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Understanding how students navigate their ways to and through higher education could be instructive for those seeking to wisely invest institutional and public resources, foster supportive environments for student development, and cultivate worthwhile partnerships to improve access and enhance student success.

Using Qualitative Methods to Assess Student Trajectories and College Impact

Shaun R. Harper

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) have offered two comprehensive syntheses of the published literature, yet in many ways, much remains unknown about how college affects students. For example, researchers have called attention to the racism and stereotypes experienced by black undergraduates on predominantly white campuses (Feagin, Vera, and Imani, 1996; Fries-Britt and Turner, 2001; Harper and Hurtado, 2007; Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000); provided evidence of how race-specific organizations and programs help neutralize the oppressive ethos of these institutions (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper and Davis, 2006; Harper and Quaye, 2007; Patton, 2006); and proven empirically that historically black colleges and universities foster more nurturing and outcomes-rich environments for these students (Allen, 1992; De-Sousa and Kuh, 1996; Flowers, 2002). While the consistency of these three findings is interesting, I argue here that institutional researchers have neglected to meaningfully explore additional aspects of black and other students' experiences. Could there in fact be more to being black in college than what has been captured in these three areas of inquiry?

Astin's question (1993), "What Matters in College?" is often answered through quantitative assessment mechanisms, and data derived in these ways seem to matter most to offices of institutional research. But what actually matters to college students, and how do we know? An undergraduate could spend four or more years completing annual surveys and having her academic progress statistically analyzed as part of aggregate report production for institutional decision making. It is entirely possible that this same

student will persist through degree completion (or withdraw prematurely) without having ever been asked about the impact of the campus and its various agents on her experiences. Attributable in large part to the myths and misconceptions described in Chapter One of this volume, talking and listening to students remain uncommon in institutional research. In “Imagine Asking the Client,” Kuh (2005) advocated for more intentionality in data gathering from college students to understand their individual and collective experiences. Doing this almost exclusively through quantitative methods provides an incomplete assessment picture that lacks depth, complexity, personal accountability, and voice. More problematic is that students are denied opportunities to reflect on what they learned and the ways that programs, interventions, and people added value to their lives and educational trajectories.

Sophisticated understandings of how diverse populations of students navigate their ways to and through higher education are warranted. In their 2006 report, the commission appointed by U.S. Department of Education Secretary Margaret Spellings to explore necessary areas of improvement in higher education called for more data to help identify educational interventions that are effective and worthy of investment. In many ways, quantitative methods can reveal what works—but not how it works, who and what made it work, the facilitators and obstacles that were encountered along the way, and the meanings students ascribe to the experience. We cannot begin to fully understand and foster conditions to replicate effective educational practices in the absence of voice and sense making among students who actually experienced them. One-sided methodological approaches to assessing the end product (outcomes) continue to furnish insufficiently narrow insights into how those outcomes were accrued. Furthermore, efforts to support students, especially during difficult periods, could be guided by qualitative data, which is explained below in greater detail.

A much-needed methodological resolution regarding the use of “effects” and “affects” in qualitative research and assessment activities is presented in the next section. Then the focus of the chapter shifts to explaining trajectory analyses as a qualitative data-gathering option in institutional research. Following are five illustrative case examples derived from a study of undergraduates across six institutional types. The chapter concludes with a list of data sources that can be used to assess students’ trajectories and reveal the institutional agents, resources, and learning opportunities that left meaningful imprints on their college experiences.

Using Phenomenology to Explore Qualitative Effects

Statistical significance and effect sizes have been used to justify the exclusive use of quantitative methods in studies that explore how environments, conditions, and experiences affect students. Claims that something caused students to behave a certain way, make a certain set of choices, or undergo

developmental change are often permissible only when analyzed quantitatively. Most researchers who have attempted to publish a qualitative study that includes *effects*, *affects*, or *impact* in either the title or throughout the manuscript probably have received negative reactions from editors and reviewers. Likewise, graduate students are commonly taught in research methods courses that causation is best (or perhaps only) determinable through statistical analyses. This is wrong and in many ways socially oppressive.

