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Research on historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) has documented the positive impact of these institutions on Black students. Such research has shown that Blacks experience positive academic and social outcomes and a disproportionate number of students who graduate from HBCUs attend graduate or professional schools. Notwithstanding, over the years, there has been an increase in the number of Blacks attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs) over HBCUs. While research has provided insights into the reasons Black students attend HBCUs and PWIs, limited empirical research has documented their rationale for not considering and attending HBCUs. To this end, this qualitative study of 13 students enrolled at a PWI provides insights into factors contributing to Black students' decision not to consider and attend HBCUs. Recommendations for institutional practice and policy are offered for HBCUs.

Numerous researchers have supported the relevancy of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Allen, Jewell, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007; Berger & Milem, 2000; Brown & Davis, 2001; Flowers, 2002; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Gasman, 2007; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Watson & Kuh, 1996). Researchers have found that HBCUs continue to provide Blacks with a supportive and engaging campus experience that pales in comparison to their experiences at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Whereas Blacks at PWIs often experience alienation, have strained relationships with White faculty, experience discrimination, and lack adequate support services (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Nelson-Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams & Holmes, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Rankin & Reason, 2005), students at HBCUs exhibit positive psychosocial adjustments, cultural awareness, increased confidence, and support from key agents in the

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institutional community (Allen et al., 2007; Berger & Milem, 2000; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Harper & Gasman, 2008; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Furthermore, although HBCUs may admit students with academic deficiencies and some come from low socio-economic backgrounds, they perform well academically (Allen et al., 2007; De Sousa & Kuh, 1996; Harper & Gasman, 2008; Kim, 2002; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002). Freeman (2005) echoes the impact that HBCUs have on Blacks. Specifically, she stated "Studies show that [Black] students who attend HBCUs experience higher intellectual gains and have more positive self-images, stronger racial pride, and higher aspirations" (p. 84).

HBCUs, without a doubt, play a prominent role in educating Black students (Allen et al., 2007; Gasman, 2007; Gasman, Baez, Drener, Sedgwick, & Tudico, 2007; Harper & Gasman, 2008; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). For example, while HBCUs comprise less than 3 % of all higher education institutions, they enroll 16% and graduate 20% of Blacks at the undergraduate level, respectively (Allen et al., 2007; Gasman, 2007). Moreover, research has shown that the HBCU experience propels more Blacks to seek professional education beyond the bachelor's degree (Garibaldi, 1997; Harper & Gasman, 2008; Perna, 2001; Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Wenglinsky, 1996). Allen and colleagues (2007) noted that HBCUs award 20% of all first professional degrees to Blacks. Hill (2007) analyzed data from the National Center for Education Statistics and found that HBCUs awarded 11.4% of all master's degrees and 10.8% of all doctorates to Blacks in 2004, respectively. Furthermore Gasman and colleagues (2007) noted that HBCUs prepare most of the nation's Black leaders in critical areas, such as science, medicine, mathematics, and engineering.

Despite the noteworthy significance of these institutions, over the years, there has been an ebb in the number of Blacks attending HBCUs, as many have opted to attend PWIs, prompted by several governmental initiatives and litigations (i.e., *Adams v. Richardson*, 1972; *Brown v. Board of Education* 1954; *Civil Right Act of 1964*; and the implementation of the federal aid program). According to Sissoko and Shiau (2005), the total number of Blacks enrolled in HBCUs declined from 18.18% in 1980 to 13.70% in 1998 while the number of Blacks enrolled in other higher education institutions grew from 80.22% in 1980 to 86.3% in 1998. Although the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) recently released a report indicating that there has been an increase in the number of students of color attending minority serving institutions, a closer examination of this report reveals that institutions classified as Hispanic serving, Black serving non-HBCUs, and Asian serving, have experienced an increase in the enrollment of students of color, not HBCUs per se (Li & Carroll, 2007). Given researchers' characterization of HBCUs' impact on the social and academic success of Blacks, and their bleak experiences at PWIs, it seems likely that more Blacks would attend HBCUs. Clearly, this is not the case. Because this paper, to some extent, examines college choice, it is appropriate to review the literature on the college choice process for

college students. Furthermore, reviewing this information is important because it provides insight into the theoretical process students use to make their institutional selections. Research has shown that academic and social integration is more easily facilitated, if students are committed to the institution of higher education they choose to attend (Freeman, 1999a, 1999b; Freeman & Thomas, 2002; Tinto, 1993).

Review of Literature on College Choice

According to researchers who investigate college choice, the decision making process to engage in and attend a particular higher education institution falls into three categories: (a) predisposition, (b) search, and (c) choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Freeman, 1999a, 1999b; Stage & Hossler, 1989; Tobolowsky, Outcalt, & McDonough, 2005; Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008). The preposition stage involves students' decision to continue their education beyond high school. Researchers point out that several factors influence students during the preposition stage, including the student's socio-economic status, high school attended, family and peers' disposition toward education, student's academic ability, and understanding of cost and knowledge about financial aid (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Tobolowsky, Outcalt, & McDonough, 2005).

