built on personal affiliation, history, and legacy of the African American culture, and providing empowering, inspiring, movement centers with a family-like atmosphere, presents the background for the seven key ingredients of Chickering and Reisser's educational environment.

Terenzini and Reason's (2005) college impact model focuses on "... identifying those factors . . . over which faculty members, administrators, staff and public policy makers have some programmatic or policy control" (pp. 6 – 7); thus, expanding on previous college impact models by Astin (1985, 1993), Tinto (1993), and Pascarella (1985). According to Terenzini and Reason, students come to college with a variety of demographic, psychographic, economic, and social characteristics, which will ultimately influence their college experience. However, there are three components of this college experience: the organizational context, the peer environment, and the students' individual experiences (p. 6), which are the primary influences on the students' development. As purported by Terenzini and Reason, it is within this college experience that institutions can exercise some control and ultimately shape the students' experiences occurring in classroom, curricular and out-of-class settings. Therefore, it is imperative that organizational structures instituted provide a coordinated and strategized approach to student learning and assimilation, especially in the first year.

For this reason, the Terenzini and Reason (2005) model examining the students' experiences, and Chickering and Reisser's (1993) psychosocial theory of student

development combine to examine the influence of the HBCU experience on retention. This project study explored the students' perception of the HBCU experience in fulfilling this task. Does SPU, in possessing the key ingredients as posited by Chickering and Reisser, and in creating an atmosphere of history, legacy, and traditions of the African American culture, provide an environment of students' experiences purported by Terenzini and Reason which will influence the development of its African American students? Additionally, does this environment further translate to retention of these African American students?

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

The Higher Education Act of 1965 defined HBCUs as any institution established before 1964 with the stated mission of educating the African American/Black population (ASHE Report, 2010, p.9). As of July 21, 2014, the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities listed 105 institutions with such designation (U.S. Department of Education, <http://sites.ed.gov/whhbcu/>). These 105 institutions represent only 3% of colleges and universities in the nation, but enroll 11% of the Black student population (Gasman, 2013). Additionally, since their early beginnings in 1837 to present, HBCUs serve a diverse population, indicating an increase to an average 20% non-Black population in 2011 (Gasman, 2013, p. 6).

Although a few HBCUs were established prior to the end of the Civil War, many came into existence during the post-Civil War era due to the efforts of the Freedman's Bureau, religious missionary organizations and wealthy northern philanthropists (ASHE Report, 2010). In addition, the Second Morrill Act of 1890 provided federal support for

the cause of educating the newly freed black populace. Within this environment, SPU began in 1904, garnering support from white, winter tourists to the local area, and instituting its mission to educating "...homemakers and Christian leaders" (Smith, 1995). Since then, the institution emerged to a United Methodist-affiliated, co-educational university, serving an increasingly diverse student population presently at a 3:1 ratio of African Americans to other ethnicities.

According to Albritton (2012), HBCUs have a history embedded in the commitment of the African American community to empower and uplift the race (p. 312). Furthermore, Albritton (2012) indicated, these institutions served as student activism sites in the fight for liberation. Thus, as described by Mbajekwe (2006), cited in Albritton (2012), students experienced "... race pride and race consciousness... [leading] to greater self-esteem and self-confidence" (p. 313). In so doing, the HBCUs serve to fulfill Chickering's student development theory by continuing the mission to "... enroll and graduate ... this traditionally disenfranchised minority" (Nelms, 2010, p. 15). Thus, the HBCU experience, foster the history and legacy of the African American ethnicity (ASHE Report, 2010; Palmer & Gasman, 2008), providing a backdrop to curricular, classroom and out-of-class experiences for students. Therefore, I explored the students' perceptions of the HBCU experience at SPU, and its influence on their return decisions.

Student Retention Models

Over the decades, researchers have developed a cornucopia of theories to assist institutions with the issue of retention, especially after the first year (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Seidman, 2012; Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003; Terenzini &

Reason, 2005; Tinto, 1993, 2009). In keeping with the definition of retention as purported by Berger et al., (2012), the researchers posit models with an emphasis on the institutional elements to improve retention. Consequently, as the cost of college attendance increases and the likelihood of gainful employment after college stagnates, college retention and graduations rates remain in the forefront of today's higher education institution. Thus, the prolific research on retention provides extensive practical and proven models within which to explore.

Tinto (2009) posited students experience stages of passage during their college careers, since they separate from communities of the past, transition into new patterns of behavior, and then incorporate or integrate into college life (pp. 94-99). In the midst of all this change, according to Tinto, "...student learning is the key to student retention..." (p.2), therefore institutions need to recognize that educational settings such as classroom and laboratories are strategic in enhancing student retention. As such, Tinto posited four conditions necessary to student success as expectations, support, feedback and involvement, all of which are elements of the educational community. Accordingly, the integration framework, as suggested by Tinto (1993), focuses on the academic and social assimilation of students into an institution, and has propelled the structured student support services of today's institutions (Karp, Hughes, & O'Gara, 2010).

Additionally, Seidman (2012) advanced the retention formula and model "Ret = Early ID + (E + In + C) IV", stating Retention equals Early Identification plus (Early plus Intensive plus Continuous) Intervention. In this model, early identification refers to an assessment of skill levels, early intervention is an application of intervention strategies at

the earliest time possible after assessment, intensive intervention provides an opportunity for students to master skills, and continuous intervention ensures persistence until effected change occurs (pp. 272-274). Furthermore, according to Seidman, this applies to all students, from all backgrounds, religions, cultures, race, and heritage, within all age groups and at all institution types (p. 268); thus providing a practical and applicable model for all students.

A common trend for these models is the implied, and/or expressed, need for a community-like atmosphere within institutions, a coordinated effort between all elements faculty, staff, and administration to provide a welcoming environment within which students may achieve goals. This is reminiscent of the HBCU experience evident at SPU. Thus, the experience provides the atmosphere purported by researchers (Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Tinto, 2009), but still the institution faces a low retention rate. Therefore, I explored the students' perceptions of the HBCU experience at SPU, and its influence on their return decisions.

First Year Student Retention

Previous researchers emphasized the usefulness of an efficient transitional program on student learning, success, engagement, and retention (Barefoot et al., 2005; Cuseo, 2010; Fulkerson et al., 2011; Potts & Schultz, 2008; Tinto, 2009). According to Barefoot et al., "the long-sought-after holy grail of higher education is to bring together entering first-year students and institutions of higher education in a seamless transition toward an undergraduate experience with a lasting impact" (p. xiii). Additionally, Wingate (2007) indicated, students in higher education have to be actively engaged in

their own learning, but the institution must provide the academic, social, and physical environments to support this. Furthermore, Krause and Coates (2008), in their analysis of student engagement data, revealed that the Transition Engagement Scale, which examined the orientation program, advising, and student expectations, correlated most positively with the Student-staff Engagement Scale, which reviewed the role of academic staff in the transition of the first-year student (pp. 499-501). These findings led to the conclusion that a program that "...embraces both academic and social dimensions and their role in promoting successful transitions" (p. 500) is necessary for the successful integration of first year students.

First year retention initiatives run the gamut of selections such as a First Year Experience (FYE) program, Freshman College (FC), freshman orientation courses, freshman seminar courses, student retention specialists, first year advising, the federally supported TRIO program, among others. Cuseo's (2010) empirical review of previous research revealed positive results in retention and achievement for "...all types of students...[as well as]...all institution types, sizes, and locations..." (p. 2). Cuseo indicated positive results in persistence to completion of individual years and degree, as well as improved academic achievement. In addition, Cuseo provided an insight to the possibilities of institution-wide advantages, such as curriculum development, increased use in campus services, enhanced student recruitment, and improved commitment to the institution. Furthermore, Fulkerson et al. (2011) validated this trend when they indicated retention results were higher for the FYE completers than any other groups of students.

As the institution seeks to enhance the results of retention in the first year while also developing the student to a more autonomous learner, it is prudent to provide a team of academic, financial, and social support collaborating across all divisions and departments. Thus, the institution incorporates Chickering and Reisser's (1993) key elements of an institutional environment and provides the atmosphere for students' experiences proposed by Terenzini and Reason (2005). As such, I explored the students' perceptions on the influence of the HBCU experience on their retention.

Retention at HBCUs

According to Nelms (2010), HBCUs represent 3% of higher education institutions, and enroll *only* 12% of African American students; but graduate 30% of baccalaureate degrees, 40% of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) degrees, and 60% of engineering degrees awarded to African American students (p. 15). However, the issue of low retention rates continues to persist and must be addressed if the White House Initiative on HBCUs objective to increase graduation rates by 2020 is to be attained.

Nettles, Wagener, Millett, and Killenbeck (1999) indicated private HBCUs have tried for many years to create a culture of collective responsibility as it pertains to retention, prior to the efforts of other institutions (p. 53). According to Nettles et al., these private institutions rely on tuition as their main source of revenue, and, maintaining revenues is contingent on retaining students; thus, all elements of the institution should be involved with retaining students. Researchers such as Astin (1993) and Tinto (1993, 2009) asserted the value of student involvement and integration in the college community

as a condition of retention. Consequently, according to Baird, as cited by Townsend (2007), HBCUs, with their reputation for social nurturing, create a level of connectedness and sense of belonging among students. As indicated by Townsend (2007), Spelman College, an HBCU with consistent results in producing STEM baccalaureate degrees, is a participant in the Model Institutions for Excellence (MIE) program for their efforts and success at attracting, retaining and graduating students in this area.

As an illustration of this successful model, Perna, Gasman, Gary, Lundy-Wagner and Drezner (2010) identified reasons for persistence of women in the STEM fields at Spelman College. According to Perna et al., these reasons included (a) the small class sizes to encourage one-on-one interaction between faculty and students, (b) open-door policies that provide access to faculty, and (c) a known culture of peer cooperation with “sisters” (pp. 45-47). Additionally, Perna et al., indicated the cooperative and supportive peer culture is an indication of the overall institutional culture, and attributed to the social, cultural, and nurturing environments HBCUs use to encourage academic success. Thus, the institution (a) portrays characteristics supporting the college impact models on student retention purported by Terenzini and Reason (2005) and Tinto (2009); (b) possesses the key ingredients for student development as posited by Chickering and Reisser (1993); and (c) fulfills Chickering’s (n.d.) assertion that institutions develop identities within a social and cultural context.

Paradoxically, although SPU possesses similar institutional characteristics to Spelman College, it has a lower retention rate, not just in STEM fields, but overall. This may be attributed to the pre-enrollment characteristics of students at SPU, which prides

itself on open enrollment and attracts a high percentage of academically disadvantaged students. In comparison, Spelman College, as described by Perna, Lundy-Wagner, Drezner, Gasman, Yoon, Bose and Gary (2008), is more selective in their admissions requirements, thus attracting students with average SAT scores of 1,068 (p. 6).

According to Lee (2012), the majority of students at HBCUs come from low- to middle-income households, with average 66% recipients of Pell Grants. Consequently, the institutions' overall welcoming and nurturing atmosphere affect student retention. However, SPU experiences an alarming inability to retain its students. As such, in an effort to shed more light on this issue, I explored the students' perceptions of the influence of the HBCU experience on their retention.

The HBCU Experience

With the abundance of institutions, and the increased access for African American students, why does one chose to attend a HBCU? According to Turner (2011), reasons include continuing a family legacy or changing one's experience from a predominantly white grade school experience (p. 2200). Additionally, Palmer, Davis and Maramba (2010) indicated the HBCU provided a nurturing, supporting and family-oriented learning environment (p. 87); a haven for the economically and academically disadvantaged, first-time-in-college students they tend to attract. Thus, the old adage "it takes a village to raise a child" is a common theme of the HBCU environment and experience (Davis, 2006). As stated by Brown and Ricard (2007), black students attend these institutions due to the distinct efforts to preserve "...Black history, racial pride, ethnic traditions, and Black consciousness" (p. 121), this substantiated by Turner (2011)

who stated HBCUs embrace a legacy of black culture, history and identity (p. 2198). Thus, the academic environment of the HBCU is encased in a social, cultural, economic and political niche curricula designed to take the underprepared and mold them into productive global citizens (Brown and Ricard, 2007). As indicated by Brown (2014) in interviews of present HBCU students, their reasons for attending these institutions include the warm and welcoming environment, expectation to make one a better individual, and the notion of being in the majority while they strove for academic excellence (Brown, 2014). Additionally, Fletcher (2014) described the experience as inclusive of classes and extra-curricular activities that directly relate to the African American culture providing a strong sense of community and involvement where there is an African American majority.

As an HBCU, it is expected that SPU provides a similar environment for its students. However, though students come for this environment, the problem of retention still exists. Why do students chose to leave an environment they crave? Consequently, this project study examined the students' perceptions of the HBCU experience at SPU, guided by Chickering & Reisser's (1993) key ingredients, alongside Terenzini & Reason's (2005) students' experiences, and the influence this experience had on their decision to return to the institution after the first year.

