Beyond the Call of Duty: Building on Othermothering for Improving Outcomes at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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Healthy faculty and student interactions have been found to positively affect students' satisfaction with their collegiate experience. Positive and frequent out-of-class faculty and student interaction has long been documented as being important to the academic viability and personal development of college students. This article will attempt to provide some insight into ways that historically black colleges and universities could improve their graduation rates by increasing students' connectedness to their institutions. Faculty-student relationships will be examined in the context of othermothering. Critical factors that foster positive educational outcomes for Black students will be elucidated.

Keywords: HBCUs, othermothering, student integration

A critical component of the campus environment that leads to increased levels of social and academic integration for students is faculty and student interaction (Pascerella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Specifically, research has indicated that faculty and student interactions positively affect students' satisfaction with their collegiate experience (Astin, 1984/1999). In addition, frequent interactions between faculty and students positively correlate with various academic outcomes including college GPA, degree attainment, persistence, and post-undergraduate aspirations (Astin, 1984/1999). Moreover, increased student-faculty interaction is proven to expand students' general ways of thinking, strengthen problem-solving skills, and broaden conceptualization of various life goals and aspirations (Astin, 1984/1999; Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000). These positive outcomes resulting from sustained faculty and student interaction have the potential to increase student graduation rates and broaden the skillsets of our workforce (Palmer & Wood, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008). This article will attempt to provide insight into ways that historically black colleges and universities could improve their graduation rates; through

increasing students' connectedness to their institutions. Faculty-student relationships at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) will be examined in the context of *othermothering* practices, and critical factors that foster positive educational outcomes for Black students will be elucidated. Gilkes' (1980) characterization of othermothering is connected with community-based activism. She stresses the need for *community mothering* which further intertwines individuals' involvement in their community activities, schools, and political events.

Othermothering: Beyond Mentoring

Culturally and historically, the idea of othermothering stems from the relationships developed between slave women and other slave women's children they cared for, who had been left motherless due to slave trading and other acts of depradation (Collins, 2000). For generations, othermothering has been a means of increasing the educational, socioeconomic, and social status of Black Americans.

Within the context of education, othermothering has referred to the commitment of female Black educators to provide holistic care for students, going above and beyond basic educational or curricular needs (Case, 1997), to ensure students' personal and academic success. Within the scope of this study, othermothering is treated as a generalized gender-neutral supportive relationship. Othermothering is treated as a different phenomenon from mentoring, since it includes extra support that goes beyond students' basic academic needs (Butler, 2007).

For both the student and faculty member, othermothering is a symbiotic relationship that extends beyond the classroom. Collins (2000) asserts, "Unlike the traditional mentoring so widely reported in the educational literature, this relationship goes far beyond that of providing students with either technical skills or a network of academic and professional contacts" (p. 191). Mentoring tends to be described as a formalized relationship between an individual and a person of authority (Kram, 1983); while othermothering refers not only to the individual but also to the interactions with and the support of the community (James, 1993).

Historically, the notion of othermothering has also been seen as a practice that allows the Black community to socialize children in the ways and traditions of their community (Perkins, 1989). Collins (1986) notes that othermothering is a tool for active change in the Black community. She concludes, "Nurturing children in the Black extended family networks stimulated a more generalized ethic of caring and personal accountability among African American women who often feel accountable to all the Black community's children" (p. 129). The process of othermothering allowed academic communities to provide an educated perspective of the world, while teaching Black students about White dominant ideology and ways of resistance (Foster, 1993). Bernard and Bernard's (1998) research focused on the supportive role of the mothers, primarily how "Black mothers have historically been charged with the responsibility of providing education, social, and political awareness" (p. 47).

Othermothering in HBCUs

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were established as an institutional structure that embodied the true nature of support for Black college students. Traditionally, they have emphasized the importance of collective cohesion among all members of the community; as a result, othermothering was socialized as an institutional HBCU value.

Othermothering often refers to the level of intentionality faculty have embodied when engaging in direct and/or indirect caring relationships with students throughout their collegiate experience (Hirt et al., 2008). These acts, often personal, may result in life-long mentoring relationships between faculty and students. The genuine relationships students encounter at HBCUs often provide them with familial patterns and a sense of nurturing. These relational traits have been found to lead to higher levels of campus integration and satisfaction for HBCU students (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; Palmer & Maramba, 2012; Mawhinney, 2011 & 2012).