Once students decide to enter college, they begin the search phase (i.e., the investigation of specific institutions) of the college decision making process. During this phase, students generally turn to friends, teachers, parents, counselors, and extended families for better information and to facilitate decision-making (Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1999; Tobolowsky, Outcalt, & McDonough, 2005). Although research has shown that the search phase requires students and their families to give serious thought concerning qualities they seek in a college, this stage is not as stress provoking for some students, as it is for others. For example, students with low SAT scores and poor socio-economic backgrounds may be restricted to a limited geographical range and the quality of the institutions to consider (Zemsky & Oedel, 1983). Moreover, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) noted that some students may have inaccurate information that restricts their choice. A study of differences in the postsecondary aspirations and college decision-making processes by social class, conducted by McDonough (1997), found that low income students not only had a paucity of resources to access information about college, but also gatekeepers (e.g. guidance counselors, teachers, and admission officers), often held lower expectations for low income students and provided information accordingly. Other researchers (Freedman 1997, 1999a, 1999b; Orfield et al., 1984; Perna, 2000) support McDonough's findings.

In the final phase of the college choice model in which Hossler and Gallagher (1987) calls the courtship between the applicant and educational institution, students begin to narrow their selections of educational institutions based on perception and assessment of institutional quality, financial aid package, the availability of academic programs, and the

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institution's recruitment of students (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Tobolowsky, Outcalt, & McDonough, 2005). Research has shown that financial aid is an important factor in the college choice process, specifically for Black students. In fact, Freeman and Thomas (2002) noted "The most consistent finding about [Black] students across higher education type continues to be the importance of financial aid because of so many [Black] families still cannot afford to finance higher education for their children" (p. 354). While individual student differences factor into how they assess these issues in the choice phase, all students have certain expectations of the college experience at an institution, and their decisions, to some extent, are rooted into how those expectations reflect their own perceptions of the experience (Tobolowsky, Outcalt, & McDonough, 2005).

While researchers have provided salient information relevant to educators and policymakers about students' institutional decision making process, this literature has also provided insight about characteristics of Black students and factors that influence their decision to attend HBCUs (Astin & Cross, 1981; Freeman, 1999a, 1999b; Freeman & Thomas, 2002; McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1995). Although research (Allen et al., 2007) on HBCUs has challenged this point, Astin and Cross (1981), who reported on characteristics of Black students attending HBCUs in the 1980s, noted that Black students at HBCUs, to some extent, have better educated parents than Black students at PWIs. Furthermore, while Astin and Cross found that Black enrolled in PWIs performed better academically in high school, they reported that Black students at HBCUs were more likely to attend graduate or professional schools than their counterparts at PWIs. Another noteworthy characteristic Astin and Cross reported was that Blacks at HBCUs were more concerned with political and community action compared with Blacks attending White institutions who gave higher priority to financial and status goals. Although researchers (Allen, 1992; Davis, 1998; Freeman, 1999a) on HBCUs have cautioned against making generalizations about students' background characteristics enrolled in HBCUs because of the difference in student profiles at private and public HBCUs, Blacks at HBCUs are typically thought to have lower high school GPAs and standardized test scores, and to come from neighborhoods in close proximity to the institution.

Aside from characteristics of Black students attending HBCUs, Astin and Cross (1981) discussed several factors that influenced Blacks to attend HBCUs in the 1970s: (a) relatives and personal relationships they had with people who attended HBCUs, (b) teachers, and (c) academic reputation. These researchers also found that Blacks chose to attend HBCUs for their low tuition. In a quantitative study McDonough, Antonio, and Trent (1995) conducted on Black students, they found that students' religion, the institution's academic reputation, and relatives were significant influences on their choice to attend an HBCU. More recently, a qualitative study Freeman (1999) conducted on 70 Black high school students identified three major influences on their decision to consider attending HBCUs: (a)

knowing someone who attended an HBCU, (b) seeking cultural empowerment and knowledge, and (c) lacking cultural awareness. While Freeman's study confirmed much of the earlier research about Black students' choice to attend HBCUs, it emphasized the role that culture plays in the college choice process for Blacks (Freeman, 1997, 1999a, 1999b; Freeman & Thomas, 2002). More specifically, Freeman and Thomas speculated, the more isolated Blacks are from their cultural heritage, the more likely they are to attend an HBCU. However, they noted, the more immersed Blacks are in their cultural heritage, the more likely they are to attend a PWI.