Implications

Although it was difficult to predict findings of this research, I attempted to distinguish the influence of the HBCU experience on student retention, summarizing the findings in a white paper. The objective of the study and subsequent white paper was to

provide insight and understanding of the HBCU experience from the students' perspective and its subsequent effect on student retention. As a result, recommended strategies to improve retention were influenced by a deeper understanding of the HBCU experience. Recommendations developed for implementation were directed to the institution's administration. Consequently, SPU would be able to apply Chickering & Reisser's (1993) key ingredients of the institution, Terenzini & Reason's (2005) students' experiences, as well as Berger et al.'s (2012) concept, in creating an institutional retention strategy that fits the SPU environment and student.

Summary

In section 1 of this project study I described the problem of first year student retention at SPU, an issue that was the focus of the institution's administration during the 2014-2015 academic year as indicated during the presidential address at the Faculty/Staff Institute Fall 2014. The rationale for choosing this problem was distinct, as the institution strives to improve academic excellence, enhance its U.S. World News rankings, prove efficiency and effectiveness for accreditation purposes, and maintain a healthy and stable student body as well as revenue streams. Key terms were defined and a thorough review of relevant literature conducted, as knowledge of the issue on a local and global scale justifies the study of this issue. The objective of the resulting white paper was shared. In Section 2, I will review the qualitative methodology and will include a rationale for research design and approach and a description of the plan for data collection and analysis procedures.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the students' perceptions on the influence of the HBCU experience on their decision to return to SPU at the end of the first year. Therefore, the questions guiding this study were:

1. What are the perceptions of African American students of the HBCU experience at SPU?
2. What are the perceptions of African American students on the influence of the HBCU experience on their decision to return to SPU after their first year at the institution?

To address this study's research questions, I applied a case study method, conducted interviews with students and analyzed their responses using Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). The selected data collection method was a semi-structured interview using a protocol.

This section includes (a) the research design and approach, (b) the rationale for the research design, (c) participant selection, (d) data collection and analysis procedures, and (e) the results of the data collected.

Research Design and Approach

The project study employed a qualitative research design. Qualitative research, as defined by Lodico et al., (2010) collects information by observation, interviews and document analysis, and summarizes discoveries by narrative or verbal methods (p. 15). In addition, McMillan (2012), identified characteristics of qualitative research to include

(a) natural setting, (b) direct data collection, (c) rich narrative descriptions, (d) inductive data analysis, and (e) participant perspectives. Therefore, this project study on the students' perceptions of the HBCU experience and its influence on their retention, as indicated by Lodico et al., provided a voice to the participants of the study (p. 264). Thus, the choice of qualitative research design is a fitting one for the project study.

The chosen type of qualitative research design is the case study method, as described by Creswell (2007, 2012). According to Creswell, as cited by Merriam (2009), case study research conducts a detailed analysis of a situation through in-depth data collection. Additionally, Merriam (2009) further described a case study as (a) focusing on a specific situation, place, or event; (b) providing rich, thick description of the concept; and (c) offering concrete and contextual information to enhance the learning of the reader (pp. 40-45). As well, Yin (2009) indicated case study research is applicable when "...focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context" (p. 2). Thus, a description of the students' perceptions of the HBCU experience, conducted within the real-life context at SPU, provided insights on the influence this experience had on their return decision, and will assist in the enhancement of a caring, welcoming, institutional environment to influence retention in the first year. Therefore, SPU will be able to apply Berger et al.'s (2012) theory to create an institutional retention strategy applicable to the SPU environment and the SPU student.

A qualitative design is applicable for the project study as it fits the characteristics described by McMillan (2012); the study was conducted in the natural setting of the campus, involved data collection by semi-structured interviews, and after a process of

inductive analysis, provided a rich, narrative description of the perspectives of the participants. A grounded theory design was deemed unacceptable since it results in the formulation of a theory, which is not the objective of this research, as well, narrative research was inappropriate since the research requires the perceptions of a group of students, not one individual (Creswell, 2012). Although this research lends itself to a phenomenological study, time constraints for the researcher made it inappropriate since a phenomenological study requires multiple interviews of the same participants over longer periods, in addition to a period of silent reflection for the researcher to gain insights and make interpretations (Lodico et al., 2010, pp. 270-271). Therefore, a case study, within a bounded system of the institution (SPU), providing an understanding of the contemporary phenomenon (the HBCU experience) within the context of the type of institution (HBCUs), was most appropriate for this study.

Participants

Selecting participants for a qualitative research study involved a purposeful sampling method (Creswell, 2012; McMillan, 2012; Merriam, 2009). As defined by Creswell (2012), purposeful sampling allows the researcher to deliberately select locations and participants best able to enhance understanding of the phenomenon under study (p. 206). Furthermore, Merriam (2009) indicated purposeful sampling is applicable when the researcher intends to "...discover, understand, and gain insight..." (p. 77). Therefore, the study applied the purposeful sampling technique of homogeneous or criterion sampling, as defined by Lodico et al., (2010, p. 141) and McMillan (2012, p. 105). This sampling technique indicates specific criteria or characteristics, which

identifies members within the subgroup and, ensures participants have sufficient information on the phenomenon studied.

As described by McMillian (2012) purposeful sampling is advantageous in several ways such as (a) less costly, (b) less time-consuming, (c) usually high participation rates, (d) adds credibility to research and (e) ensures receipt of necessary information (p. 111). However, I acknowledge the disadvantages as described, since this selection method makes results (a) more difficult to generalize, (b) less representative of population, and (c) dependent on the sample (McMillian, 2012, p. 111). Consequently, my intention is not to generalize to all institutions, but as indicated by Berger et al. (2012), this study will be used to inform the institution in its efforts to fit *its* retention strategies to the needs of *its* students and the idiosyncrasies of *its* environment.

Selection of Participants

According to LeCompte and Preissle, as cited by Merriam (2009), criterion-based selection requires the identification of reasons for participant selection that will deliver participants who are information-rich, thus valuable to the study. To be eligible for the study, participants needed to be:

- 🐾 African American;
- 🐾 full-time students of SPU;
- 🐾 present sophomore, junior, and/or senior students;
- 🐾 over 18 years of age; and
- 🐾 non-Hospitality Management majors.

Since the study focused on the HBCU experience and its influence on return decisions after the first year at SPU, transfer students were also eligible and participation was not limited to a specific gender. Additionally, because I am an Assistant Professor of Hospitality Management, qualified students within that discipline, were ineligible for participation.

An email soliciting participation was sent to the student population, using the institution-wide emailing list. Permission to use this list was gained from the institution's administration. The first 12 qualified respondents were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews. All volunteers signed an informed consent form before actual participation.

Gaining Access to Participants

Since gaining access to a study site is deemed difficult, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) recommend being overt in your intentions as a researcher (p. 84). Thus, I submitted a letter of intent to the institution's administration, outlining a description of the study, its value to the institution, disclosure of potential risks, and strategies to protect the privacy of the participants. The letter also affirmed that participants were not required to participate, and that care was taken to ensure participants were not within the supervision of the researcher.

Researcher-Participant Relationship

Researchers join their subjects in their natural environments, spend time with them, may participate in activities, but still maintain objectivity and detachment (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007, p. 82). Thus, I established trust with study subjects by assuring

protection from risk, confidentiality and engagement. The informed consent and statement of confidentiality was the first effort at establishing trust. Additionally, since the participants were not within my discipline, and both parties were meeting for the first time, the portrayal of a professional demeanor, provision of an atmosphere that was relaxing and conducive to open and honest conversation, refreshments, and engaging in rapport-building small talk before the interview, set the tone for the researcher-participant relationship. As a researcher who is not African American, my cultural experiences, identity, and outlook are different. Thus, I was aware that my view may taint what I heard from the respondents and was prepared to procure the services of an external auditor to ensure researcher bias is minimized.

Ethical Protection of Participants

According to Creswell (2012), a researcher must refrain from deceptive practices and be respectful of his/her research site (p. 230). Thus, I was cognizant of ethical issues that might occur during the study, and aimed to ensure integrity and confidentiality for research subjects. To this end, I was certified through the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to protect human research participants (Certificate Number 1283525). The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the participating institution issued the following IRB number: 00009916 #1. Additionally, the Walden Institutional Review Board issued the following IRB approval number: 11-19-15-0341875.

Additionally, I undertook strategies to ensure participants were aware. Firstly, prospective participants had an opportunity to read, sign and return the informed consent electronically. Any questions to the researcher could have been sent via email, gaining

answers before deciding to participate in the data collection process; or interested parties could have made an appointment to discuss the study with me. This gave the participant an opportunity to question me, discuss the consent form, thus clarifying issues pertaining to being a participant. Prospective participants were granted five working days to review, query and sign informed consent. Secondly, all identifiers were removed and destroyed, thus, names were changed, and email addresses were not retained. Thirdly, all collected data is stored electronically on my personal computer and backed up on an external hard-drive, in my home, with access limited to only me. Finally, the confidentiality agreement signed by the external auditor enhanced the protection of the participants.

Data Collection

Data collection strategies applied aligned with the problem, research question and design and discussed in the preceding section. Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors of development and seven key ingredients of an institution, form a backdrop to the data collection. As students develop skills and awareness at SPU, the HBCU experience combines the key ingredients described by Chickering and Reisser (1993) with Terrenzini and Reason's (2005) college impact model. Thus, the interview attempted to establish the students' perception of this HBCU experience and its influence on their decision to return after the first year at SPU.

Data were collected during semi-structured interviews using an interview protocol (Appendix B). Merriam (2009) purported interviews as a method of gaining information on past events that cannot be replicated, and knowledge on a person's feelings, behaviors and interpretation of events (p. 88). Further, McMillan (2012) described interviews as

allowing for “...greater depth and richness of information” (p. 167), since the interviewer will also be able to observe nonverbal cues and clarify responses. Although this data collection method is considered more time-consuming and costly than most, it is said to return a higher response rate (McMillan, 2012). Therefore, in keeping with McMillan’s (2012) definition, the interview allowed participants to freely respond to questions and prompts in a semi-structured, interview guide approach. As defined by Creswell (2012), the interview used general, open-ended questions to garner information from respondents, providing depth, richness of topic, and allowed for the observation of non-verbal behaviors to be included. Advantages to using interviews include (a) having opportunity to gain details and clarification, (b) the flexibility of changing questions to suit the conversation, and (c) control of the type of information acquired through specific questions and probes.

Nevertheless, as the researcher, I was cognizant of the problems that might occur in using interviews, such as (a) information filtered by view of interviewer, (b) interviewee provide information they think the interviewer wants to hear, and (c) small sample size. Consequently, in my role as the researcher, care was taken to mitigate these issues. Therefore, I began with an introductory session, inclusive of refreshments, to encourage rapport building between interviewer and interviewee. Additionally, the services of an external auditor evaluated the findings for researcher bias and accuracy.

During the initial meeting, interviewees reviewed the signed informed consent, was apprised of and assented to audio-recordings. The value of the audio tapings was expressed to the interviewees since it allows for accurate recording of statements and it

allows the interviewer to focus the flow of the conversation with interviewees, rather than recording what is being said. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each and were conducted in a designated conference room for privacy, and at a time convenient to both the interviewees and interviewer.

Role of the Researcher

According to McMillian (2012), there is evidence that interviewer characteristics may influence respondents during the interview sessions (p. 168). Thus, I ensured a pleasant, friendly, relaxed atmosphere conducive to open, honest conversation between interviewer and interviewees. Since the interview protocol allowed for audio recording, I ensured limited note taking, focusing on conducting and managing the interview. In addition, I provided refreshments prior to the beginning of the discussion, to enhance rapport building between interviewer and interviewees.

Additionally, as an assistant professor at the institution, I am aware of the nuances of the culture and environment that exists. However, not being African American means my cultural experiences are different, and so my outlook is different. Thus, I was aware that my view may color what I heard from the respondents. My challenge was therefore to hear the respondents view and accept their experiences without matching it to mine, or challenging it. I did not allow my experiences to shadow the study as it may have influenced the value of the project and ultimately the effect on social change.

Consequently, an external audit of the findings and analysis assisted in ensuring the inferences are grounded in the data, and researcher bias is minimized. The external auditor signed a confidentiality agreement, thus protecting the participants.

Data Analysis

In the process of analysis, I employed Creswell's (2012) recommended six steps which are (a) organization of data, (b) initial exploration through coding, (c) developing description and themes, (d) representation using narratives and visuals, (e) interpretation through personal reflection and literature, and (f) validation of accuracy (p. 237). The first act in the organization of interview data is transcription. According to Halcomb and Davidson (2006), transcription is reproducing the spoken word into text (p. 38). I used voice-recognition internet-based system *Transcribe*, to capture interview data for transcription. As indicated by Fletcher and Shaw (2011), voice-recognition software is time effective, accurate and relatively low cost. Following the transcription, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) *ATLAS.ti* was used to easily and efficiently organize, sort, save and track data collected.