In order to assist Black students with degree attainment, more emphasis needs to be placed on faculty engagement. Several researchers (Astin, 1984/1999; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Strauss & Terenzini, 2007) have posited that opportunities for direct interaction among students and faculty lead to increased levels of student involvement and engagement, which directly correlate with students' ability to integrate academically and socially into the campus community. Moreover, increased levels of faculty and student interaction have proven to lead to gains in personal and cognitive development and a more successful and value-added collegiate experience for Black students (Kuh, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1981).

When considering the ability of HBCUs to provide students with the opportunity to make educational and cognitive gains through environmental influences, such as intentional faculty and student interactions, there is much to be learned about what specific actions HBCU faculty employ to achieve such outcomes. In particular, the concept of "othermothering" has often been associated with HBCUs when discussing the nature of faculty and student relationships. HBCUs have historically been recognized for their ability to foster campus environments that support frequent positive interactions between students and faculty (Avery, 2009; Fleming, 1984, 2001; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002). More specifically, faculty members at HBCUs have provided emotional and academic support that has led to greater scholastic achievement for students. Black students attending HBCU's have noted frequent interaction with faculty members as an essential element of their successful transition to the college environment (Hirt et al., 2008; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). Flowers (2003) concluded that Black students who attended an HBCU reported more student-faculty interactions than those Black students attending other institutional types. In addition, Flowers also found that students attending HBCUs reported having had more frequent informal visits and brief meetings with faculty after class, discussed career paths and ambitions with faculty more consistently, and had coffee, cokes, or snacks with a faculty member more frequently, in comparison with peers attending predominately White institutions (PWIs). In an effort to understand common practices often associated with the idea of othermothering, this study attempted to uncover the effects of these practices on students. In addition, this study sought to uncover the ways components of the othermothering concept are presented or ingrained within the quintessential HBCU experience. To achieve the aforementioned goal, we provide a review of the relevant literature, followed by our methods and data sections, and concluding with our findings and discussion.

Black Students' Interactions with Faculty

Healthy faculty and student interactions have been found to positively affect students' satisfaction with their collegiate experience (Astin, 1984/1999). Positive and frequent out-of-class faculty and student interaction has long been documented as being important to the academic viability and personal development of college students (Astin, 1977, 1985, 1993; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991; Pasceralla, 1985;

Pascarella & Terenzini, 1976, 1979, 1981; Tinto, 1993). Black students in particular often look to faculty to be mentors or to serve as role models throughout their college career. Palmer and Gasman (2008) found that role models/mentors played a fundamental role in the academic development of Black male students at one Black college. Particularly, several of the participants in their study articulated that they admired their professors with whom they shared interests. Moreover, the participants expressed the view that having faculty members from their racial/ethnic background produced a greater sense of self-efficacy (Flowers, 2011; Palmer & Gasman, 2008).

In general, healthy frequent interactions between faculty and students have been noted to positively correlate with various academic outcomes including college GPA, degree attainment, persistence, and post-undergraduate aspirations (Astin, 1993). More specifically, increased student-faculty interaction has proven to expand students' general ways of thinking, strengthen problem-solving skills, and broaden conceptualization of various life goals and aspirations (Astin, 1993; Ancis et al., 2000). Do these results apply to Black students? Kim (2002) found that compared with their White peers, Black students attending PWIs had less frequent out of the classroom contact with faculty, which ultimately made them less likely to become academically integrated into the campus community. Guiffrida (2005) found that in comparison to their White peers, Black students attending PWIs often encounter difficulty experiencing the same benefits associated with interactions with faculty. A study conducted by Mayo, Murguia, and Padillia (1995) revealed that although the high achieving Black study participants had more frequent out-of-class interactions with faculty, they did not find these interactions to be as fulfilling or rewarding as participants from other racial or ethnic groups. This finding is consistent with the results of a study conducted by Kim and Conrad (2006), in which participants reported the frequency of faculty interactions to be less important to their overall collegiate satisfaction than the quality of the interactions.

According to Guiffrida (2005), two primary factors may affect the quality of the interactions between faculty and Black students at PWIs. First, Black students may have difficulty developing meaningful bonds with White faculty due to cultural differences that affect students' ability to perceive them as realistic role models. Secondly, Black students may frequently perceive faculty at PWIs as culturally unaware and insensitive due to their failure to tame culturally charged comments or remarks within classroom settings.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research method in order to understand the effects that othermothering has on students, and how othermothering is embodied at HBCUs. Qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach to provide the researcher with an understanding of key phenomena in context-specific settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). The leading questions of this study were: (a) how do students and alumni of HBCUs characterize their relationships with their HBCU faculty? (b) how does that relationship inform the broader literature on othermothering? and (c) what lessons could be taken from othermothering, which could provide insight into improving professor quality? To address these questions, we used an online survey instrument with open-ended questions. We sent the questionnaires out to HBCU graduates from around the country. We will use the data collected, along with prevailing literature, to garner recommendations for recruitment, retainment, and the graduation of Black students.