While research has provided some insight into factors encouraging Blacks to attend HBCUs, limited studies has offered understanding of factors motivating Blacks to attend PWIs. For example, research has identified reasons Blacks may attend PWIs: (a) the school's academic reputation, (b) size of the financial aid package, (c) recruited by an athletic department, (d) and a desire to live in close proximity to home (Astin & Cross, 1981; Freeman, 1999a, 1999b; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1995). Notwithstanding the insight that the aforementioned research has provided to the college choice process for Blacks, few empirical studies have explored factors that discouraged Black students from considering and attending HBCUs. Perhaps if administrators at HBCUs were better informed of these factors, they may be better positioned to implement programmatic initiatives to stimulate the interest of Blacks as well as other students and encourage them to attend these institutions. Doing so would be important as research has shown that some HBCUs have a goal of increasing their enrollments and seeking ways to better attract top Black high school graduates (Benavides, 1996; Freeman, 1999a, 1999b; Freeman & Thomas, 2002).

The purpose of this paper was to provide greater insight into Black students' rationale for not attending HBCUs; opting instead to attend a PWI. The initial purpose of this study was to understand salient factors promoting the academic success for Black, upper classmen students, at a PWI, who had a grade point average (GPA) of 2.5. Aside from focusing on factors of success, we also questioned the participants about their college choice process, and what consideration they gave to attending an HBCU. Examples of the questions included: (a) *How familiar were you with HBCUs when you began the college search process?* (b) *What factors caused you not to consider and attend an HBCU?* and (c) *Once you complete your education at this university, would you consider attending an HBCU for graduate school?* We received detailed narratives from participants regarding their rationales for not considering and attending an HBCU. We share those narratives in this study.

Methodology

We conducted this study at a public, mid-sized, research PWI, located in a small-town in the northeast region of the United States. Approximately

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12,000 students were enrolled when data were collected. Forty-five percent of students enrolled at this institution are White, and their Asian, Black, Hispanic, and unknown racially/ethnically counterparts comprise 13%, 6%, 7%, and 22%, respectively. Approximately 46% of White students matriculating at this institution complete a baccalaureate degree within 6 years, whereas that figure is 13% for Asian, 9% for Black and Latina/o students, and 25% for racially/ethnicity unknown students. For this study, we named this institution, Northeast University.

Using in-depth interviews methods, we sought to explore the academic and social experiences of a particular group of students situated in a particular context (Lincoln, 2002). Thus, the study's epistemological approach was anchored in the constructivist tradition to construct knowledge, understanding, and meaning through human interactions (Lincoln, 2002). To some extent, grounded theory strategies were incorporated into the research process. These strategies were not confined to the interview process, but rather occurred throughout the entire research process. Specifically, we employed strategies of continuously asking questions, utilizing research notes, exploring hunches, constant comparative analysis, and memo writing (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Participants. To recruit participants, we sought the help of student affairs staff and graduate students to purposefully select Black students who were upperclassmen and had a GPA of 2.5 or above. We recruited additional participants through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is the process of asking those who have participated in the study to refer others who meet the study's criteria (Creswell, 2003). This study's sample consisted of 13 African American upperclassmen, who had attained a grade point average (GPA) of 2.5 or above. Specifically, seven students were seniors and six were juniors. The majority of the students were women. Specifically, the study included nine women and four men. Participants' ages ranged from 19-23 years old and their average GPA was a 3.0.

Data Collection. We conducted one face-to-face, in-depth interview, with each participant. As an incentive and recruitment method, all participants received a \$10 gift certificate for their participation. Prior to beginning these interviews, participants signed a consent form, completed an open-ended questionnaire, and demographic form. Because the original intent of the study was to examine success factors for Black students at a PWI, we asked participants about their academic and social experiences at the institution during interviews. We also explored students' college choice process and inquired about their consideration for attending an HBCU. All interviews ranged from 90 to 110 minutes. We recorded observations regarding the ways in which participants responded to questions and their willingness to engage in the interview. We also conducted follow-up phone interviews with participants. Specifically, we conducted separate phone interviews with four participants, which ranged from 20 to 25 minutes. Follow-up phone interviews were completed during the data collection phase of the study after consulting field notes and listening to participants'

audiotapes. We conducted these interviews to ask participants to elaborate on themes discussed or clarify issues that emerged during the interviews. There were no standard questions asked during follow-ups. The questions we asked participants were based on a need to clarify the data.

Researchers' Positionality. For any qualitative study, it is important to discuss how the position of the researcher influences data collection, analysis, and interpretations (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Three researchers conducted this study. Two researchers identify as African American males while the third researcher identifies as a Filipina American. Our research interests focus on the retention and persistence of students of color at various institutional types. Specifically, the two African American researchers primarily focus on the experiences of Black males at HBCUs, while the Filipina American researcher focuses on the academic success and campus climate for students of color at PWIs. We engaged this topic because of the discrepancy in the literature about the impact of attending an HBCU have on the academic and social experiences of African American students compared with the number of Black students opting to attend PWIs over HBCUs. By undertaking this investigation, we hoped to learn directly from the participants about their rationale for not attending an HBCU. As such, we would be able to critically offer strategies HBCUs could employ to better enhance their recruitment of Black students.