During the initial exploration, I applied McMillan's (2012) recommended data organization by source, identifying interviewee wording as emic data, and researcher representation of emic data as etic data (p. 297). Additionally, reading the data identified codes and themes, resulting in categories. The process required constant review of the data to ensure accurate coding into classifications, and meaningful descriptions prior to the final interpretation and analysis of the data. Hence, an inductive synthesis of the data lead to inferences, supported by visuals drawn from CAQDAS. In addition, the recordings provided direct quotes and observer's comments to substantiate findings.

Quality, Accuracy, and Credibility

According to McMillan (2012), credibility in qualitative research hinges on the researchers ability to convey accuracy, trustworthiness, consistency, plausibility, authenticity, and meaningfulness in the research. Consequently, I applied strategies for promoting credibility and trustworthiness as described by Merriam (2009). First, I conducted regular critical self-reflection to ensure personal biases, assumptions and views did not creep into the analysis of the study. Second, I provided rich, meaningful descriptions of the students' perceptions, so readers will be able to identify with the research context and determine if the findings are transferrable to their individual situations. Third, I conducted member checks, allowing participants an opportunity to correct misconceptions of their views, if any. Thus, students were invited to review the analysis via email communication and suggest comments or corrections as they saw fit. As well, if the participants so desired, they could have met with the researcher to further discuss findings. This required an additional 30 minutes for the electronic review, and another 30 minutes if they desired to discuss one-on-one, for a total participation of up to two hours and 30 minutes during the study. Fourth, I ensured an audit trail of methods, procedures, decision, and all documentation pertaining this research. Last, the services of an external auditor ensured findings were grounded in the data, inferences were logical, and researcher bias eliminated. Additionally, familiarity with the topics of retention and the HBCU experience were not required, as the audit focused on logical inferences and bias elimination.

Results

The objective of this research study was to explore the students' perceptions of the HBCU Experience and its influence on their decision to return to the institution at the end of the first year. Therefore, the research questions guiding this study were:

1. What are the perceptions of African American students of the HBCU experience at SPU?
2. What are the perceptions of African American students on the influence of the HBCU experience on their decision to return to SPU after their first year at the institution?

The data were collected through one-on-one semistructured interviews with eight participants. Prospective participants were identified as fitting the profile of African American, fulltime sophomore, junior, and senior students, over 18 years of age, and nonhospitality management majors, using the institution's database. Of the eight participants, five were seniors, two juniors, one sophomore and only one male. As indicated previously, the names of the participants have been changed for this report.

Themes

The codes were collapsed into seven themes: (a) interviewee background, (b) interviewee expectations, (c) academic atmosphere, (d) student life, (e) Christian heritage, (f) racial consciousness and self-growth, (g) HBCU Experience and retention.

Interviewee Background

This theme combined several elements such as upbringing, local home environment and high school setting. The institution prides itself on serving a large student population from economically and academically disadvantaged areas;

institutional statistics for the 2014 year shows 77% of students were Pell Grant recipients, and incoming students had an average GPA of 2.9.

In their response to the first two interview questions: (a) Why was an HBCU your college of choice and (b) What factors influenced your decision to choose SPU, participants all alluded to some element of their personal backgrounds or upbringing. With the distinct exception of Sylvia, who described herself as a *military brat*, most participants were from urban, low-income communities, where they attended public high schools and were considered in the minority. Olivia's description of her local environment stated "...I'm used to seeing black people that are struggling, on the corner...". Thus, the general consensus for the participants was embodied in Angie's "You go to college so you can have a better life for yourself" statement. However, the selection of an HBCU, especially one that is a private, more expensive institution, saw varied responses. For instance, Dara, Angie, Sylvia and Sean all had college-choice influences from parent(s), relatives, and even church members who had previously attended a HBCU. This influence is prevalent in the African American homes of former HBCU attendees, and the institution publicly acknowledges graduates from 'true SPU families'; sometimes honoring parents and all children, or graduates from several generations in the same family. As well, the reason for this influence was described by Albritton (2012) in his statement "...as a Black male, my exposure to Black male professors and other Black male professionals would allow me to see more positive images of Black men" and this reasoning is applied to both genders. Angie recalled receiving her first band instrument in the sixth grade and her aunt stating "...you can play

in the SPU marching band one day”; the institution’s marching band is nationally known and remains its pride and joy. As she emphatically stated, she was *raised* to attend this specific institution, there were no other choices on the table. On the other hand, Paige had no special connection and chose SPU because “...SPU accepted me on the spot and gave me a full ride”.

The atmosphere of previous high schools seemed to play a major role in college choices for some recipients. Most had attended predominantly white high schools and expressed an interest in changing that, as suggested by Olivia. Sadia reiterated that sentiment when she stated “...this was a complete different experience from my high school...it’s not about color, ...not anymore”. The only participant who did not consider the HBCU setting a ‘culture-shock’ was Sean, who stated his high school was 98% African American. As well, Dara’s situation was divergent because, though she was in the minority, she attended a Hispanic-majority high school. This was, she explained, because her mom always dated Hispanics, and she, Dara, “had many issues in middle and high school because of it”, thus her choice of an HBCU was to offset that.

As indicated by Freeman, cited in the ASHE Report (2010), African Americans choose HBCUs because of personal affiliation and an interest in a majority-black environment (p.29). Additionally, Cokley (2005) posited an understanding of the African American identity should be completed through the eyes and context of the Afrocentric paradigm (p. 518). Therefore, SPU continues to “... enroll and graduate ... this traditionally disenfranchised minority” (Nelms, 2010, p. 15), fulfilling the initial mission

of HBCUs and realizing Chickering and Reisser's (1993) student development theory in its quest.

Interviewee Expectations

This theme referred to the participants' expectations from college in general, from being at SPU specifically, and whether those expectations were met. The questions were (a) What were your expectations of college, in general, (b) What were your expectations of college life at an HBCU, and (c) How did SPU meet those expectations. Probes included were concerning expectations from an academic and social perspective, and for specific examples of their expectations and instances where the expectations were met.

Though there were a variety of responses that reflected this theme, the general consensus on attending college was felt in the terms 'new' and 'different': new people, new places, different people, different things, and different experiences were repeated terms. As Polly aptly concluded, in all this 'new' you attend college to "...find yourself". As well, the expectations for attending SPU specifically were diverse. Notably, after a number of predominantly white schools, Olivia needed to be where "they teach me about me". That sentiment was seconded by Polly, who wanted to learn more about her history, and Sylvia who starved to be around more African Americans, "you know, people who look like me". These expectations fulfilled Freeman's words, as cited in the ASHE Report (2010), that students choose HBCUs for the black-majority environment it provides.

All respondents agreed their expectations were met. They had new best friends, met people from different parts of the state, country and world, learned about places they

had only dreamed or heard of, had different experiences (even more than they anticipated), and were beginning to find themselves. Consequently, SPU fulfilled Chickering's (n.d.) assertion that student development occurs within social, historical and cultural settings, by providing an educational environment in which African Americans felt a sense of belonging.

Academic Atmosphere

In Question 6 I asked participants to recall their academic experiences during their first year. This theme became the most quoted with ten codes and 60 quotations. The codes in this theme included class size, curriculum, classroom setting, student-faculty relationship, mentor, and trust, among others.

Participants referred to small class sizes as evidenced in statements such as Sean's "...my biggest class...had about 50 people...". As well, the professors being described as caring and welcoming, was mentioned by all and shown in the sentiments expressed by Dara "...my professors, they are very, like, open; they make you feel comfortable". These elements mentioned drive home Wingate's (2006) premise that HBCUs promote self-concept by "...the presence of a significant number of Black faculty and staff who serve as surrogate parents, mentors and supporters" (p.111). Additionally, Davis (2006) posited that student maturity is accelerated in an environment of shared heritage, as is the case of the African American student at the HBCU. Other aspects of the academic atmosphere included a rigorous curriculum, the 24-hour library access, etiquette classes, having a television studio and learning about the history of the founder and institution. Participants spoke of specific courses required of students, which some indicated was not

so at PWIs. One such course was Understanding Faith which Paige felt helped her develop her relationship with God. Sadia was enamored by the African American History and Freshman Seminar courses where she learned the history of the institution's founder, as well as the institution itself. She made the dean's list that year and was "ecstatic".

One concept revealed through this theme was the participants seemingly unfamiliarity with this academic setting. In an effort to explain this, Olivia emphasized, "...being surrounded by successful Black Americans...they have PhDs (shouts term), and my mind was blown". This statement solidifies her recollections of her African American upbringing, where they were always "...on the corner..." and "...never had a conversation with someone with a PhD, [especially not] a black person that had a PhD". Additionally, Polly referred to it as a culture shock to see mostly African Americans in a school setting, and that made her proud. Paige was amazed that Freshman Seminar taught "...time management, how to be professional, how to dress and how to be disciplined..."; she did not know one would be taught that in college. Ultimately, all the participants felt the courses were necessary since "...they have helped me to grow as a person...", as Sean stated. Paige further concluded African American History should be a must for all HBCUs since she felt African Americans should be experts at their own history. Olivia expressed the need for all African Americans to attend an HBCU, "...you learn yourself here..." she stated.

As Chickering and Reisser (1993) indicated "...a positive identity is enhanced by an awareness of one's cultural background, an immersion in the social world of one's ethnic group, a valuing of the rituals, traditions, and artifacts of one's extended family or

adopted network, and a sense of one's lineage" (p. 194). In addition, Chickering and Reisser posited seven key ingredients for institutional environments as they encourage human development. From an academic perspective, those key ingredients include the size of the institution, curriculum, teaching and student-faculty relationship. Thus, a smaller institution, with clear and consistent objectives, a curriculum relevant to the student body, and active learning strategies which encourage frequent and friendly student-faculty relationships, is an educationally powerful environment that promote student development. The purpose of the HBCU, to develop students intellectually and culturally, is evident at SPU and fits the Chickering and Reisser's theory.

Student Life

The theme of student life encompasses the social experiences in Question 6. This was one of the most often quoted themes with codes such as campus life, camaraderie, student involvement and school pride. Participants talked about the exuberant school spirit as is evidenced by the pride and support of the marching band, football, basketball, baseball, softball, and athletics teams which have consistently been conference champions. Also mentioned was the abundance of organizations in which one could become involved, especially Greek Life and the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). There was exceptional pride in talking about the NCNW, since that organization was also started by the institution's founder. Dara expressed amazement in the presence of the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. members in her freshman hall when she stated, "...they really take their time out to come and talk to us...that was like the best thing for me because it was like, you know, having your older siblings to come talk to

you...”. For the participants, meeting upperclassmen in this way developed that sense of community and camaraderie early in their college experience. That later parlayed to becoming members of these various groups.

Recollections included a variety of events organized from the Department of Student Activities, for example Welcome Back Bash, Turn-up Thursdays, and Poetry Night, as well as participating in ‘Stop the Hunger’, ‘Midtown Clean-up’ and other community service events. During these social activities, according to Sylvia and Sadia, one meets their new best friends, coupled with gaining the big picture view of the world as organizations help you live the founder’s legacy “...to go out and help the community” as Paige so fittingly stated. Sadia concluded the student life element in her statement “...now, I have my own little community of brothers and sisters here”.

According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), the student life aspects of campus provide a laboratory for learning to communicate, increase tolerance and integrity, and develop acceptance, enjoyment, and loyalty. Thus, the formal and informal interactions between students provides a training ground for developing competence, autonomy, interdependence, and interpersonal relationships (pp. 275-276). Additionally, student involvement has consistently been a key component of student retention and therefore should be a major component of any retention plan.

Christian Heritage

Though not directly linked to a specific interview question, this theme was prominent for six (75%) of the participants. All six mentioned developing an appreciation for chapel services, though they may have felt forced to attend initially.

Participants Olivia, Paige and Sean experienced personal growth from the Understanding Faith course, coupled with the chapel services, as they were able to explore other religions and better appreciate *their* own beliefs. Paige's statement on this element was "...now I ...have my own conversation and my own relationship with God".

Additionally, Sadia viewed her college experience as "...a blessing and spiritual awakening", while Olivia thinks this element separates SPU from other institutions. It must be noted that, historically speaking, Christianity and the church (both black and white churches) were instrumental in the development of HBCUs across the country. SPU specifically, though not started by a church, has had a faith-based beginning and became affiliated with the United Methodist Church in 1924. This ensures a strong religious heritage for the institution, depicted in a robust religious life department and 'Faith' as one of the institution's core values. According to Shaw (2006), private HBCUs provide 'character education', a system in which "...value-laden themes such as justice, self-discipline, honesty, courage, truth, responsibility, and the pursuit of excellence prevail" (p. 96). Additionally, the Branch-Simpson's (1984) identity development model, as described by Chickering and Reisser (1993), asserts religious and spiritual identity as a primary constituent in the development process of African Americans. To this end, the religious life aspect of the institution is a critical component of the curricula and co-curricular elements, and religion is a part of the learning.