Participants

Patton (2002) defines *qualitative research* as an attempt to understand the distinctive interactions that happen within a particular situation. Inherently, the aim of the qualitative researcher is to understand what occurred, not predict what might occur. The intent of qualitative research is to capture the essence of the participants' experiences within the context of their environment. Participants of this study were both men and women; in total there were 34 participant responses to the open-response ten-item questionnaire. In total, 56% of the participants were male and 44% were female. Additionally, 60% of the participants were alumni, and represented various HBCUs.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data was collected for this study using *SurveyMonkey*, an online open-response tool. Emails were sent to numerous HBCU alumni and student organizations. The authors of this study, having experiences connecting them to HBCUs, distributed the surveys to members of their organizations, friends and associates who were current or former studentsor alumni. In an effort to use social media as a tool to reach a wider audience of potential participants, the link to the questionnaire was also posted on Facebook and Twitter. Once the participants responded to the online request, they were instructed to answers a series of open-ended questions. The participants' responses served as the primary data source for this study.

Patton (2002) described the process of qualitative data analysis as a constant hunt for concepts and themes. The questionnaire responses were collected, transcribed, and organized into manageable data sets. A direct interpretation approach was used to code that data. Specifically, initial, focused, and axial coding techniques were used to deconstruct, interpret, and reassemble the data in ways that provided insight into the participants' development of self-esteem and HBCUs' part in engendering it, following Charmaz's (2006) methodology. For this process, three phrases of coding were used to help enhance the conceptual understanding of the data. During the initial coding phase, significant concepts were identified. Next, focused coding was used to group the incidents and concepts into categories based on their shared properties and the types of student relationships to faculty. Finally, axial coding was used to understand relationships among the categories that emerged during the focused coding phase. Essentially, the categories captured recurring patterns that emerged from the participants' narratives.

Several strategies were used to establish trustworthiness in this study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined *trustworthiness* as "that quality of an investigation (and its findings) that made it noteworthy to audiences" (as cited in Schwandt, 200, p. 258) and noted that trustworthiness is based on credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Peer debriefing was utilized to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. This involves the use of an outside expert who checks the inquiry process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Debriefers were provided raw transcripts from each participant. They were chosen based on affiliation with the institution: they were either professors or employed in student affairs at HBCUs. The selected debriefers engaged the researchers throughout the research process in a series of ongoing discussions regarding the tentative meanings made of the participants' experiences. Transferability was reached through thick description about the context of the study, which allows readers to assess the extent to which the research findings would likely transfer to similar settings and populations (Patton, 2002).

Findings

In this section, we summarize the two major themes that emerged from the interviews. The first theme highlights participants' descriptions of staff and administrators, actualizing the concept of othermothering by going beyond their professional duties to be supportive of student success. The second theme explores the impact of caring and dedicated faculty who are committed to advancing student academic success and cultivating students' sense of self-worth.

A number of participants explained that the administrators and staff at their HBCU went beyond their prescribed roles to help them succeed academically and foster their personal growth and development. For example, while Mark explained that his college experience was empowering and helped hone his leadership skills, he largely credited caring administrators for facilitating these changes by displaying an ethic of caring and being available when needed to support his growth and development. Specifically Mark noted:

> My college empowered me by recognizing my academic success and giving me opportunities to be a leader. In addition, administrators at the college were important to this process because they actually cared about me and went out of their way to support my growth.

James, another participant, echoed Mark's comments about the supportive nature of administrators and how they went above and beyond their duties to impact the lives of students. Specifically, James explained that he attended a small university, which enabled him to have opportunities for developing meaningful relationships with administrators, faculty, and peers. These relationships played an important role in his academic and personal development. James noted:

> I was in an environment where I interacted with Black administrators, professors, students, who all represented a strong sense excellence. They knew your name. I knew the president of the University; The vice president; and the deans. They believed in the students and were connected. We didn't have all the resources of larger schools. But we had excellent teachers and administrators who cared about establishing personal connections and relationships. The personal care we got from teachers and administrators provided me with a sense of confidence to face any challenges in the real world.