Collectively, we believe our identities and experiences in higher education, particularly as researchers of color created a unique lens and position to understand the contemporary experiences of students of color in a familiar context. While our experiences and research may have helped us to better understand students of color experiences, they may have biased how we structured the questions and our interpretation of the data. Nevertheless, we allowed the findings to emerge independent of our biases. Member checking and peer debriefers also helped to make certain that the findings were accurately reflective of the participants' voices.

Data Analyses. We used constant comparative analysis on research notes, observations, and interview transcripts to identify recurring or unique topics (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Jones et al. (2006), constant comparative analysis engages the researcher in a process of collecting and analyzing the data simultaneously at "all stages of the data collection and interpretation process, and results in the identification of codes" (p. 44). Specifically, as we collected and transcribed the data, we read through our research notes and made self-reflective notes in the margins to help form initial themes. These notes included questions and speculations about the data and themes that emerged. As the data became increasingly voluminous, we used ATLAS.ti (5.0), a qualitative data management software program, to organize, manage, and code the data. We used open coding, which involved analyzing the data line by line, to identify themes. The line by line coding allowed for themes to emerge from the data and become aggregated into response patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process continued until the data reached a point of saturation—which is

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when the data becomes redundant (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Furthermore, memo writing allowed us to not only refine the categories, but also to understand the relationships among them. In discussing the findings, we present excerpts from the participants' responses verbatim to preserve the essence of the participants' voices. We used pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of each participant.

Credibility and trustworthiness. We employed several techniques presented by Merriam (1998) to ensure credibility of the study. For example, we provided thick description so others interested can draw their own conclusions from the data. Moreover, providing thick description enables the reader to vicariously experience the participants' social reality at the institution. To ensure the data's trustworthiness, we also conducted member checks by returning the transcribed interviews to all participants so they could review the transcriptions for accuracy and clarity following the interviews (Jones et al., 2006). Specifically, participants were invited to add, delete, or otherwise comment on the transcriptions. We used their feedback to enhance the integrity and preserve the authenticity of the participants' voices. Lastly, we used feedback from three peer-debriefers, who were well versed in-depth interview methods and active researchers on students of color and HBCUs to ensure credibility. Debriefers were provided with raw transcripts from each participant. These debriefers engaged the researchers in a series of ongoing discussions regarding the tentative meanings made of the participants' experiences throughout the research process (Jones et al., 2006).

Limitations. There were several limitations in this study. First, this study was conducted at one public PWI with 13 participants. Nevertheless, we provided thick descriptions so others can decide the transferability of this study to their institutions. Given the number of the participants, we are unable to compare the participants' perceptions of HBCUs to other Black students at other institutional types. Furthermore, given that this study was conducted at an institution in the northeast, Black students in other parts of the country may have different perceptions of HBCUs. This may serve as another limitation to the study's transferability. Another limitation is that interviews may not be an effective way to collect reliable information when the questions pertain to matters the participants perceive as personally sensitive. Notwithstanding, we proceeded with this approach because researchers suggested the need for qualitative research to investigate the experiences of students of color (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Guiffreda, 2004; Hurtado, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000). Furthermore, our familiarity with the topic and experiences may have served as a limitation in that they may have biased the kinds of questions selected and our interpretation of the data. In addition, the accuracy of the findings is contingent upon how well we analyzed the data, although this is true for all research studies.

Overview of Findings

In this section, we summarized three themes that emerged from the interviews. We delineated these themes and present quotes from participants to preserve the essential aspects of their experiences. Overall, the findings suggest that the majority of the participants have misperceptions and a general lack of knowledge about HBCUs. As a result, this misinformation often influenced their decision to consider or not consider these institutions. The first theme discusses the participants' practical reasons for not attending an HBCU including such reasons as distance and financial concerns. The second theme focuses on their perceptions of HBCUs lacking "diversity." The last theme involves the participants' perceptions that HBCUs are "party schools," and lack academic rigor compared to their PWI counterparts.

Practical considerations: (Un)familiarity with HBCUs, distance from home and financial aid. Nine of thirteen participants noted that they were disinclined to consider or attend HBCUs because of their familiarity or unfamiliarity with HBCUs, distance from home, and financial aid concerns. For instance, George, a senior in sociology, was not familiar with HBCUs until he came to Northeast University; only learning about them through different Greek organizations on campus which sparked his curiosity. He went on to say that in addition to his interaction with Greek organizations, he initially knew about HBCUs "based on TV, like documentaries and stuff [about] what these places are like." Furthermore, he said that he would be open to visiting an HBCU but admitted, "I have never considered attending one, to be honest."

Although the majority of the participants responded that they would *not* consider attending an HBCU, the few who considered applying often made mention of the schools being too far away from home. Most of the participants were originally from New York City and had major concerns about the location of HBCUs, being "all in the South." With the exception of a few of the participants mentioning the more well known HBCUs, such as Spelman and Howard, the rest of them believed that these institutions were all located in the South. This was a common misperception from the majority of respondents. This further hindered their consideration of applying to an HBCU. Before the interviewers informed them of some HBCUs located in the northeast, participants, for the most part, were not aware of HBCUs close to New York. However, among the few students who had some knowledge of historically black colleges and universities, it still did not appear that there was a strong interest in applying. For example, one respondent, Rick, a senior in economics, stated, "I wanted to go away, but not that far. I wanted to stay maybe in state [New York]. The furthest I thought about going was Boston and I know there are not many Black colleges, predominantly black colleges around [there]." However, when asked if he would consider attending if one was located closer to home, he responded that he still would not attend.