Racial Consciousness and Self Growth

This theme was second most prominent with 52 quotations across all interviews, though not directly attached to a question. It encompassed codes looking at racial pride,

social awareness, diversity, and hope. The respondents were enthused with the diverse student body; though most were the same skin color, students were from different cities, states, countries, and heritage. Thus the college experience involved sharing of different cultures and viewpoints but "...coming together [in] unity..." as expressed by Sean.

Participants felt the institution, and its founder, instilled a sense of racial pride. As indicated by Angie "I can't take this for granted...I had no idea her [the founder] parents were slaves, [or] this place was a dump [physically]...I found out in freshman seminar. And I can imagine how many times she wanted to quit". Angie was emphatic as she continued, "...this school has history, ...a specific purpose. She [the founder] used hearses to get students to football games (loudly)...". For Angie the founder's actions in those early years showed strength, character, and determination, thus she ended "...I can't mess this up, you know...". Polly corroborated in her statement, "...having SPU started by an African American woman is empowering...that is amazing". Paige's take on it was "...you have to work for everything, like, she didn't just ask for hand-me-downs, she worked (hits table) and she went out and fought hard for it...she started this with a dollar and fifty cents, ...that makes me motivated". According to Brown and Ricard (2007), African Americans attend HBCUs due to the distinct efforts to preserve "...Black history, racial pride, ethnic traditions, and Black consciousness" (p. 121). Thus, as participants mature along the lines of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) identity development, they begin to better appreciate their cultural heritage, and progress in terms of self-acceptance and self-esteem.

Fifty percent of the respondents alluded to the self-growth experienced by being at an HBCU. Sean and Paige felt growth and maturity was linked to association with a diverse group of people, while Sadia expressed it as being life-changing, claiming she had a "...mental awakening...that gave her hope". The thoughts of what may have led to that growth were encompassed in community service events, chapel speakers, interacting with upper classmen, and experiencing courses in history and religion. As Angie so fittingly stated "...I grew from day one of freshman year to the end" while Sadia's sentiments were "...seriously, freshman year Sadia to junior year Sadia, oh, I feel like, I'm proud...like, my mind has grown...". This growth expressed by participants fits into Chickering and Reisser's (1993) moving through autonomy toward interdependence vector. In this vector, according to Chickering and Reisser, students develop an awareness of a larger community, establishing mutually satisfying interrelationships, and showing reciprocal respect.

The HBCU Experience and Retention

Though the HBCU Experience is difficult to define, it refers to the black culture, history, and identity, according to Turner (2011), prominent in an academic and social curricular which may exist on HBCU campuses. Questions 7 – 11 referred to that experience and its influence on the participants. The questions were (a) How would you define the term HBCU Experience; (b) During your first year at the institution, did you ever consider dropping out or transferring to another college; Why or why not; (c) How would you describe the role your academic experience played in your decision to return at the end of your first year; (d) How would you describe the role your social experience

(campus life) played in your decision to return at the end of your first year; (e) What influence do you think the HBCU experience has had on your decision to return to the institution at the end of your first year.

There was one participant, Sylvia, who had not heard of the term HBCU Experience previously. This may be attributed to her military upbringing which had her outside the country for most of her formative years; she came to SPU directly from Japan. However, when given the above definition she responded, “Oh, ...then my Freshman Seminar and Cultural Literacy classes got me to understand my HBCU Experience...[made] me understand my African American side...the whole mindset of everything”. Of the other seven participants, Olivia previously heard negative connotations to the term, which she qualified with “...they [the proponents] are people who never even attended an HBCU”. This negative response to attending an HBCU permeates the literature, ironically among high school counselors, as Albritton (2012) described being discouraged in his decision to attend a HBCU. The other participants used terms such as family-like, marching band, school pride, unity, professors who care, our history, Greek life, and partying to describe what they thought the term meant. Overall, the village pedagogy, defined by Harris III (2012) as a communal atmosphere in which learning takes place, was evident in the participants’ reflections on their HBCU Experience. For the participants, all the aspects of residential life, combined with the academic atmosphere, were what made the experience.

As described by Polly, the HBCU Experience is “...just like everybody is together and I feel like part of...is really learning to love who you are, like your roots,

and really learning to embrace it...”. This was evident in Harris III, as his high school and HBCU experiences ran parallel to the village pedagogy, while his one semester at a PWI starkly contrasted with feelings of loneliness, isolation, and disconnect. The HBCU Experience Harris III described as “...a cultural center...” (p. 347), where more of the professors, administrators, staff were African American with whom he could identify, the jargon and music were familiar, and members of the ‘village’ were contributing to the development of the whole person through formal and informal lessons for succeeding in life.

One emerging and note-worthy sub-theme of the HBCU Experience was the warm, welcoming, family-like atmosphere experienced by the participants. Comments such as “I feel like we are more like family here”; “I like that it is very family-oriented” and “...the staff were amazing, so loving...” were expressed by Angie, Sean and Olivia respectively. Sadia validated this when she stated “...you feel like this is your home, our family away from our family” and for Olivia, the presence of the founder’s home on campus “...closes the family”. This general consensus and the use of family terminology was prominent in all the interviews; “having older siblings” was used by Dara to describe her residential life experiences, “this is where [I] belong” expressed how Angie felt, while Polly had “...someone to lean on a little bit, outside of mom and dad”. This family-like atmosphere was a major component of the HBCU Experience for the participants. This sentiment was shared by Davis (2006) who described the HBCU as an extended family, and used the adage “it takes an entire village to raise a child” to depict that setting.

When asked about the impact on their decision to return, Olivia described her experiences as “awesome” and “phenomenal”, Sadia called it “exhilarating”, Angie was emphatic in her statement, “...I finished my first semester with a 3.66 GPA, I accomplished too much to quit”, while Sean summed it in “...they want to see you succeed...and that’s one thing that made me want to come back”. The descriptions used portray the sentiments expressed by Harris III (2012) as he defended HBCUs as a “...space in which their academic concerns, passions, development, and culture are central to the mission of their college experience” (p. 344). This environment of empowering, close student-faculty relationships, family-like feel, according to the ASHE Report (2010), is why students attend, and remain, at an HBCU; that is the HBCU Experience. Therefore, the HBCU experience built on personal affiliation, history, values, norms, and legacy of the African American culture, presents the backdrop for the seven key ingredients of Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) educational environment. This culture-specific, village pedagogy is the catalyst and the glue for students at an HBCU.

Conclusion

In Section 2 of this project study I provided a description of, and justification for, the qualitative case study research approach selected. In this section I included the criteria for selecting participants, procedures for gaining access to participants, and measures for the ethical protection of participants, a narrative for establishing the researcher-participant relationship, the method for data collection, the role of the researcher in the process, data analysis procedures and a discussion on ensuring quality, credibility and trustworthiness. This case study on the HBCU Experience and its

influence on first year retention answered the key research questions: “What are the perceptions of African American students of the HBCU experience at SPU” and “What are the perceptions of African American students on the influence of the HBCU experience on their decision to return to SPU after their first year at the institution?” The findings revealed that the HBCU Experience is encompassed in a “village pedagogy” (Harris, 2012) that positively influenced students and their decision to return to SPU after their first year at the institution. A summary of these perceptions were presented in a white paper, an easily readable format for the administration of SPU. As well, this white paper may inform other HBCUs in their efforts to retain students.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

Student retention continues to be a focus of institutional strategies in this new millennium. The purpose of this doctoral study was to examine the students' perceptions of the HBCU Experience and its influence on their retention. The study results indicated that this nurturing atmosphere with its efforts to preserve "...Black history, racial pride, ethnic traditions, and Black consciousness" (Brown & Ricard, 2007, p. 121) has positively impacted the participants and fostered their retention. Though limited in sample size, the results of this study provided a foundation for the evaluation of the HBCU Experience and its influence on student retention at SPU. The project developed from the study was a white paper that will assist the administration in their discussions on the preservation of this HBCU Experience. Presenting the results and recommendations in a white paper provides the opportunity to directly address the administrators with authority to make necessary changes to ensure implementation. Additionally, the white paper may serve to inform other HBCUs, thus impacting the Experience and African American student on a national scale.

In Section 3 I looked at the goals, rationale, and literature review of the project genre, as well as a through description of the project resources, barriers, implementation, and evaluation.

Description & Goals

According to Creswell (2012), one type of research report used in the educational setting is a policy or position paper presenting information to policy makers for

consideration in decision-making; that type of report is more widely called a white paper. A white paper, as defined by Stelzner (2007) is a hybrid of an article and a marketing brochure, proposing a solution and intending to persuade its audience. Additionally, Kolowich (2014) described it as a "...persuasive, authoritative, in-depth report...". Hence, this white paper will present valuable information to the institution's administration as they further examine the issue of student retention with an intention to solve the problem.

The problem addressed in this white paper (Appendix A) is that of student retention at SPU. Study participants' perception of the HBCU Experience and its influence on their retention is an ideal topic to present in the white paper format, since it allows for the illustration of research data in an easy-to-read document with a focus on recommended solutions. As indicated by Creswell (2012), the white paper will highlight key findings and their implications for practice to an identified audience. Thus, this white paper will present the perceptions the study participants have of the HBCU Experience and its influence on their retention, within the context of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) key ingredients of an institution, Terenzini and Reason's (2005) students' experiences, and Berger et al.'s (2012) concept that the institution's retention strategy should fit the SPU environment and student. The goals of this white paper are to 1) provide insight and understanding of the HBCU Experience from the perspective of the students and its subsequent effect on their retention; 2) further explore the HBCU Experience at SPU within the context of Chickering and Reisser's key ingredients of the institution; and 3) recommend retention strategies influenced by the HBCU Experience.

Scholarly Rationale of White Paper

Stelzner (2007) stated white papers have their origin in governmental publications but have evolved to becoming a powerful marketing tool (p.3). In the original format, white papers were legislative documents which served to explain and support political positions (Kolowich, 2014). However, as they evolved to be used in other arenas, they are presently used to educate a target group, present an identified position, or evaluate a product or theory (Gordon & Graham, 2003, p.3). Neuwirth (2013) substantiated this and indicated the best white papers educate, provoke innovative thinking, and clearly communicate a point of view using statistically sound data and well researched findings. Further, Evans (2014) posited the white paper provides an opportunity to "...deliver insight and thought leadership..." in such a creative way it becomes "...a marriage of white papers and design" (p.1). Thus, the white paper is a medium through which decision makers will absorb the essence of the research in a shorter period of time, while still having access to the detailed research if needed.

Since the white paper now has a broader appeal and is considered an educational essay based in facts, it is an effective format through which to inform this administration. In this white paper I presented an analysis of the students' perceptions of the HBCU Experience, its influence on their retention, and possible solutions to stemming the tide of retention by applying Chickering and Reisser's (1993) key ingredients of an institution, Terenzini and Reason's (2005) college impact model, and Berger et al.'s (2012) concept of creating an institutional retention strategy that fits the institution's environment and student.

Review of the Literature

This review is a comprehensive summary of the literature on publishing research using the genre of White Papers. Database searches were conducted using the Walden University online library and Google Scholar. Terms searched included *white papers*, *position papers*, *policy statements*, and *policy recommendations*. The Walden University online library provided access to several databases, including Academic Search Complete, ERIC, ProQuest Central, PsycINFO, and Thoreau. While a Google Scholar search of the term *white papers* yielded 3.68 million results, a multi-database search using Thoreau provided just over 10, 000 peer-reviewed scholarly articles. Further examination revealed the majority of the peer-reviewed articles where white papers themselves, only three provided insights of what a white paper is. Thus, though limited, the literature indicates a growing trend in the use of the white paper as a means of distributing research.

Publishing Research

Primarily research findings are shared through journals, dissertations and conference presentations (both orally and written). As indicated by Merriam (2009), one must determine the audience for the report in order to select a mode of publication, as each audience has its own objective and viewpoint on reading the report. Creswell (2012) indicated, qualitative results may be reported using either two general structures: (a) qualitative scientific with detailed procedures and a traditional analysis of themes, more suitable for case studies, and (b) qualitative storytelling with descriptions, reflections and the author's stance all woven into an unfolding story, more applicable for

ethnographies. Within Creswell's general structures, Lodico et al., (2010) presented six formats for writing the text of qualitative reports as (i) thematic, (ii) natural history, (iii) performance-based, (iv) amalgamation, (v) theoretical, and (vi) traditional scientific. For this report, the thematic format described by Lodico et al., was applied. This is the most commonly used format, according to Lodico et al., and allowed for the discussion of themes as they emerged from the data analysis. This format also falls within the general scientific structure described by Creswell.