Kofi expressed a similar sentiment by noting that administrators and other institutional officials not only acted as role models, but also challenged and supported his and his peers' concerns and triumphs. Kofi shared: "They [administrators and faculty] challenged, encouraged, and supported me and my friends by serving as role models and a listening ear, which helped us succeed because someone on campus cared about us."

Indeed, there was a sense among the participants that the connections they shared with administrators played an important role in their academic and personal development at the university.

Lisa furthered described how administrators went beyond their formal roles to connect her to various opportunities and resources on campus, which helped to maximize her college experience. Specifically, she indicated:

Dean Jones gave me my first job at school on work study. The director of student life helped me get into the honors club where all the smart minds gathered and exchanged ideas . . . there was the band director, whom we called "Sugar Bear," who helped me get a scholarship so I could stay in school; they all cared about us and worked hard to make us stronger.

Similarly, John explained that the dean and his family worked to provide a support system when he went away to active duty. Specifically, John indicated:

The dean of education and his family provided a stepping stone to my future by providing a support system for me when I went off to my first active duty assignment. People saw more in me than I saw in myself and through their nudging and/or guidance, I achieved more for myself.

Faculty Advancing Student Success and Personal Development Through Othermothering

In addition to administrators, participants also cited faculty as key institutional aids who exemplified the practice of othermothering by going above and beyond the call of duty to establish connections with students and support their academic and social development. For example, Rachelle explained that faculty took an interest in her and treated her like family, which helped her to feel positive about herself and her ability to succeed in college. Although she has graduated, she still has conversations with faculty. Specifically, she shared:

I would see faculty at ball games and grocery stores. They were concerned with my well-being. We were able to have conversations that you can only get from your older family members. I believe that the instructors and professors really saw us coming in as family members, and they did all they can do to make us feel good about ourselves so that we can succeed. I still have conversations today with my instructors. I have personal relationships with them.

Similarly, Jason provided an example of a faculty member acting as a parental figure when he missed several classes. Specifically, he explained how a faculty member called the residence hall to check on him. Upon learning that he was sick, this faculty member brought chicken noodle soup to the residence hall where Jason resided. He indicated:

I had not been in class for a week. My professor called the dorm and came to my room and discussed the importance of attending class and brought chicken noodle soup because I had the flu.

The supportive and caring nature of faculty at this HBCU was observed by other participants. Participants generally reflected that faculty cared deeply and passionately about students and genuinely wanted to see them succeed. For example, Fred shared that faculty believed in his abilities, which had a positive impact on how he viewed his academic potential. Specifically, he noted: "The faculty consistently encouraged me to exceed expectations and to be the best person that I can be, which helped me to believe in myself more." John echoed this sentiment: "There were always faculty members who took students under their wings and helped

them along the way… I was blessed to have mentors and role models in every facet of my life to include my college years."

Similarly, Martin shared a reflection about how HBCU faculty helped to facilitate and strengthen his self-esteem by believing in his academic abilities, pushing him to excel, and providing mentorship. He stated:

> The faculty played a big role in self-esteem by reinforcing my capability as a student by never allowing me to be comfortable with anything less than my best as well as even mentoring me on leadership as well.

The comments made by participants speak to the uniqueness of an HBCU environment in that faculty care deeply about their students and want to play a significant role in guiding their growth and development. As many participants have attested, the magnitude of the support and dedication has played an important role in how they see themselves. Comments from Nicole, a participant in his study, embodied this sense of support and its profound impact upon a student's sense of self-worth. Particularly, she explained:

> [HBCU faculty played a] huge role on how I see myself! I was taught that I could accomplish anything and not to let the color of my skin feel like a burden. Nowhere other than an HBCU would the candid conversation of skin, culture and history be a topic of empowerment.

The participants' voices speak to the critical role of caring, dedicated, nurturing, and supportive faculty. Participants shared that the faculty members at HBCUs were personally invested in their success in and beyond the classroom, which had a positive impact on participants' academic success and their self-worth.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to provide some insight and recommendations into ways that historically black colleges and universities can improve their graduation rates. We examined how faculty–student relationships in the context of "othermothering" foster higher levels of educational attainment at HBCUs. As indicated in the research, Black students' experiences on college campuses have a significant impact on their academic longevity.