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There were, however, a few students who mentioned that they considered applying to an HBCU. Nikita, a senior in political science pointed out that although she thought about attending an HBCU, "it wasn't the best choice for me at the time." Distance from home was an issue and she was concerned about being too far away from her parents. Similarly, Mary, a junior in nursing, was concerned about being too far away from her family and that she would consider attending if it was closer. She explained, "Most historically black colleges are in the south, and I was like, that would be too far for me to go to school."

Another concern for the respondents, although common for many college students, was financing their education. Attending a university in state seemed to ease their financial concerns. Participants believed that it would be more expensive to attend an HBCU especially if it meant that they would live out of state. Nikita shared that this would add to her worries, as she discussed that attending an HBCU would not be financially feasible, "it would be considered out-of-state for me, so it would be more money than I would be able to cover." She was also concerned that it would be a heavy burden on her family financially. John, a junior in business, echoed this sentiment. Specifically, he stated: "Black schools, they were not on the top of my list. I had applied to other universities that were more cost-efficient...." Similar to Nikita and John, Melissa, a junior in nursing, explained that going out of state was not an option for her. She wanted to attend a school in state. Specifically, she noted: "when I started looking for a college, I only looked at the ones in state . . . HBCUs were out of state, and I could not afford the tuition." Nancy, a senior in human development, believed that her parents could only afford her to attend public university and that Northeast University was the most affordable. She, however, also mentioned and incorrectly assumed that all HBCUs were private, making them not an option for her.

Misperceptions of a "lack of diversity" and not the "real world." Ten of thirteen participants explained that they would not consider or attend an HBCU because they lack diversity and were not reflective of the "real world." All of the respondents only referred to race when they talked about a "lack of diversity." For example, Kimberly, a junior psychology major, felt that attending an HBCU would be "dull." She shared that although the university she attends presently "is not the most diverse school, but at least you get to see other cultures and you just understand what it means; such as knowing, what's outside your box." She proceeded to say, "I really like diversity. Just meeting new people, learning new customs, and obviously everybody's different."

Many of the students believed that it would be more beneficial for them to be in an environment with "different people" and believed that the atmosphere of HBCUs would not provide such a setting. Melissa explained that she knew about them but never considered applying to an HBCU because, "that's not what the real world is." She continued, "going to a historically Black college would hinder me, but you will get a different

experience. I know people at historically Black colleges but their experience is much more different than mine here, and I need diversity. I need a lot of colors around me." Similar to Melissa, George felt that based on his research before coming to college, he was "more prone to coming to this type of college [Northeast University], because I was looking for diversity. And I feel like there wouldn't be that much diversity in a historically Black university just because it would be predominantly Black." George believed that he was trying to "see and know different things" such as interacting with Latinos, Blacks, Whites, and Asians, which he finds at his current university. For the majority of the respondents, HBCUs did not stand out to them for similar reasons. However, a few students mentioned that one of the reasons that these institutions may not have stood out was because "they weren't really promoted as well" at their high school as compared to Northeast University.

Some respondents explained that they did not consider attending an HBCU because of the environment in which they grew up. One student, Tiffany, a junior in industrial engineering, attended a high school with different races, so she did not want to attend an HBCU. She explained, "I came from a high school that was very mixed, and I didn't want just go into a college where it's just predominantly Black." Coming from a different high school experience, John, who had attended a predominantly White high school, felt that attending a HBCU would "be a big culture shock." He believed that if he attended a "predominantly Black school" he would be concerned with figuring out how to negotiate "hanging out with his Black friends" and "when to hang out with his White friends." He emphasized that he has learned a lot at Northeast University because he is "exposed to all different races but felt like if I went to a historically Black school, I wouldn't learn as much." Similar to John, Nancy attended a predominantly White high school. She explained, "So coming from that background, it's just natural to pick a school like Northeast University [rather than an HBCU]."

All of the respondents explained that one of the reasons for not attending an HBCU was mainly because it did not reflect the "real world". According to the students, the "real world" did not just consist of people of the same race but of many different races. For the majority of them, they assumed that HBCUs were predominantly Black and would eventually put them at a disadvantage because it was not the "real world."