Reports for policy makers and school personnel are typically oral presentations and policy or position papers, often called white papers. This type of research report offers an opportunity to present research findings in a clear, concise manner, highlighting key findings and making recommendations to enact change (Creswell, 2012). As a means of disseminating this research, the white paper provided the best medium to present the results of the data collection completed in Section **two**.

The White Paper Genre

The white paper is defined by Gordon & Graham (2003) as a marketing tool, a cross between "...a glossy brochure and a technical manual" (p.2). This definition reflects the position of other authors (Kolowich, 2014; Neuwirth, 2014; Stelzner, 2007). According to the researchers, white papers made their debut in politics with the *British White Paper of 1922* as legislation in governmental policy, then evolved to being used in the technology and marketing fields as new products are developed or to position a product in the market (Kolowich, 2014; Stelzner, 2007; Willerton, 2013). Stelzner (2007) indicated the white paper is a subtle marketing tool since the forefront purpose is

to educate its audience in technical, business, governmental, and educational arenas. Additionally, Stelzner pointed to the growing trend in the use of white papers when he reported a general Google search in 2001 garnered a million documents, and by 2006 that grew to 329 million. Thus, Stelzner further named three purposes for publishing white papers (a) Lead Generation; (b) Thought Leadership and (c) Close Sales. This white paper fits into Stelzner's theory as it is intended to demonstrate forward thinking and encourage further exploration on the topic.

Although there are no industry standards on writing white papers, these documents are persuasive in nature, on average 12 pages long, and serve to present problems and possible solutions to an intended audience (Gordon & Graham, 2003; Stelzner, 2007). As well, the general trend indicates the composition of a white paper includes: introduction to the problem, a background of scholarship that addresses the problem, solution and benefits, proposed costs, and evaluation of new strategy (Gordon & Graham, 2003; Sakamuro, Stolley & Hyde, 2016; Stelzner, 2007). Additionally, the circulation of white papers tends to be in an informal setting, for example via the Internet, thus white papers are structured using color, graphics and appropriate vernacular (Evans, 2014; Kolowich, 2014; Neuwirth, 2014). Though they are distributed in a similar, less formal setting, white papers are distinct from blog posts and e-books in that they are "...more serious in tone, less flashy and more heavily researched..." (Kolowich, 2014 p.2). However, the white paper distributed via the Internet should also include web links and videos to capture the attention of the audience and encourage the sharing of the document.

The project white paper fits with the general trend in that it is 14 pages long, has a cover page, executive summary, introduction to the problem, scholarship addressing the problem, recommended solutions, and references; following the standard described by Gordon & Graham (2003) and Sakamuro et al., (2016). The intended circulation of this white paper will be the institution's email listing in the initial stage, to be followed by scholarly publications and academic websites as the information is shared with similar institutions.

Conclusion

One method of disseminating research results to policy makers and school personnel is decidedly a white paper. As the literature indicates, this medium can be used to garner support for a recommended solution as well as to guide the decision-making process and encourage change. The results of the data collected in Section 2 indicated a positive influence of the HBCU Experience on the study participants and their decisions to return to SPU. Thus, the white paper presents possible solutions to eradicating the retention issues based on the framework of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) key ingredients of an institution, Terenzini and Reason's (2005) college impact model, and Berger et al.'s (2012) concept of creating an institutional retention strategy that fits the institution's environment and student.

Project Description

This white paper will serve as the tool for distribution of the results of this study and recommendations for programs to enhance the HBCU Experience and improve retention rates. The goals of the white paper are to (a) provide insight and understanding

of the HBCU Experience from the perspective of the students and its subsequent effect on their retention; (b) further explore the HBCU Experience at SPU within the context of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) key ingredients of the institution; and (c) recommend retention strategies influenced by the HBCU Experience. The white paper will first be distributed to SPU administrators via the institution's email system upon completion of the doctoral project. Additionally, as other HBCUs are faced with similar issues, the white paper will be distributed via academic journals and websites for the consideration of other administrators. As well, I will consider the presentation of these results at academic conferences hosted by HBCUs.

Potential Resources and Existing Support

As the institution embarks on solving the problem of retention, initial resource needs lie within institutional commitment and human resources. The institution prides itself on being a data-driven decision-making entity, thus the current Office of Institutional Research will become involved if administrators decide more research is needed. Additionally, the divisions of Academic Affairs, Student Affairs and Enrollment Management will all need to be committed to adopting the Village Pedagogy and crafting a culturally-infused First Year Experience (FYE) Program. The necessary structure, as in departments and divisions, are already in place. However, there may be a need to hire a director for the FYE Program, thus requiring funding for that process and position. As it applies to disseminating the white paper, the necessary technology already exists – the internal email system and Adobe Reader are necessary to access the paper.

Potential Barriers and Solutions

The goals of this white paper are aligned with the strategic plan of the institution in “Ascending to Greatness”. The SPU strategic plan 2013-2018 denotes that in its goal to promote student success, one of the key indicators will be improved retention rates. However, since embarking on this journey, the administrators I spoke to during the 2013 – 2015 academic years are no longer with the institution. The then Provost has moved on to becoming President of another HBCU, the Vice President for Student Development and Academic Integration has moved on to another institution, and that position no longer exists. This may be my first potential barrier, and it will now be my responsibility to convince the new administrators of the importance of my study. Therefore, prior to circulation of the white paper, I will initiate individual meetings with the present Provost, the Vice President of Student Affairs, and the Vice President of Enrollment Management and Undergraduate Studies. These meetings will serve to inform each individual and garner their support for the project before circulating to the wider administrative team.

The second barrier I envision may be a resistance to change and a lack of commitment to ensure change, especially as it applies to the institution of the FYE Program. Krause and Coates (2008) indicated a “need for a more holistic view of student engagement in the first year that embraces both academic and social dimensions and their role in promoting successful transitions” (p. 500); thus the need for the culturally-infused FYE Program I recommend. This will ensure the holistic view of student engagement considers the HBCU Experience since it is the catalyst and glue for HBCU students. Consequently, to counteract this resistance to change, I recommend the adoption of a change management model such as the Kotter’s 8-step Model. According to Kotter

International (2016) change within an organization will fail unless the organization takes a holistic approach and engages its workforce. This application of Kotter's model will require a committee mandated with the task of designing the FYE Program and ensuring its implementation, assessment, and alteration as needed.

Roles and Responsibilities

As a scholar-practitioner, my role is to present the results of this research study to the administration at SPU, advocating for change through recommended solutions included in the white paper. Additionally, as a member of a stakeholder group, my responsibility extends to informing internal stakeholders, faculty and staff, and garnering their support for the recommendations made. However, the key roles of instituting a steering committee and developing necessary programs lay in the hands of the Provost, who will decide on the teams and leaders, and spearhead the actualization process. As well, more research may be needed as the sample size of this study was small. Therefore, the Office of Institutional Research may be required to spearhead that process. Consequently, more student participants may play a role in the ultimate changes made to improve retention and enhance the HBCU Experience at SPU.

Project Evaluation

The goals of the white paper are to (a) provide insight and understanding of the HBCU Experience from the perspective of the students and its subsequent effect on their retention; (b) further explore the HBCU Experience at SPU within the context of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) key ingredients of the institution; and (c) recommend retention strategies influenced by the HBCU Experience. These goals fit in with the

institution's strategic goal to promote student success, using improved retention rates as one of the key indicators. Thus, the evaluation of this white paper will be formative and summative.

Since the white paper is a specific report written for an identified audience, evaluating its effectiveness lies in gaining comments and questions from the target group of readers (York, 2012). Therefore, feedback garnered from the administrators will determine if an understanding of the HBCU Experience from the perspectives of the students was accomplished. Additionally, administrators would be expected to express their views on the recommendations I made, thus opening a dialogue for instituting these recommendations. The formative assessment of the effectiveness of the project will come through these questions, comments and concerns. In the long term, the summative assessment of the effectiveness of the project will be ascertained through the implementation of recommendations by the institution's administration, and ultimately by continued tracking and reviewing of the retention rates.

Project Implications for Social Change

Local Implications

The white paper recommends strategies to improve the institution's retention rate, as well as its impact on individual students. First, an understanding of how the HBCU Experience influences retention would enhance the institution's ability to retain its students at the end of the first year. As such, an improvement in the retention rates would also reflect in an improvement in the U.S. News and World Report Best College ranking, an objective indicated by the institution in its strategic plan. Second, as an HBCU,

especially in light of the recent social and political climate among and/or for African Americans, the institution stands to educate and influence students to become social change agents. Thus, a culturally-infused FYE program, a village pedagogy, and a renewed mission to "...enroll and graduate...this traditionally disenfranchised minority" (Nelms, 2010, p.15) will see the application on Chickering's student development theory, especially the vector of establishing identity. As a consequence, students will develop the "...race pride...consciousness...self-esteem and self-confidence..." described by Mbjekwe, as cited in Albritton (2012). Both these implications would reflect on the campus community in the first instant, then extend to the wider community. Third, an enhancing of the racial pride and consciousness could extend to the local community of Midtown which is predominantly African American. In this regard, community-based programs could be developed to educate and assist the development of community residents in a similar manner, thus impacting social change in the surrounding areas.

Far-reaching Implications

As the institution influences the lives of individual students, it creates change agents for the wider communities at both state and national levels. Students thus graduate to become social change agents in their individual communities, spreading the racial pride and consciousness garnered at the institution. Additionally, the white paper can inform other HBCUs, thus widening the influence and producing even more change agents on the national scale. The implications for social change therefore lies in the development of generations of individuals more conscious of their identity and value as a racial group.

Summary

In Section 3 of this project study, I provided a description of the goals and rationale for using the white paper as the project genre. Additionally, a review of the literature was completed and a thorough description of resources, barriers, roles and responsibilities in implementation, and evaluation ensued. I closed the section with a discussion of implications for social change should the recommendations included in the white paper be implemented. In Section 4 I presented my reflections and development of self as I conducted this research process.

Section 4: Reflections

Introduction

The purpose of this project study was to examine the students' perceptions of the HBCU Experience and its influence on their retention. I was motivated to examine this area after my daughter's first year at a prominent HBCU, and that experience opened my eyes to the plethora of research on the First Year Experience and student retention. As I am employed at another HBCU, that placed me in the perfect position to examine the issue within the realms of our institution, thus illuminating a problem we were also experiencing. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are the perceptions of African American students of the HBCU experience at SPU?
2. What are the perceptions of African American students on the influence of the HBCU experience on their decision to return to SPU after their first year at the institution?

The goal of my research was to inform administrators of the students' perspectives as we examine ways to eradicate the issue of attrition after the first year.

Project Strengths

The deliverable designed from this project study is a white paper. The white paper itself is a strength, as it is a synopsis of the research data presented in an easy-to-read fashion, and circulated to a targeted audience of administrators. This white paper aligns with Creswell's (2012) concept of presenting research findings to education practitioners in a clear and concise manner, and making recommendations for change

they can easily access (pp. 271-272). Thus, the white paper will serve as a guide to administrators as they examine the problem and implement strategies to solve it. Another strength of this project is that the white paper offers recommended strategies designed to fit the environment and student, thus applying Berger et al.'s (2012), theory to fit *SPU's* retention strategies to the needs of *SPU's* students and the idiosyncrasies of *SPU's* environment. Thirdly, the strength of this project lies in its ability to provide a voice to students. As institutions, and HBCUs particularly, address the issue of retention, this project provides a medium through which students share their experiences and choices and, thus, assisting administrators to become more aware of the issues from the perspective of students. Finally, though there is a surplus of literature looking at retention and first year experiences, there is no readily accessible research specific to the HBCU Experience and retention. Thus, this white paper *starts the conversation* and accentuates the need for research in that area. The findings in this study, presented in the white paper, will contribute to a body of research that is necessary but non-existent.

Project Limitations and Remediation

This project study, and resulting white paper, is limited first by sample size and setting. The size of the sample is quite small in relation to the population of the institution, thus making it difficult to generalize results to the institution itself, and other HBCUs in general. Additionally, the setting of a private HBCU possesses an abundance of other elements affecting student retention that may not be common with public HBCUs, such as cost of attendance, and availability of financial aid. This study did not focus on those elements and seems to isolate the HBCU Experience from the cost of

attendance, thus limiting its scope and applicability. Further research will alleviate these limitations as more participants and more HBCUs may be included to improve generalizability of the study.

Another limitation of this study was the actual source of the data. The study was opened to African American students who had completed at least one year, and were presently enrolled. However, during the interview process I observed that limiting that group to sophomores may have led to more detailed data on the first year experience. Juniors and seniors tended to recall incidences from the previous year, not necessarily the first year of their college life. Additionally, in my conversations with alumni, I find they tend to appreciate the HBCU Experience more, and are more expressive of what that experience means to them. Thus, present students may not fully understand the impact of the experience, and alumni may have been a better source of data. However, the issue of the first year would still remain, would they be able to recall and talk about just that first year of college?