Phenomenology in qualitative research focuses on understanding and describing the lived experiences of people who have experienced a phenomenon or been exposed to a certain set of conditions (Creswell, 1998, 2007; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). A phenomenological account gets inside the experience of a person or group of people and describes what participants have experienced, how they have experienced it, and their sense making regarding various effects relative to the phenomenon (Holstein and Gubrium, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). According to Creswell (2007), participants in a phenomenological study are asked two key questions: "What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?" (p. 61). Moreover, Polkinghorne (1989) suggested that the researcher and readers of a phenomenological study should be able to say, "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that" (p. 46). In assessment activities, it is possible for participants to describe what they have gained and recall how various outcomes were directly affected by key interventions and conditions, and in turn how or why they were compelled to react, perform, or behave in a certain way (Patton, 2002).

Creswell (1998) offered an example of a phenomenological study in which cancer survivors talked about how they were affected at each stage of the experience. In this case, perhaps a survey could have been distributed to the group and rigorous statistical techniques could have been employed to determine the effects of various treatments. However, having someone actually say, "This experience affected me in the following . . . ways . . ." or "That [nurse, drug, hospital room color, surgery, or something else] had profound effects on my attitude and recovery because . . ." should also be deemed methodologically appropriate and arguably more credible. It is when researchers become consumed with trying to make sweeping generalizations that individual perspectives on causation are considered useless. This again is why most students pass through institutions of higher education with untold stories of their navigational trajectories that could be instructive to educators and administrators. The point here is that individual insights, though not generalizable to the entire population of students on a campus or across institutions, can still be helpful in assessment and program enhancement. Statistical significance and generalizability are not the only indicators of educational impact and replication worth.

To say that effects cannot be determined through methods that give voice to students who outright say they were affected by something in various ways

privileges the researcher over the persons being researched. Put another way, researchers who subscribe to the belief that qualitative methods cannot be used to determine effects are in essence arguing that students are incapable of reflecting sensibly and honestly on what they have experienced firsthand. Who appoints these methodological guardians and awards them such power and authority over affected others who can speak for themselves in research studies? College students are arguably best positioned to offer personalized data and perspectives that help shed light on the magnitude of how they were affected by something in their learning environment, participation in a program or activity, or interactions with faculty and student affairs educators. But again, such lived experiences are lost in institutional fetishes with aggregate analyses. Although phenomenology is offered here as one possible qualitative approach, case study, grounded theory, biographical and narrative inquiry, and ethnographic methods could also be used to explore qualitative effects.

Analyzing the Trajectories of College Students

As indicated consistently throughout this volume, one of the fundamental goals of qualitative research is to provide rich, deep descriptions of people's lived experiences. To accomplish this, institutional researchers should spend face-to-face time with students and invite them to reflect meaningfully on who they were before they enrolled in college, how their college-going aspirations were developed, the methodologies they used to search for and select an institution from among available choices, the facilitators of or barriers to smooth adjustments in the first year, the role of significant others (for example, peers, parents, or educators) in their success, experiences in residence halls and classrooms, explanatory factors for active or passive engagement, environmental conditions that have fostered changes in their attitudes and behaviors, and gains and outcomes accrued through participation in enriching educational experiences.

Trajectory analyses involve these sorts of questions and capture key turning points, make known those influential others, and in some instances offer compelling insights into how students transcended odds and managed to persist. In addition, this type of qualitative data gathering recognizes students as informants who can speak to what worked well or proved harmful to them. Understanding much of what was experienced along one's journey from high school through college graduation could produce assessment data regarding educational programs and practices that otherwise may have remained unrevealed. Even if provided by one or only a few students, these findings could produce the rich data for which the Spellings Commission and other accountability agents have recently called. Ultimately these data could inform policy and practice in new, instructive ways. Some of the most complex educational dilemmas could be untangled simply by enabling students to talk to researchers about their navigational experiences.