The literature reveals that there are several issues that can prevent Black students from successfully attaining their college degrees (Bonner, 2010; Flowers, 2011). According to Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000), more research-based programming must be done in developmental services in order to help Black students thrive in a collegiate setting. Several influential scholars (Collins, 2000; Hirt et al., 2008; Strayhorn, 2008) provided a foundational context for studying Black college students, and more specifically, their collegiate experiences and the effects of othermothering. Nevertheless, the research examining the influence of othermothering remains limited. One of the most important results derived from this research is the value of relationship between students and faculty.

The present article uses Tinto's (1993) student integration model as a framework to understand student college integration and the concept of othermothering for Black students attending a HBCU. According to Tinto (1993, 2005), Black students face unique challenges in

academic development and social integration into college settings. Tinto's model suggests that students' personal background characteristics, educational and occupational goals, commitment to personal and institutional goals, and the degree of academic and social involvement and investment in the institution interact to determine whether the students will leave the institution before completing a degree program. Tinto's model comprehensively accounts for the interaction between an individual's characteristics and the institutional conditions that impact integration. Thus, Tinto's theory explores personal as well as environmental components that affect students' integration into college environments. Tinto found that fragmentation of the curriculum, a lack of closeness with faculty and staff, and a lack of institutional programs were contributors to a low-quality academic experience for students. Tinto (1993) noted that social integration influences persistence decisions for Black students as much as for White students, and that incongruence with social norms often makes it difficult for Black students to "become a member of a supportive community within the college" (p. 74). Tinto's model broadly accounts for the interaction between an individual's characteristics and the institutional conditions that impact integration and feelings of belonging for Black college students.

HBCUs remain at the threshold for providing Black college students with an educational *community* that is both culturally and academically congruent to their needs. Hurtado, et al., (1998) contended that a sense of community affects the retention of students. According to Strange and Banning (2001), "[A] sense of community includes a feeling of belongingness, a perception of one's ability to have influence in the community, a shared belief that members' needs will be met by their commitment to be together, and a shared emotional connection" (p. 161). Typically, students who engage and connect to campus life are more apt to take advantage of opportunities that secure their academic success and increase the chance of persistence (Bonous-Hammarth, 2000). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found that:

> Academic integration (as measured by such variables as grade, intellectual development, and contacts with faculty) had its strongest positive influence on persistence or degree attainment for students at the lowest levels of social integration [....] As a student's level of social integration increased, the importance of that student's academic integration for persistence or degree attainment diminished. The reverse was true for the influence of social integration on persistence or degree attainment at different levels of persistence or degree attainment for students at the lower levels of academic integration, and as level of academic integration increased the importance of social integration diminished. (p. 411)

Opportunities that are inherent to being members of a learning community include, but are not limited to, the following: academic and social integration in the form of better grades, deeper satisfaction with what is learned in class, greater ability to apply knowledge to novel situations, deeper academic connections to faculty and peers, increased satisfaction with academic and social environments, and healthier personal choices (Brower et al., 2003; Tinto et al., 1994). Thus, it is strongly recommended that aspects of learning community models be integrated with notions of othermothering to provide students with a supportive institutional environment. Myers (2003) asserts that the establishment of a positive institutional climate has a significant impact on students' satisfaction with their academic achievement.

Institutions that are successful in retaining students are those that are responsive to the academic, social, and cultural needs of their student populations. Institutions of higher education

must realize that initiatives focusing on family involvement should be systemic. With regard to HBCUs, Kimbrough and Harper (2006) recommended,

> Given that most HBCUs are nestled in the heart of Black neighborhoods or in close geographic proximity to large concentrations of African Americans, they are in a unique position to reinforce college-going messages to young boys and teenage males. After-school, summer, and special outreach programs should be created to nurture pools of prospective African American male college-goers. (p. 205)

Providing othermothering would aid in student achievement of academic excellence and integration on campus. Othermothering support would provide students with practical information such as which courses to take, test preparation skills, and financial aid information. In addition, it would provide students with transitional support and access to a network of "care" on campus. Research on othermothering shows a number of benefits associated with this practice, such as increased academic success, goal commitment, and satisfaction with the institution. Overall, othermothering would increase opportunities for Black students to be successful on campus.

Professors going beyond the call of duty have been a constant at HBCUs, and should continue. When students experience success at the institution, that will provide more currency to attract future students to the college.

For Black college students, the level of faculty support and institutional connectedness has a dramatic effect on academic development and matriculation (Harper, 2010; Tinto, 1993). HBCUs should therefore continue and improve upon their othermothering in order to improve the retainment, retention, and graduation of Black college students. This, in turn, will improve the recruitment of future students to the college.

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