There was also limitation in the methodology used to collect data – individual interviews. Although the interviews did produce some personal experiences, the inclusion of focus groups may have provided a more robust discussion and additional rich data. According to Patton, as cited by Merriam (2009), focus groups allow participants to hear each other's responses, make additional comments, agree and/or disagree, but not necessarily needing a consensus, thus having a conversation on the topic in a group setting (p. 94). Further, McMillan (2012) described focus groups as "...designed to

promote interaction... [and] lead to a richer understanding..." (p. 293) of the topic at hand, and thus would have been a more appropriate method of data collection.

One of the most vital limitations of a white paper is getting stakeholders to actually read and embrace the recommendations. In my case, the issue is expounded by the institutional changes which took place since the start of the project, as the administrators I spoke to during the 2013 – 2015 academic years are no longer with the institution. Thus, I will need to initiate individual meetings with the present Provost, the Vice President of Student Affairs, and the Vice President of Enrollment Management and Undergraduate Studies to convince them of the importance of my study.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

According to Creswell (2012), there are a variety of ways for disseminating research including oral presentations, journal articles and conference presentations, which may be applicable to the educational setting. This specific project study could be presented to administrators in an oral presentation and discussion format, which could be extended to include a panel of students, and/or alumni. However, the time commitment required on the parts of all administrators, myself, alumni and student panel may be a deterrent to using this method, but is a viable alternative to starting that conversation. Thus, addressing the problem of retention, and exploring the impact of the HBCU Experience on retention could take the form of an oral presentation, inclusive of a discussion and panel presentation.

Although there is little or no research focused on the HBCU Experience and its influence on retention, there is an abundance of research on retention (Pascarella &

Terenzini, 2005; Seidman, 2012) and the first year experience (Barefoot et al., 2005; Cuseo, 2010). Researchers (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993, 2009) purport student involvement and integration as a condition of retention, thus alternative solutions to the issue of retention include an array of programs such as a First Year Experience (FYE) program, Freshman College (FC), freshman orientation courses, freshman seminar courses, student retention specialists, first year advising, the federally supported TRIO program. As it applies to solving the issue of retention in the first year, Duncan (2009) suggested we pay close attention to the academic needs of freshman students before they become freshmen. In his address to the National HBCU Conference in 2009, Duncan denoted the success of programs such as Howard University Middle School of Mathematics and Science in preparing students for college success in those subject areas. Thus, an alternative to stemming the attrition rate is to begin to impact students prior to college.

Scholarship

According to the Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary (n.d.), scholarship and/or learning refers to the act of gaining knowledge by studying, which equates to the process I have been immersed in since embarking on this project study. My review of the literature, using sources such as Academic Search Complete, ERIC, ProQuest Central, and Thoreau, revealed numerous tactics applied by institutions to the issue of student retention, especially as it impacts low-income, first-generation and 'at-risk' groups. However, there was no literature looking at the HBCU Experience and retention. That for me was an eye-opener, as it was an indication that conducting research at HBCUs was at a minimum, and most of this research focused on the sciences (STEM) and gender.

Thus, I learned the obligation is on practitioners to conduct research relative to the issues we face so we can learn from each other. Additionally, as we attempt to solve issues, it is imperative we know what has been tried before, what information is already out there, and where the needs and/or niches might be. Scholarship therefore, tedious though it may be, is the basis on which problem-solving should be built.

Project Development

When I embarked on my dissertation journey, the issue of what project to recommend was in the back of my mind. The plethora of research indicated programs such as a First Year Experience (FYE) program, Freshman College (FC), freshman orientation courses, and freshman seminar courses, among others, were already tried and proven. As well, my institution was in the middle of transitioning presidents, and by extension, the leadership team. Consequently, we explored using one or more of the above mentioned strategies as an objective of the new leadership. Thus, I wanted a project that would withstand changes and still be available for whomever decision-maker is in place. Deciding on a white paper was the best solution to the situation. This led me into another area of scholarship that I did not realize I would need to do, that of researching the project type and defending my choice. This information on white papers, the various purposes, the history, and the formats was new to me, thus expanding my knowledge base.

Leadership & Change

Researchers (Carter, 2008; Drew, 2010; Hilton & Jacobson, 2012; Kezar, Gallant, & Lester, 2011; Koen & Bitzer, 2010; Kouzes & Posner, 2003) have explored change and

the challenges of higher education leaders. As a result, strategies for good leaders and change management are popular research topics. A Google Scholar search of the two terms leadership and change together yielded 523,000 articles since 2012. What I learned from exploring these two terms lie in the existence of various types of leaders, leadership strategies, and change management. Consequently, as an emerging leader, I revere Carter (2008) and his change management process where he stated "...one needs to focus on what you are trying to change (strategy), the recipients of the new state (staff and skills), and the tools to support the new state (structures)" (p. 20). As well, a good leader is described by Kouzes and Posner, cited by Harris and Cullen (2008), as "...honest and forward thinking..." (p. 25). Thus, as I conclude this doctoral process, my leadership gain from it is to apply change management, be honest with the people I am leading and be proactive in all I do.

Analysis of Self as a Scholar, Practitioner & Project Developer

I started this doctoral journey appalled at my daughter's first year experience at one of the top tier HBCUs in the nation. Her experience made me question my actions in conducting my duties on a daily basis. My very first class starting this program opened my eyes to information I wish I knew before she went off to college; we would have done our college search and decisions differently. I have spent the last five years, as I complete this Doctorate of Education (Ed. D) with Walden University, reexamining all my previous educational experiences, delving into an analysis of myself as a scholar, practitioner, and project developer.

I have grown since starting this program. As a scholar, I honed my research, critical thinking, and organization skills through numerous re-writes, assessing peer comments and critique, and setting and meeting my own deadlines. Additionally, I have learned the true meaning of patience and flexibility. I consistently felt I was behind my cohort because I did not immediately narrow down a topic and proposal. However, when I crossed that hurdle, I moved fairly quickly, but had to accept the process, allowing time for reads, corrections, coordination, changes, and all the elements that could have become issues had I allowed them. As well, I learned to personally gauge myself, because life does not pause whilst one studies. Therefore, I learned to balance my work, student, and family life throughout this process; now I apply Chickering (1969) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) psychosocial theory of development to myself, family, and students.

I have always considered myself a teacher; my career is about impacting lives through education. I taught high school for 10 years before getting into higher education, and have been in higher education now for 13 years. Starting this program of study helped me adjust as a practitioner. I began to deeply examine my teaching methods and my interaction with students. As I delved into the research on retention, I began to recognize where we went wrong with our decisions for my daughter's college choice, but then applied strategies to ensure the students in my classroom did not feel the same way my daughter did about her professors. As a practitioner, I recognized that my institution catered to low-income, first-generation and 'at risk' students, who had a higher propensity to failing. Thus, my responsibilities were extended, I am not only imparting knowledge, I am also responsible for making them feel comfortable, accepted, and a part

of the family that is the institution. Previously, I thought that was the responsibility of the Student Life Division, now I am accepting it is a holistic effort, the entire team that is the institution needs to be involved. I am now capable of extending my role to one that may be outside the classroom in order to achieve our retention goals. Additionally, I have been able to adapt Berger et al.'s (2012), concept to fit *the* retention strategies to the needs of *the* students and the idiosyncrasies of *the* environment.

As indicated earlier, I created a white paper, a project that will hopefully withstand changes in administration and still be available when needed. However, as I analyze my growth as a project developer, I honestly think this is where I experienced the least growth. As I worked on putting this together, the upheavals, dismissals, departures, and changes that took place over the last couple of years made the white paper the path of least resistance. Nevertheless, as I move forward, I hope to be able to bring to fruition the programs recommended in the white paper. The culturally-infused first year experience was a natural extension of what was learnt from the data as students express the desire to be immersed in their culture and history. I will begin to work on encouraging adoption from the present administration in order to fully develop the proposed program.

Reflections on the Importance of the Work

This work is the culmination of my doctoral journey and thus its importance to me was, initially, for that purpose. However, as the topic was defined and my research began, it became glaringly obvious how much it was needed. A Google Scholar search of the term *research at HBCUs* revealed a mere 8,310 results, while one of *HBCUs* added

only 1,500 to that number! Therefore, a major importance of this work is to fill the gap in practice and knowledge, that of performing research at HBCUs and informing the world about HBCUs. Additionally, there were no articles found on the HBCU Experience and retention. Thus, this body of work will begin to fill that gap, informing SPU specifically and starting a conversation for other HBCUs as they look at their environs and retention.

Implications, Applications and Future Research

In today's educational environment, HBCUs continue to fulfill their mission of educating the African American population, developing racial pride and consciousness, with the intention to empower and uplift the race. Thus, this body of research, and subsequent white paper, will impact positive social change as students themselves become change agents, affecting their own families, impacting the community surrounding the institution and the communities from whence they came. Additionally, as the study instigates an increase in the body of knowledge about the HBCU Experience and its influence on retention, it will initiate the conversation at other institutions, thus impacting the wider HBCU community and widening the scope of social change as they look at their individual environments. It is not the intention to generalize the data from this small, qualitative study, however, by sharing this information with other practitioners, it is hoped the conversation will encourage them to examine their own environments and thus impact their own students.

The recommendations of the white paper to strengthen the village pedagogy and develop a culturally-infused First Year Experience program are appropriate applications to fulfilling (a) Berger et al.'s (2012) concept to create an institutional retention strategy

that fits the SPU environment and student; (b) Terenzini and Reason's (2005) theory that institutions should control the curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular entities that shape students' experiences; and (c) Chickering and Reisser (1993) hypothesis that the purpose of higher education is human development and should have key ingredients to fulfill this purpose. As such, these programs reflect the voices of the participants who stated feeling a part of a family where relevant information is shared was their experience.

Future research on this topic is imperative to increasing the body of knowledge. Data could be gathered from a larger group of students using a survey format of open-ended questions. Additionally, the use of a focus group would enhance the depth of information gathered as focus group participants tend to feed off each other and thus provide even more details to some situations. Ultimately, the way to create the greatest impact would be using a multiple-site case study method, thus allowing for cross-examination and -referencing of various HBCUs, such as, all private, all public, or private vs. public.

Conclusion

My doctoral journey culminated in this body of research motivated by personal experience during my daughter's freshman year. The overall goal of the research was to identify the perceptions of African American students on the HBCU Experience and its influence on their retention. The project created from data collected was a white paper intended to provide an insight into the HBCU Experience and its influence on retention, as well as provide recommendations for practice. Despite the small group of participants,

the study is valuable in that it opens the door to more areas for research and starts the conversation on other elements that may influence retention. As well, notwithstanding the limitations outlined in Section 4, the implications for social change are evident. This study will assist HBCUs in their quest to educating a marginalized minority. I am even more energized to continue to assist in the transition of students to college and be a proponent of the village pedagogy.

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Appendix A: The Project



THE HBCU EXPERIENCE & RETENTION

A WHITE PAPER

ABSTRACT

The issue of student retention has long been a focus of institutional strategies, especially among students with financial, academic and social risk factors, and specifically after the first year. Addressing the issue of retention is a priority for Sea Port University. The purpose of this study was to identify the students' perceptions of their HBCU experience and its influence on retention. The purpose of this white paper was to make recommendations for retention policy to be considered by Sea Port University based on the study results.

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Executive Summary

Student retention has long been a focus of institutional strategies, especially among students with financial, academic and social risk factors, and specifically after the first year. First year students at HBCUs are most likely to dropout at rates higher than other colleges and universities; approximately 33% annual dropout rate over the past 50 – 60 years (Crow, 2007, pp1-2). Here at Sea Port University (SPU) there was a steady decline in retention rates from 80% in 2002 to 63% in 2012.

This study was completed using a qualitative case study approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with eight fulltime, African American students. The guiding research questions were:

- 1) What are the perceptions of African American students of the HBCU experience at SPU?
- 2) What are the perceptions of African American students on the influence of the HBCU experience on their decision to return to SPU after their first year at the institution?

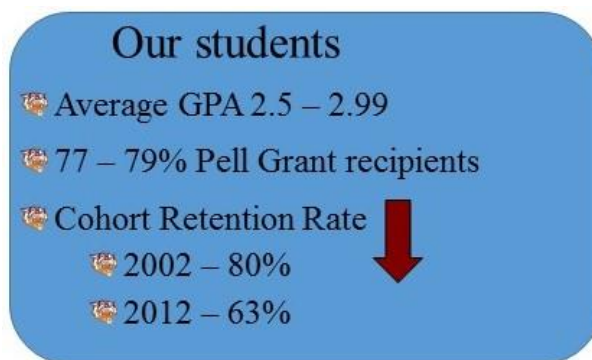
The results of this case study were reviewed considering theory and literature review, culminating in recommendations to improve retention through the HBCU Experience. The goals of this white paper are to

- (a) provide insight and understanding of the HBCU Experience from the perspective of the students and its subsequent effect on their retention;
- (b) further explore the HBCU Experience at SPU within the context of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) key ingredients of the institution; and

(c) recommend retention strategies influenced by the HBCU Experience. Although these results and recommendations are specific to SPU, it may inform other HBCUs as they attempt to stem the attrition tide and improve the retention of first year students.