A Multi-Institutional Qualitative Study of Student Success

To illustrate the usefulness of trajectory analyses, the remainder of this chapter is devoted to the population for whom college participation, persistence, and achievement appear most problematic: black male undergraduates. Four quantitatively derived trends justify this focus:

- In 2002, black men were only 4.3 percent of all students enrolled at institutions of higher education, the same as in 1976 (Harper, 2006).
- Black men participate in clubs and activities less frequently, serve on fewer campus committees, and assume significantly fewer leadership roles in student organizations than do their same-race female peers (Cuyjet, 1997).
- Black male undergraduates work less hard to meet professors' expectations and are significantly less engaged in studying, reading, writing, and preparing for class than are black women at historically black colleges and universities (Harper, Carini, Bridges, and Hayek, 2004).
- Nationally, more than two-thirds (67.6 percent) of black men who start college do not graduate within six years, the lowest college completion rate for both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in higher education (Harper, 2006).

“[These] and a legion of other discouraging facts about African American males are the usual headlines. But what about those among this population who beat the odds, make the most of college, and achieve in multiple ways inside and outside of the classroom? Who are they, and what can they teach us?” (Harper, 2005, p. 8). Getting inside the lived experiences of black men who experienced college more positively seemed like a worthwhile endeavor given all of the negative trends amplified about them in the literature and popular press. To this end, in 2005 I began data collection for the largest-known empirical investigation of black male undergraduates to date.

The National Black Male College Achievement Study

Data for this study were collected from 219 students at forty-two colleges and universities in twenty states. As shown in Table 5.1, six institutional types are represented in the study. Administrators (for example, provosts, deans of students, directors of multicultural affairs) nominated and senior student leaders such as student body presidents helped identify black male undergraduates who had earned cumulative grade point averages (GPAs) above 3.0, established lengthy records of leadership and engagement in multiple student organizations, developed meaningful relationships with campus administrators and faculty outside the classroom, participated in enriching educational experiences (for example, study-abroad programs, internships, and summer research programs), and earned numerous merit-based scholarships and honors in recognition of their undergraduate achievements. Each student participated in a two- to three-hour face-to-face

Table 5.1. National Black Male College Achievement Study Participating Institutions

<i>University Type</i>	<i>Universities</i>
Public research universities (32 participants)	University of Illinois Indiana University University of Michigan Michigan State University The Ohio State University Purdue University
Highly selective private research universities (41 participants)	Brown University Columbia University Harvard University University of Pennsylvania Princeton University Stanford University
Private historically black colleges and universities (42 participants)	Clark Atlanta University Fisk University Hampton University Howard University Morehouse College Tuskegee University
Public historically black universities (34 participants)	Albany State University Cheyney University Florida A&M University Norfolk State University North Carolina Central University Tennessee State University
Liberal arts colleges (45 participants)	Amherst College Claremont-McKenna College DePauw University Haverford College Lafayette College Occidental College Pomona College Saint John's University (MN) Swarthmore College Vassar College Wabash College Williams College
Comprehensive state universities (25 participants)	Brooklyn College, City University of New York California State Polytechnic University, Pomona California State University, Long Beach Lock Haven University Towson University Valdosta State University

individual interview on his campus, and some follow-up interviews were conducted by telephone.

An Antideficit Achievement Framework. The national study magnifies lessons learned from students who maximized their college experiences and moves beyond the deficit perspective by highlighting institutional agents, policies, programs, and resources that help black men achieve desired educational outcomes across a range of institutional contexts. Instead of adding to the now-exhaustive body of literature and conversations that highlight all of the reasons that black male participation and attainment in higher education are so low, trajectory analyses were used to understand how the 219 achievers managed to gain admission to their institutions, overcome hurdles that typically disadvantage their peers, and amass profiles and portfolios of experiences that rendered them competitive for internships, jobs, and admission to highly selective graduate and professional schools.

In the interviews, considerable emphasis was placed on who the students were before they began college. Questions captured chronologically what they experienced, who was supportive, and which educational interventions added value throughout their time at their institutions. Understanding what compelled them to become actively engaged, both inside and outside the classroom, was chosen over the popular approach of trying to discover all the reasons that black men are so disengaged in educationally purposeful activities. Instead of focusing on the resources, social and cultural capital, and pre-college educational privilege that some participants lacked, efforts were devoted to understanding how they managed to acquire access to information and networks. This avenue was especially interesting because 56 percent of the participants came from low-income and working-class backgrounds. Also favored over a subtractive research lens was understanding how the students resolved identity conflicts, negotiated popularity alongside achievement in peer groups, and survived in environments that were sometimes racially oppressive. In sum, the focus was on understanding why black men excel instead of adding to the already well-understood reasons that they fail.