For many, attending an HBCU would be a disadvantage because it would mean that stereotypes that they may have of other races may be reinforced. John explained that being at an HBCU would mean that stereotypes that he had held about certain races would not change. He said that by attending his current university, he was able to challenge his stereotypes and think about races differently. He elucidated, "I wouldn't find any ways to breaking them [stereotypes], if I went to a predominantly Black school." He felt that attending Northeast University makes him rethink that "maybe that's not how the world [really] is, but that it's just

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how I perceived that one person." In other words, he felt that his current experience facilitated a sense of cognitive dissonance about his understanding of different races. Similarly, Kecia, a senior in Political Science, who grew up in Brooklyn, attended a predominantly Black high school and then later attended a predominantly Jewish school. She shared that had she never had that experience, she would have continued to hold stereotypes about the Jewish population. It was through this experience that Kecia decided not to attend an HBCU.

For many, the environment at their current university suited them best. Another student, Lorenzo, a junior English major, felt that he would not have learned about other people's cultures had he not attended Northeast University. He explained, "One of my coolest friends is Chinese. I never had a Chinese friend until I came here. I learned a lot about her culture, so I feel like I've learned a lot about different people's cultures, and their experiences. And I feel like if I went to a historically Black school, I wouldn't have that."

HBCUs are party schools; PWIs make you work harder. Finally, eight of thirteen participants delineated that they would not attend HBCUs because they were not places of academic rigor compared to PWIs. Others assumed that the environment at PWIs sparked competition, which facilitated a desire to work hard and learn more. Students often referred to their academic and social learning as attributed to being exposed to different races with whom they interacted. According to many respondents, attending a PWI gave them a competitive edge. Moreover, there were some students who believed that HBCUs were "party schools" and believed that PWIs were places where academics are taken seriously.

On an academic level, some students explained they would only attend an HBCU if they knew that it had a good program for their major, not necessarily because it is predominantly Black. Some students did not feel they should attend an HBCU just because of their race. John shared, "I don't like doing things or getting things simply because I'm Black." There was a sense of dissonance with John, in that he felt that by attending an HBCU [because he is Black], would always make him feel that people would perceive him "differently." John was conflicted with the idea of attending a school solely "because a lot of Black people attended there. I attend a school because it's a good school." However, he went on to say, that he did not specifically seek out or consider an HBCU because he was mainly concerned about attending a "good school." It appears that John's definition of attending a "good school" was strongly associated with both the quality of academics and race.

A number of participants continued to make strong associations and comparisons between HBCUs and PWIs, specifically referring to their academic abilities. For example, Jackie, a junior in Industrial Engineering, spoke candidly about her understanding of her academic ability. She believed that if she is "smart enough to go to school" than she does not "need someone to give [her] a boost" so therefore she did not feel that she

needed to attend a HBCU. She was also concerned about how others would perceive her because she attended a "Black college." She did not associate HBCUs with high academic standards and felt that if she was capable enough to enter a PWI, then it suits her best. Other participants also expressed a similar sentiment to Jackie's academic quality of HBCUs. Specifically, Rick explained that his mother made him attend his current institution because she was skeptical about the academic quality of HBCUs. He noted "my mother told me to focus on attending a White school because I would get a good education compared [with attending] a Black college." Kimberly also shared a perspective tantamount Jackie and Rick about the quality of education at HBCUs. In particular, she mentioned, "the quality of education at Black college was a concern of mine."

Some students were familiar with a few historically black universities and colleges but felt that if they attended one, their academic productivity would be hindered. According to some respondents, they feel that they have more to gain by attending a predominantly White university because it would make them work harder. For others, attending a PWI was associated with working hard and HBCUs were places to "party." Eugene, a senior in biochemistry, was familiar with a few HBCUs. Upon his reflection, he stated that he still would not consider attending because he believed that he probably would not have "gotten as much work done." He explained that he purposely went away for college, because being too close to home and having his friends around, would be too distracting and unproductive for him. He likened this to attending an HBCU, "it would be about the same, I probably wouldn't get any work done." He continued, "I feel like, adjusting to a predominantly White college gives you a chance. It gives you an open window to focus more on work." Nikita believed that she "always heard stories, that [HBCUs] are more social" because of what she perceived as a party-like atmosphere. She doubted that this particular atmosphere would work for her. Shakinah, a senior in Chemistry, shared a similar perspective. While she felt that there could be "plenty to gain at an HBCU" but if she attended a "Black college" she did not think that she would "function too well." She was concerned that she would not do well academically because she might be "too social" and be distracted. She added, "the world is just not [made up of] your own 'skin,' I would definitely gain strong grounds with people outside my race." She also stressed that "there are more different outlets, and different perspectives going to a school like Northeast University." This experience, she believed, would allow her to branch out and be more academically and socially successful.

Discussion

Researchers have described factors attracting Black students to HBCUs (Astin & Cross, 1981; Freeman, 1999a, 1999b; Freeman & Thomas, 2002; McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1995). Furthermore, researchers have focused on factors compelling Blacks to attend PWIs (Astin & Cross, 1981; Freeman, 1999a, 1999b; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McDonough, Antonio,

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& Trent, 1995). However, limited empirical studies have focused on reasons that discouraged Black students from considering and attending HBCUs. Participants in this study described several factors that undergirded their decision not to attend HBCUs. The first theme that emerged from this study was how distance and financial concerns factored into the participants' decision not to attend HBCUs. More specifically, most of the participants in this study were from New York, and while they were willing to travel, they were not willing to venture below the Mason Dixon Line, where most HBCUs are located, to attend an institution of higher education. Compounding this decision, many participants were concerned about what implications of going out of state would have on their ability to finance their education. Generally, when a student attends an institution out of state, they are not eligible for financial support for the state in which they are from, and their tuition is usually higher. Thus, they have to rely exclusively on federal financial aid and internal and external scholarships to support their education.