The Problem

First year student retention is a persistent issue especially since, according to Lee (2012), the success of an institution is often measured by its first-year retention rate, along with graduation rates. Additionally, Tinto (1993) and Engle and Tinto (2008) posited low income, first generation students face numerous obstacles to college success, are more apt to fail, and the retention of these students may be impacted by the college experiences they undergo. Therefore, if students attending HBCUs have an HBCU Experience, does this influence their decision to return after the first year?



According to the SPU fall new student profile data, over the 5-year period 2011-2015 the mean GPA for freshman students ranged between 2.5 – 2.99. As well, during that same period, the number of students receiving Pell Grants has hovered between 77 – 79%; an indication they are in the low-income category described by Engle & Tinto

(2008). It should also be noted that a review of the institution's cohort retention statistics shows a steady decrease from 80% in 2002 to 63% in 2012, a 17-point drop in 10 years. Consequently, we must address the issue of retention by applying Berger, Blanco Ramirez, and Lyons' (2012) concept of creating an institutional retention strategy that fits the SPU environment and student.

The Theory

According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), during early adulthood one progresses through seven vectors of development, one of which is 'establishing identity'. The authors further posited seven key ingredients for an institution organized around human development. As stated by Chickering and Reisser, "...a positive identity is enhanced by an awareness of one's cultural background, an immersion in the social world of one's ethnic group, a valuing of the rituals, traditions, and artifacts of one's extended family or adopted network, and a sense of one's lineage" (p. 194). Also, Terenzini and Reason (2005) purported a college impact model in which the organizational context, peer environment and student individual experiences are the primary influences on student development, and it is within this context that institutions shape student experiences through classroom, curricular and out-of-class settings.

The HBCU, established with a mission to educate the African American populace, provides an education built on the history and legacy of the African American culture, as well as empowers and inspires the African American race. Therefore, does SPU, as an HBCU,

- 1) possess the key ingredients posited by Chickering and Reisser (1993)?

- 2) create an atmosphere of history, legacy and traditions of the African American culture?
- 3) provide a context of experiences to influence the development of its African American students?
- 4) If so, does this environment translate to the retention of these African American students?

Retention is a "...campus-based phenomenon" (Berger, Blanco Ramirez, and Lyons, 2012, p. 8), requiring individual institutions to fit *their* retention strategies to the needs of *their* students and the idiosyncrasies of *their* environments.

Objective and Design

The objective of this qualitative case study was to explore the students' perception of the HBCU Experience and its influence on their decision to return to the institution at the end of the first year.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of African American students of the HBCU experience at SPU?
2. What are the perceptions of African American students on the influence of the HBCU experience on their decision to return to SPU after their first year at the institution?

Purposeful sampling generated eight participants: four seniors, two juniors, two sophomores. All participants signed an informed consent form which described the purpose of the study, the consent for audio-

recording, how the information may be used, voluntary participation, and the risks and benefits to the study. Member checking and an external auditor were used to validate the information and determine researcher bias in the analysis.

Results

Each audio file was transcribed and Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) was used to store, examine, and organize the data collected. Thirty-one codes were identified,



and further collapsed into seven themes.

Interviewee Background

As indicated by Freeman, cited by the ASHE Report (2010), African Americans choose HBCUs because of personal affiliation and an interest in a majority-Black environment (p.29). All participants, but one, were from urban, low-income communities; Olivia's description of her local environment stated "...I'm used to seeing black people that are struggling, on the corner..."

"...never had a conversation with someone with a PhD, [especially not] a black person that had a PhD" - Olivia

As well, most attended high schools where they were in the minority, as Sadia expressed "...this was a complete different experience from my high school...it's not about color, ...not anymore".

Fifty percent of the participants chose an HBCU as mom, dad, cousins and even church members were HBCU alumni. They were already familiar with the product; they were encouraged to select our product. Angie emphatically stated, she was *raised* to attend this specific institution, there were no other choices on the table.

Angie's directive from her aunt: "...you can play in the SPU marching band one day"

Interviewee Expectations

The general consensus among participants was felt in the terms 'new' and 'different': new people, new places, different people, different things, and different experiences were repeated terms. Notably, after a number of predominantly white schools, Olivia needed to be where "they teach me about me". That sentiment was seconded by Polly, who wanted to learn more about her history, and Sylvia who starved to be around more African Americans, "you know, people who look like me". As was described by Albritton (2012) "...as a Black male, my exposure to Black male professors and other Black male professionals would allow me to see more

positive images of Black men”; this reasoning is applicable to both genders. Consequently, SPU is expected to fulfill Chickering’s (n.d.) assertion that student development occurs within social, historical and cultural settings, by providing an educational environment in which African Americans felt a sense of belonging.

Academic Atmosphere

“...being surrounded by successful Black Americans...they have PhDs [shouts term], and my mind was blown” - Olivia

Aspects of the academic atmosphere mentioned by the participants included a rigorous curriculum, the 24-hour library access, etiquette classes, progress reports, having a television studio and learning about the history of the founder and institution. Professors being described as caring and welcoming, was mentioned by all and shown in the sentiments expressed by Dara “...my professors, they are very, like, open; they make you feel comfortable”. Participants spoke of specific courses required of students, which some indicated was not so at PWIs. One such course was Understanding Faith which Paige felt helped her develop her relationship with God. Sadia was enamored by the African American History and Freshman Seminar courses where she learned the history of the institution’s founder, as well as the institution itself. Paige was amazed that Freshman Seminar taught “...time management, how to be professional, how to dress and how to be disciplined...”; she did not know one would be taught that in college. Paige further concluded African American History should

be a must for all HBCUs since she felt African Americans should be experts at their own history. Olivia expressed the need for all African Americans to attend an HBCU, “...you learn yourself here...” she stated.

These elements mentioned drive home Wingate’s (2006) premise that HBCUs promote self-concept by “...the presence of a significant number of Black faculty and staff who serve as surrogate parents, mentors and supporters” (p.111). Additionally, Davis (2006) posited that student maturity is accelerated in an environment of shared heritage, as is the case of the African American student at the HBCU.

As Chickering and Reisser (1993) indicated “...a positive identity is enhanced by an awareness of one’s cultural background, an immersion in the social world of one’s ethnic group, a valuing of the rituals, traditions, and artifacts of one’s extended family or adopted network, and a sense of one’s lineage” (p. 194). In addition, Chickering and Reisser posited seven key ingredients for institutional environments as they encourage human development. Those key ingredients are (a) institutional objectives, (b) institutional size, (c) student-faculty relationships, (d) curriculum, (e) teaching, (f) friendships and student communities, and (g) student development programs and services (p. 265). Thus, a smaller institution, with clear and consistent objectives, a curriculum relevant to the student body, and active learning strategies which encourage frequent and friendly student-faculty relationships, is an educationally powerful environment that promote student development. Additionally, the shared cultural and historical experiences that is the nature of the HBCU enriches the development of African American students.

Consequently, SPU is evidently fulfilling its purpose as a HBCU, to develop students intellectually and culturally, and the environment fits Chickering and Reisser's theory.

Student Life

Recollections of the participants included a variety of events organized from the Department of Student Activities, for example Welcome Back Bash, Turn-up Thursdays and Poetry Night, as well as participating in 'Stop the Hunger', 'Midtown Clean-up' and other community service events. Participants talked about the exuberant school spirit as is evidenced by the pride and support of the marching band, football, basketball, baseball, softball and athletics teams which have consistently been conference champions. Also mentioned was the abundance of organizations, especially Greek Life and National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), in which one could become involved. There was exceptional pride in talking about the NCNW, since that organization was also started by the institution's founder. Dara expressed amazement in the presence of the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. members in her freshman hall when she stated, "...they really take their time out to come and talk to us...that was like the best thing for me because it was like, you know, having your older siblings to come talk to you...". For the participants, meeting upperclassmen in this way developed that sense of community and camaraderie early in their college experience. According to Sylvia and Sadia, it is during these social activities that one meets their new best friends, coupled with gaining the big picture view of the world; these events and organizations help you live the founder's legacy "...to go out and help the community" as Paige so fittingly

stated. Sadia concluded the student life element in her statement "...now, I have my own little community of brothers and sisters here".

According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), the student life aspects of campus provide a laboratory for learning to communicate, increase tolerance and integrity, and develop acceptance, enjoyment and loyalty. Thus, the formal and informal interactions between students provides a training ground for developing competence, autonomy, interdependence and interpersonal relationships (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 275-276). Additionally, student involvement has consistently been a key component of student retention and therefore should be a major component of any retention plan. As an HBCU, SPU delivers this environment within an historical and cultural atmosphere unique to the African American student, but does this HBCU Experience influence retention?

Christian Heritage

This theme was prominent for 75% (6) of the participants; expressed by Sadia that her college experience was "...a blessing and spiritual awakening". All six participants mentioned developing an appreciation for chapel services, though they may have felt forced to attend initially. Participants experienced personal growth from the Understanding Faith course, coupled with the chapel services, as they were able to explore other religions and better appreciate their own religious beliefs. Paige's statement on this element was "...now I ...have my own conversation and my own relationship with God". Olivia thinks this element separates SPU from other institutions; though not started by a church, SPU has had a faith-

based beginning and a strong religious heritage, with 'Faith' being one of the institution's core values.

According to Shaw (2006), private HBCUs provide 'character education', a system in which "...value-laden themes such as justice, self-discipline, honesty, courage, truth, responsibility, and the pursuit of excellence prevail" (p. 96). Additionally, the Branch-Simpson's identity development model, as described by Chickering and Reisser (1993), asserts religious and spiritual identity as a primary constituent in the development process of African Americans. To this end, the religious life aspect is a critical component of the curricula and co-curricular elements of the institution, and religion is a part of the learning.

Racial Consciousness & Self Growth

The participants were enthused with the diverse student body; though most were the same skin color, students were from different cities, states, countries, and heritage. Thus the college experience involved sharing of different cultures and viewpoints but "...coming together [in] unity..." as expressed by Sean.

"...she (founder) really wanted us to have a chance...I can't take this for granted...too many sacrifices have gone into it..." - Angie

Participants felt the institution, and its founder, instilled a sense racial pride. As indicated by Angie "...I had no idea her [the founder] parents were slaves, [or] this place was a dump [physically].... And I can imagine how many times she wanted to quit". Angie was emphatic as she continued,

"...this school has history, ...a specific purpose. ...I can't mess this up, you know...". Polly corroborated in her statement, "...having SPU started by an African American woman is empowering...that is amazing". Paige's take on it was "...you have to work for everything, like, she didn't just ask for hand-me-downs, she worked [hits table] and she went out and fought hard for it...she started this with a dollar and fifty cents, ...that makes me motivated".

According to Brown and Ricard (2007), African Americans attend HBCUs due to the distinct efforts to preserve "...Black history, racial pride, ethnic traditions, and Black consciousness" (p. 121). Thus, as participants mature along the lines of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) identity development, they begin to better appreciate their cultural heritage, and progress in terms of self-acceptance and self-esteem.

Fifty percent of the respondents alluded to the self-growth experienced by being at an HBCU. Sean and Paige felt growth and maturity were linked to association with a diverse group of people, while Sadia expressed as being life-changing, claiming she had a "...mental awakening...that gave her hope". The thoughts of what may have led to that growth were encompassed in community service events, chapel speakers, interacting with upper classmen, and experiencing courses in history and religion. As Angie so fittingly stated "...I grew from day one of freshman year to the end" while Sadia's sentiments were "...seriously, freshman year Sadia to junior year Sadia, oh, I feel like, I'm proud...like, my mind has grown...". This growth fits into Chickering and Reisser's moving through autonomy

toward interdependence vector. In this vector, according to Chickering and Reisser, students develop an awareness of a larger community, establishing mutually satisfying interrelationships, and showing reciprocal respect.