Insights from Five Students' Trajectories. Interviews with the achievers yielded over forty-five hundred single-spaced pages of transcript data. Highlights from five students' trajectories are presented in this section. Instead of recapping each participant's full trajectory, one key experience or set of conditions that shaped his college access, learning, success, and development is briefly summarized. This approach shows how trajectory analyses can be instructive for those who endeavor to improve educational outcomes and assess more comprehensively students' lived experiences.

Bali Kumar: From Low Income to Ivy League. Understanding how Bali Kumar navigated his way to Brown University is interesting for several reasons. He grew up in New York City and was the first in his family to attend a four-year institution. The shaping of college-going expectations at home did not occur, in part because his parents divorced when he was young and his mother battled drug addiction. Bali was raised primarily by his grandmother.

Arthur Levine and Jana Niddifer's book, *Beating the Odds: How the Poor Get to College* (1996), captures the navigational journeys of students like Bali. In the book, they emphasized the importance of significant others and early intervention programs for the formation of college aspirations. In Bali's case, his aunt, a teacher who served as an early mentor for him, found out about Prep for Prep, a program whose mission is to identify and nurture minority students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who would benefit from attending private schools. Participation in this program enabled him to leave his resource-deprived public school to attend Phillips Academy Andover, the same boarding school from which U.S. Presidents John F. Kennedy and George H. W. Bush's sons graduated.

Prep for Prep made it possible for a teen with a perceivably bleak future to go to a school with a long-standing legacy of preparing its students for admission to elite postsecondary institutions. In addition to having a guidance counselor at Andover, the program assigned him a counselor who aided in his college choice process. Bali's trajectory from poverty to the Ivy League has instructive implications for institutional relationships with programs like Prep for Prep. Colleges and universities that are interested in increasing the number of low-income students and racial/ethnic minorities will likely find partnerships with such programs and counselors beneficial. Furthermore, once students with backgrounds such as Bali's arrive on campus, it would be advisable to explore how they got there and attempt to capitalize on such opportunity enablers through new collaborative partnerships. Consistent with Perna's findings (2002), Prep for Prep was just one among many pre-college programs that helped the 219 achievers gain admission to the forty-two institutions in the national study.

Marques Dickson: All Work, No Play for Pay. Considerable emphasis has been placed on increasing college access for low-income and working-class students (Tierney and Hagedorn, 2002). Yet much remains to be understood about the experiences of these students once they are enrolled. Often with insufficient financial aid and limited monetary support from their families, many of these students must find jobs (usually off campus) to pay tuition and fees and basic living expenses, which is an explanatory factor in their attrition from colleges and universities. McSwain and Davis (2007) noted, "It is unclear just how many such students, discouraged by high prices or lack of support, simply give up on the idea of pursuing higher education . . . reaching for the education that many of their parents have not attained, yet lacking the financial and auxiliary support to help them achieve their goal" (p. 6). Understanding who these students are, knowing where they work, and allowing them to give voice to the complexities of their experiences could compel financial aid officers, retention professionals, and other administrators to search for viable solutions to help reduce some of the pressures such undergraduates face.

A student for whom this would have been helpful is Marques Dickson, a participant from California State Polytechnic University (Cal Poly) in

Pomona. Marques was one of only four freshmen selected to participate in the National Black Male College Achievement Study because he was so involved in an impressive array of student organizations and held a 3.08 GPA. The administrator who nominated him commented enthusiastically about Marques's early contributions to Cal Poly and his obvious potential for long-term success. What this particular administrator did not realize is that Marques lived at home (which was more than an hour away), woke up each morning at 4:00 A.M. to begin his commute to campus on public transportation, took a full load of classes and participated in student organizations until 7:00 P.M. or later most evenings, rode the city bus back home afterward, and worked all day on weekends at a grocery store in his neighborhood. Having been homeless as a teen, Marques could not afford to live on campus, purchase a car, or rent an apartment closer to Cal Poly to reduce his commute.