Research has shown that many Black students rely on financial aid to support their postsecondary education (Freeman, 1997; Freeman & Thomas, 2002; Kaltenbaugh, St. John, & Starkey, 1999; St. John, Paulsen & Carter, 2005). Additional research has shown that students' college choices are constrained by their social circumstances. As such, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, such as underrepresented students of color tend to be limited by their financial circumstances in that they generally attend schools less expensive and closer to home (Carter, 1999; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005). In this sense, literature supports the findings from this current study of participants' reluctance to attend HBCUs because these institutions are further away from their homes and they would need more forms of federal financial support and scholarships than students attending institutions in state.

Another theme that emerged from this current study was participants' disinclination to attend HBCUs because of their lack of diversity. While HBCUs are diverse in terms of the sub-groups that exist among Blacks (Harper & Nicholas, 2008), participants did not emphasize within-group differences among African Americans; rather they placed a strong interest on interacting with people who differ from them racially and ethnically. Contrary to the participants' perspectives, the campuses of HBCUs have always been racially and ethnically diverse (Brown & Stein, 1972; Conrad & Brier, 1997; Foster, 2001; Foster, Guyden, & Miller, 1999; Slater, 1993). For example, research has shown that with respects to faculty rank, HBCUs are more diverse racially and ethnically than their PWI counterparts (Foster, 2001; Foster, Guyden, & Miller, 1999; Slater, 1993). Furthermore, in terms of students, recent research has shown that HBCUs presently enroll 11% of White undergraduate students (Peterson & Hamrick, 2009). An article that Hernandez (2009) published in *Diverse Education* not only supported this claim, but also indicated that public HBCUs are attracting more Hispanic and Asian students. More specifically, using data from a 20 year analysis by

the Thurgood Marshall College Fund (TMCf), a nation organization that provides support to HBCUs, Hernandez noted that the enrollment of Hispanic and Asian students has increased about 30 percent. According to researchers, due to court cases such as *Adams v. Richardson* (1972) and *United States v. Fordice* (1992), which have compelled HBCUs to racially and ethnically diversify their student bodies, the number of non-Black students enrolling in HBCUs may continue to increase (Brown, 2002; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009).

Interestingly, research has shown that generally Black students who attended a predominantly White high school were more inclined to attend an HBCU because they were seeking cultural awareness and empowerment (Freeman, 1997, 1999a, 1999b; Freeman & Thomas, 2002). On the other hand, research suggests that Black students who attended a predominantly Black high school were more likely to attend a PWI because of their strong familiarity with the Black culture (Freeman, 1997, 1999a, 1999b; Freeman & Thomas, 2002). Some participants in this current study did not support this research. More specifically, while some of the students attend mixed or predominantly White high schools, they articulated that their decision for attending a PWI rather than HBCUs was rooted in their familiarity with these environments.

A final theme that emerged in this current study was some participants' reluctance to attend HBCUs because of their perception of them being "party schools" and not being as academically rigorous as PWIs. It is interesting that participants would harbor such sentiments when they lack direct experience with HBCUs. A critical race theorist such as Derrick Bell might even argue that the socially constructed myth of Blacks being inherently intellectually inferior might have colored the participants' perceptions. Contrary to the participants' viewpoints, while some research has shown that there is no significant difference in the cognitive abilities of Blacks attending an HBCU compared with their counterparts at a PWI, (Bohr, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995; Kim, 2002; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996) a number of researchers have reported that Black students' cognitive gains are higher at HBCUs than at PWIs (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1982, 1984). Notwithstanding the conflict over which institutional type is more effective in facilitating academic development for Black students, Kim (2002) concluded that both institutional types are equally effective in facilitating Blacks' academic development. She noted, however, that the parity in institutional effectiveness is noteworthy given HBCUs' chronic funding disparity with their PWI counterparts.

Recommendations for Institutional Practice and Research

Participants in this current study have offered reasons that discouraged their consideration and attendance of HBCUs. While a disproportionate number of underrepresented students of color are attending PWIs, many HBCUs are struggling to recruit qualified Black students and have

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dwindling enrollments (Harper & Gasman, 2008). HBCUs must find ways to attract more students to their campuses or risk becoming obsolete. To this end, we offer the following recommendations for institutional practice and policy.