The HBCU Experience and Retention

Though the HBCU Experience is difficult to define, it refers to the black culture, history and identity (Turner, 2011) prominent in an academic and social curriculum which may exist on HBCU campuses. As described by Polly, the HBCU Experience is "...just like everybody is together and I feel like part of...is really learning to love who you are, like your roots, and really learning to embrace it...". Participants used terms such as family-like, marching band, school pride, unity, professors who care, our history, Greek life and partying to describe what they thought the term meant. Overall, the village pedagogy, defined by Harris III (2012) as a communal atmosphere in which learning takes place, was evident in the participants' reflections on their HBCU Experience; all the aspects of residential life, combined with the academic atmosphere, were what made the experience. This was also reflected by Harris III (2012), as his high school and HBCU experiences ran parallel to the village pedagogy, while his one semester at a PWI starkly contrasted with feelings of loneliness, isolation, and disconnect. The HBCU Experience Harris III (2012) described as "...a cultural center..." (p. 347), where more of the professors, administrators, staff were African American with whom he could identify, the jargon and music were familiar, and members of the 'village' were contributing to the development of the whole person through formal and informal lessons for succeeding in life.

There was one participant, Sylvia, who had not heard of the term previously. This she attributed to her military upbringing which had her outside the country for most of her formative years; she came to SPU directly from Japan. However, when given the above definition responded, "Oh, ...then my Freshman Seminar and Cultural Literacy classes got me to understand my HBCU Experience...[made] me understand my African American side...". Of the other seven participants, Olivia previously heard negative connotations to the term, which she qualified with "...they are people who never even attended an HBCU"; thus implying, how would they know? This negative response to attending an HBCU permeates the literature, ironically among high school counselors, as Albritton (2012) described being discouraged in his decision to attend a HBCU.

One emerging and note-worthy sub-theme of the HBCU Experience was the warm, welcoming, family-like atmosphere experienced by the participants. Comments such as "I feel like we are more like family here"; "I like that it is very family-oriented" and "...the staff were amazing, so loving..." were expressed by Angie, Sean and Olivia respectively. Sadia validated this when she stated "...you feel like this is your home, our family away from our family" and for Olivia, the presence of the founder's home on campus "...closes the family". This general consensus and the use of family terminology was prominent in all the interviews; "having older siblings" was used by Dara to describe her residential life experiences, "this is where [I] belong" expressed how Angie felt, while Polly had "...someone to lean on a little bit, outside of mom and dad". This family-like atmosphere was a major component of the

HBCU Experience for the participants; a sentiment shared by Davis (2006) who described the HBCU as an extended family, and used the adage “it takes an entire village to raise a child” to depict that setting. This substantiates Harris III (2012) village pedagogy.

When asked about the impact on their decision to return, Olivia described her experiences as “awesome” and “phenomenal”, Sadia called it “exhilarating”, Angie was emphatic in her statement, “...I finished my first semester with a 3.66 GPA, I accomplished too much to quit”, while Sean summed it in “...they want to see you succeed...and that’s one thing that made me want to come back”. The descriptions used portray the sentiments expressed by Harris III (2012) as he defended HBCUs as a “...space in which their academic concerns, passions, development and culture are central to the mission of their college experience” (p. 344). This environment of empowering, close student-faculty relationships, family-like feel, according to the ASHE Report (2010), is why students attend, and remain, at an HBCU; that is the HBCU Experience. Therefore, the HBCU experience built on personal affiliation, history, values, norms, and legacy of the African American culture, presents the backdrop for the seven key ingredients of Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) educational environment. This culture-specific, village pedagogy is the catalyst and the glue for students at an HBCU.

Recommendation #1

Participants referred to several *familial* entities at SPU with the founder referred to as *mother* and upperclassmen as *siblings*; Polly’s statement of “...someone to lean on a

little bit” was her description of the family-entity, thus expressing Davis’ (2006) sentiment that the HBCU was an extended family. Consequently, the first recommendation is the strengthening of present structures and entities to systematically create the village pedagogy purported by Harris III (2012). This pedagogy is central to the provision of an all-encompassing environment for the successful matriculation of African American students. According to Harris III (2012), the village pedagogy is a communal environment in which both formal and informal instruction takes place; where there is a common heritage, mutual commitment, and relationships that extend beyond the classroom (p. 335). Thus, the family-like atmosphere, sense of belonging, and camaraderie used to describe the SPU environment provides a basis for that village concept, and are building blocks to the creation of an atmosphere in which the African American culture is central to the mission of the college experience (Harris III, 2012, p. 344).



Though the village pedagogy permeates all aspects of college life, it should be especially visible at the freshman level through (a) clearly stated and measurable goals; (b) a

mutual understanding of the pedagogy among all departments; and, (c) involvement of academic and non-academic enterprises. Strategies to achieve this pedagogy would include:

- i. Academic advisors and student services personnel become familiar with incoming students through their admissions essays shared from the admissions office, therefore using this information to better serve them;
- ii. Development of a plan-of-action, sometimes individualized, to meet the needs of the incoming students within the student services, financial services and academic advising divisions; access to this action plan granted to all faculty and staff, so anyone can assist as needed;
- iii. Creation of a *one-stop shop* for assisting freshmen with services – academic, financial and social; thus, all advisors are trained to handle all elements of freshmen needs;
- iv. The institution of **SERVICE** training for dealing with both internal and external customers using the following **SERVICE** model, adopted from the Disney Service Model: **S**mile, **E**ye Contact & **B**ody Language, **R**espect & **W**elcome, **V**alue the person, **I**nitiate communication, **C**reative Service Solutions, **E**nd with a ‘thank you’.

These strategies will lead to the development of an “...ethic of caring about the students...” (Barefoot et al., 2005, p.159), fulfilling Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) concept of organizing educational environments to positively influence student development using institutional objectives, student communities, and student development

programs and services. Additionally, as purported by Terenzini and Reason (2005), it is within this college experience that institutions can exercise some control and ultimately shape the students’ experiences occurring in classroom, curricular and out-of-class settings. Consequently, this results in the application of Berger et al.’s (2012) concept to create an institutional retention strategy that fits the SPU environment and student.

The ‘village pedagogy’ is a familiar concept within the HBCU culture since the institutions embrace the adage “it takes a village to raise a child”, thus projecting a spirit of togetherness, camaraderie, and service to each other. Therefore, the conscious attention to the village pedagogy presents an environment that is nurturing, supporting and family-oriented, as described by Palmer, Davis and Maramba (2010). The pedagogy may seem generic and includes components of any campus atmosphere, however, it embraces the HBCU Experience as described by Harris III (2012) since the “...concerns, passions, development and culture [of African Americans] are central to the mission...” (p. 344). This immersion of all academic and non-academic departments into the historical and cultural experience uniquely provides an atmosphere the African American students craves; one in which they belong, can learn about themselves, and feel empowered.

Recommendation #2


In response to the question on expectations coming to college, Olivia aptly stated, “where they teach me about me”. This statement exemplifies the sentiments of participants who had always been in schools where they were the minority and felt they


learned very little about themselves as African American. Consequently, the statement inspired the second recommendation to craft a culturally-infused First-Year Experience (FYE) Program. Presently SPU does not employ a FYE program and relies on the efforts of the Freshman Seminar to deliver on the transitional needs of students and to influence student learning, success, engagement, and retention in the first year. As indicated by Kift (2009), the first year curriculum should serve to inspire and support students as they struggle to find their sense of belonging during the period of transition (p. 1). Thus, in keeping with previous researchers (Barefoot et al., 2005; Cuseo, 2010; Potts & Schultz, 2008; Tinto, 2009) SPU needs an invasive program embracing academic and social elements to support the successful transition of students to the institution. Additionally, since students choose HBCUs to immerse in and learn more about the African American culture, strands of this culture should be steeped into the FYE program to ensure all incoming students are exposed to the same elements.

The objectives of this FYE Program would include:


- i) To foster a successful transition to SPU;
- ii) To encourage student engagement in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities;
- iii) To promote policies, processes, procedures, and resources relative to academic success and overall college life;
- iv) To endorse concepts of diversity and responsible citizenship.


This year long program would be structured to include:

 **First Year Seminar I** – student success strategies including time management, study skills, and academic advising; identity and student development.


 **First Year Seminar II** – discipline-specific academic advising, research and writing success strategies, service learning and student engagement.


The First-Year Seminars I and II will enhance the skills of students to successfully navigate the rigorous academic requirements of college. This is especially vital for the academically disadvantaged students the institution attracts with its open admissions policy.

 **Living-learning communities** – designated first-year residential communities created with full-time residence life coordinators on a ratio of one to twenty-five students, organized around special interest groups, honor status, disciplines, and open combinations. These communities will support students both socially and academically, providing an extension of the village pedagogy described in the first recommendation.


 **Summer Bridge Orientation** – to acquaint the student to the campus, its environs, services,

activities, and facilities. A major component of this would be an introduction to the history of the institution and founder. As described in the racial consciousness and self-growth theme, participants expressed pride in the institution's founder; her tenacity and drive in bringing the institution to fruition, and her contribution to the development of the African American race being an inspiration to many, especially women.

 **African American History and Culture** – fulfilling the institution's history requirement, this course would immerse students in different elements of the history, culture, politics and society of African Americans. As participants expressed expectations to learn more about themselves as African Americans, this element of the FYE program would fulfill that need.

 **Religious Life** – formalizing the present degree requirements for a course in religious studies with the chapel services and activities of this department. Though there were no direct questions on this element, 75% of participants expressed their joy and satisfaction with the religious components of campus life. As stated by Shaw (2006), religious groups

were instrumental in the establishment of HBCUs and religion become a critical ingredient in the education of the African American populace after the Civil War. Thus, the religious entity of campus life became a part of the HBCU culture that should be retained and strengthened.

 **Student Life** – infusing the social aspects of campus life, the African American culture and activities into the co-curricular requirements. The theme The HBCU Experience and Retention reinforced that all elements of the African American culture, history, and identity, the cultural center described by Harris (2012), and the sense of belonging expressed by Angie, lend credence to the need for an infused student life component, continuing to provide an atmosphere in which African American students can excel.

According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), the purpose of higher education is human development, therefore educational environments should have seven key ingredients to fulfill this purpose. Among the key ingredients are (a) a powerful curriculum relevant to the students' background and experiences; (b) the development of intellectual competence through active learning and frequent student-faculty interaction; and (c) collaboration between programs and services to effectively move students through the vectors of development.

In the case of the HBCU, these elements of the educational environment are saturated with African American history and culture; thus, fulfilling the needs of students who crave that sense of identity, while still developing the other vectors described by Chickering and Reisser. As indicated by Wingate (2006), it is within this environment that students build pride, a sense of belonging, heightened ambitions and self-concept. Therefore, as Terenzini and Reason (2005) posited, institutions should control these curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular entities that ultimately shape the students' experiences. Consequently, this reinforces Berger et al.'s (2012) concept to create an institutional retention strategy that fits the SPU environment and student. This FYE Program will be that extension of the village pedagogy crafted specifically for the SPU first year student.

Conclusion

This case study on the HBCU Experience and its influence on first year retention answered the key research questions: "What are the perceptions of African American students of the HBCU experience at SPU" and "What are the perceptions of African American students on the influence of the HBCU experience on their decision to return to SPU after their first year at the institution?" The findings revealed that the HBCU Experience is encompassed in a "village pedagogy" (Harris, 2012) that positively influenced students and their decision to return to SPU after their first year at the institution. A summary of these perceptions was presented in this white paper, including recommendations for strengthening this HBCU Experience for student retention. As well, this white paper may serve other HBCUs in their efforts to retain students.

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Appendix B: Interview Protocol

The HBCU Experience and its Influence on Student Retention

Welcome: Welcome and thank you for taking time out of your busy day to volunteer for my project study research.

Purpose Statement: This is a semi-structured interview discussion. The purpose of the interview is to hear your perspectives on the research topic - the influence of the HBCU experience on the retention of African American students. You have had a chance to review and sign the consent form prior to this interview. Please remember your information and responses will be kept confidential and used only for the purposes of this project study. As well, the session will be audiotaped to enhance my ability to analyze, as well as quote directly and accurately. If you feel uncomfortable with any question posed, you can pass on making a response, and are free to leave if the discomfort becomes acute.

Guidelines:

1. There are no right or wrong answers; I am interested in your perspective of the HBCU experience, how it has influenced your decision to return after your first year at SPU.
2. Feel comfortable telling the good and bad experiences; we can only learn from it as we continue to prepare for incoming students.

Questions:

Rapport Building & Background

1. Why did you chose this institution?
2. What factors influenced your decision?
 - a. Personal?
 - b. Institutional?
3. What were your expectations of college?
 - a. Academically?
 - b. Socially?
4. What were your expectations of college life at an HBCU?
5. How did SPU meet those expectations?

The HBCU Experience

6. Describe your experiences during your first year on campus.
 - a. Academic experiences.
 - b. Social experiences.

7. How would you define the term HBCU experience?

Retention

8. During your first year at the institution, did you ever consider dropping out or transferring to another college? Why or why not?
9. How would you describe the role your academic experience played in your decision to return at the end of your first year?
10. How would you describe the role your social experience (campus life) played in your decision to return at the end of your first year?
11. What influence do you think the HBCU experience has had on your decision to return to the institution at the end of your first year?