In the interview, this student indicated that no one at the university had inquired about how he was navigating the campus, so no administrator or faculty member was aware of his rigorous daily routine. It is possible that if people knew about the effort Marques was expending just to get to and from Cal Poly each day, they would have helped him find alternative approaches. Moreover, understanding how he managed to balance active engagement with good grades and working several hours on weekends could have been instructive for student affairs professionals who have long struggled to engage other working commuter students in educationally purposeful activities outside the classroom. By his own admission, Marques had few friends (primarily because he did not have time) and was fearful of burning out at some point. Certainly the institution would be guilty of negligence if a student with this level of drive and commitment were to withdraw before completing his bachelor's degree. Were he to persist, an exploration of his full navigational trajectory through Cal Poly would be insightful and inspirational.

Brandon Royce-Diop: Slaying Stereotypes. One of four all-male postsecondary institutions in the United States, Saint John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, enrolled only fourteen African Americans during the time at which data were collected for the national study (February 2006). Brandon Royce-Diop, a Minneapolis native, was one of them. He was often stereotyped by his white peers, who had playfully referred to him as a "thug," touched his braided hair without permission, and occasionally blurted out "Nigger," supposedly as a term of endearment. Moreover, he recalled several racist misperceptions that were shared in the classroom and experienced firsthand many of the racial microaggressions described in Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso's study (2000). Instead of internalizing these stereotypes as some students do (Steele, 1997), Brandon boldly addressed them:

When I am confronted with ignorance and stereotypes, I'll try as best I can to take somebody aside and ask, "Why are you saying this?" And if I can challenge them to think about it and to talk to them about it, then I guess you could say it's a motivator for me. In a way, it pisses me off, but then I also

realize that a lot of people grew up in a town that had forty people in it, and the only black person they'd ever seen in their lives was in an airport, on vacation, or on TV.

In many ways, Brandon assumed the burden of responsibility for educating his white peers and dispelling faulty race-based stereotypes. In addition, he was dissatisfied with the absence of black perspectives in the curriculum and therefore took it on himself to find books that were more culturally relevant. Experiences such as these can have profound effects on students' psychosocial development (Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito, 1993), particularly the shaping and expression of their black identities (Cross, 1995; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, and Cooper, 2003).

Quaye and Harper (2007) recommended that the onus for cultural inclusivity in the classroom be shifted from students like Brandon to faculty. Similarly, addressing racism in all the places it occurs on campus should not be the responsibility of those who are often most harmed by stereotypes and racial toxins in the environment. Notwithstanding, exploring how Brandon managed to craft productive responses to stereotypes could be instructive for educators who seek to foster resilience in other racial/ethnic minority students. Despite repeated encounters with racism at Saint John's, Brandon graduated in 2007. Portions of his strategy could help the dozen or so other black male undergraduates there and at other small liberal arts colleges craft productive responses to racist stereotypes.

Tristan Mitchell: The Interned-Off. Internships help college students acquire the developmental skills necessary for competence in the workplace after college (Kuh, 1995). As such, internships are part of the enriching educational experiences measured on the National Survey of Student Engagement (2005). Thousands of students complete internships each year. Capturing qualitatively what they learned, how they grew, and the ways in which their career aspirations were reshaped are worthwhile. With the exception of the four freshmen in the sample, nearly all of the participants in the National Black Male College Achievement Study had completed at least one summer internship, study-abroad experience, or summer research program. Interestingly, most reported that they had not been afforded structured opportunities to reflect on their summer experiences; rarely was their summer learning assessed, formally or informally.

Tristan Mitchell could have benefited from participation in such assessment endeavors. The Howard University student hated his internship and subsequently chose to change fields as a result of it. Reportedly, the long hours and seven-day workweeks, corporate fascination with capitalism, and the racial workplace politics helped Tristan quickly realize that he was no longer interested in becoming a corporate attorney. Processing this experience on his return to Howard would have been advantageous because he needed advice on alternative career directions. Also, Tristan's perspective could have aided staff in the career development center and faculty in his

department in better preparing future students for some realities of internship experiences in similar settings.

Arnold Lane: The Incredible Indiana Impact. “I didn’t think I had a chance of going to college because from my understanding, colleges looked at people who had 2.5 high school GPAs and above. . . . My final high school GPA was a 1.90,” Indiana University senior Arnold Lane disclosed in his interview. A native of Gary, Indiana, Arnold grew up in a single-parent home, worked at McDonald’s in high school, and was an academically low-performing student prior to college. Four years later, he graduated with a 3.4 GPA in finance from the Indiana University Kelley School of Business. Understanding institutional impact on Arnold’s college success is not only interesting but important.

He was admitted to Indiana University in the Groups Student Support Services Program, a federally funded TRIO initiative that brings underrepresented students to campus for summer courses six weeks prior to the start of their first college year and supports them throughout their journeys. This is an example of the summer bridge programs that Harper and Davis (2006) found influential in black men’s college access, adjustment, and persistence. Because his high school grades were so low, the director of the program made an extra investment in Arnold during the summer program and throughout his first year. She made sure he understood that he would not be allowed to fully matriculate at the university if he did not achieve a certain GPA in the summer courses: Arnold had just one chance and only six weeks to earn full admission. In addition, the director helped him identify resources to remedy past educational deficiencies and reinforced the importance of enhancing his classroom learning with experiences outside the classroom.

Arnold took this advice and joined several student organizations, including the Management Consulting Club, Black Student Union, and Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. In addition, he was inducted into an honor society and studied abroad at the University of Mauritius. Getting involved on campus, having a peer mentor, seeking help in the resources in the Kelley School and across the university, and participating in the Groups Program and maintaining a close relationship with its director all added value to Arnold’s experience. His trajectory is particularly instructive given his point of academic and socioeconomic origin. Clearly college had tremendous effects on this student. Unfortunately no one sat down with him to explore what contributed to his educational transformation—arguably, an incredible opportunity for institutional learning was lost.

Qualitative Data Sources on College Impact

Much was learned from Bali, Marques, Brandon, Tristan, and Arnold about the experiences and conditions that enabled them to access and persist through higher education. Although abbreviated snapshots were offered here from their trajectories, each case contained often overlooked information about student outcomes and development that can prove instructive

to faculty, administrators, institutional researchers, and policymakers. These five undergraduates and the other 214 black male achievers in the national study were each interviewed individually on their campuses for two to three hours. This was a powerful way to explore chronologically what these students experienced and how they experienced postsecondary education. Institutional researchers would likely find similar techniques useful.

In addition to in-depth individual interviews, focus groups with particular subpopulations could also produce insightful data. For example, focus groups may be facilitated two or three times each year with one small cohort of football student-athletes from the start of college through graduation. Annual interviews with the same students, individually or in groups, are good for assessing development and change. They would also enable researchers to ascertain the value (or lack thereof) of experiences that supposedly add value to student learning; in Tristan's case, for example, this would have been his summer internship. Exit interviews with graduates and follow-up focus groups with recent alumni could also be valuable data sources.

Analyses of students' written or photographic journals could offer insights into how they view the campus environment, the experiences they deem most memorable, and the highs and lows of their educational journeys. Furthermore, résumés could be analyzed to determine the extent to which students have taken advantage of enriching educational experiences and the effectiveness with which they communicate skills acquired in college. Portfolios that combine reflective writing with supporting materials such as videotapes, artwork, or evaluation data are helpful in making sense of students' trajectories. Although portfolios are commonly used in academic majors and degree programs, they could also be used to amass evidence of student engagement in cross-cultural experiences from year to year and assess their development of cultural competence and cross-racial understanding. Finally, narrative essays written by students at the beginning and end of each academic year regarding some aspect of their experiences could be treated as a potential data source for qualitative analysis.

Students' experiences are far too rich and instructive to overlook. Attempting to understand how college affects students without asking them and making use of the vast array of data sources will leave many urgent questions about educational effectiveness unanswered. Qualitative methods can reveal aspects of student learning and development that enable institutions to be more effective and efficient. Although many colleges and universities enroll several thousand students, each deserves to have her or his story told, and every person's trajectory could potentially inform institutional action in important ways. Allowing students to graduate or withdraw prematurely from college without assessing qualitatively what they experienced along the way is akin to discarding a large stack of usable surveys or deleting thousands of quantitative data files before analyzing them.

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SHAUN R. HARPER is assistant professor of higher education management at the University of Pennsylvania and director of research on the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators board of directors.