Participants in this current study had various misconceptions about HBCUs; some of which centered on the dearth of racial and ethnic diversity and academic quality of these institutions. To clarify these misconceptions that may be widespread, HBCUs (public and private) should work collaboratively and be more intentional about informing the wider community about their significant impact on educating Black students and the contributions their alumni make to the country. More specifically, HBCUs should frequently broach that they award a disproportionate number of bachelor's degrees to Blacks and have a high number of graduates pursuing professional and post baccalaureate degrees. HBCUs should display their comparative rankings to similarly situated peer PWIs in state and national assessments and in graduate degree attainment on their websites and in recruitment materials. These institutions should also be proactive in informing a broad spectrum of the community that they have been able to achieve such notable feats despite being chronically under funded and admitting students ill prepared for college work.

One of the ways that HBCUs can better inform the wider community about their laudable impact on the academic achievement of Blacks is to partner with high schools in and outside of recruitment areas to speak with students as early as ninth grade. HBCU administrators should also hold seminars with high school counselors to provide insight and clarify misconceptions that they may have about HBCUs. Thus, counselors will have accurate knowledge to impart to students during the search phase of the college choice model. These discussions that HBCU personnel have with high school students and counselors should not be limited to the educational impact that HBCUs have on Black students, but also they should highlight the racial diversity that exists on the campuses of HBCUs. Administrators should also make clear that even if potential students attend an institution where racial diversity is lacking, it does not mean that students will be socially inept when interacting with diverse constituencies within the broader community. Furthermore, administrators should take students presently enrolled in HBCUs to talk with potential students about how their experience at the university has prepared them to interact with people from a variety of backgrounds. If HBCUs feel that this recommendation imposes a significant financial burden, they may consider using social networking and media sites, such as facebook and You Tube to better inform a wider community about their laudable impact on the educational outcomes of Black students. In terms of facebook, they can create a page that provides insight about campus life for students, their educational outcomes, faculty student interaction, student support services, and student activities. Similarly, with YouTube, they can have

communication majors create videos that accurately reflect the social and academic spirit of their campuses.

Furthermore, HBCUs might also engage support and advocacy organizations, such as the Thurgood Marshall College Fund and National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, in this mission to disabuse stereotypes and misconceptions. While these organizations produce literature, research, and reports about the historical and present relevance of HBCUs, many outside of the research community and the institutional environments of HBCUs (e.g., high school students), may not be aware of this research. Perhaps if a constellation of HBCUs and advocacy organizations worked collectively to inform a wider and broader spectrum of the population, more people, particularly high school students and their immediate families, would understand, value, and embrace HBCUs. Consequently, they might be more inclined to consider and attend these institutions.

HBCUs should also consider intentionally and actively recruiting more non-Black students. While their campuses are racially and ethnically diverse, and given the ruling of court cases, such as *Adams v. Richardson* (1972) and *United States v. Fordice* (1992), this diversity may increase. The diversity on many of these campuses is still somewhat limited. Some scholars (Brown, 2002; Drummond, 2000; Levinson, 2000) have expressed that there is reluctance by HBCUs to accept non-Black students because they may change the institutional culture and climate. While HBCUs should stay focused on recruiting Black students, they should also engage in more active recruitment of students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. One suggestion that may enhance public HBCUs' efforts to attract additional students from diverse backgrounds is HBCU administrators pressuring stake holders (students, parents, and alumni) to force their state governmental leaders to follow the spirit of the *United States v. Fordice* (1992) decision. According to Gasman and colleagues (2007), the implication of this decision should propel states to provide additional financial resources to Black colleges to upgrade facilities comparable with those of PWIs. Nevertheless, research has shown that many states are non-compliant (Brown, 2001; Gasman et al., 2007; Palmer & Griffin, in press). If campus facilities at HBCUs were comparable to their White institutional peers, perhaps this would compel more Black and non-Black students to consider and attend these institutions.

Participants in this current study expressed their paying for college was a concern, and this concern impacted their consideration of HBCUs as a college choice option. The ability to finance higher education is an increasingly important consideration for students when choosing to attend a postsecondary education (Perna, 2006; St. John, 2003; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter 2005; Titus, 2006). This phenomenon has forced more students to not consider out-of-state options and to enroll in colleges and universities close to home. HBCUs might consider finding ways to ease the concerns of students who are worried that these institutions are unaffordable. For

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example, HBCUs could show that grants and scholarship opportunities exist for students at their institution, and inform students on how their institutions can make their attendance affordable. These institutions must also do more to educate potential students on the financial aid process and help them become familiar with resources available to finance their degree. In additionally, while this current study was conducted at an institution in the northeast, similar studies should be conducted with Black students from other regions of the country to discern if there are similarities and differences in their perceptions of HBCUs.

Conclusion

HBCUs were established to provide access to higher education for Blacks when PWIs excluded their participation. Since their establishment, they have positively contributed to the educational advancement of Blacks. Although over the years, there has been a decline in the number of Blacks accessing HBCUs, these institutions continue to be relevant in promoting access and facilitating the success of Blacks in critical disciplines vital to the nation's economic prosperity. While some studies have provided insight into reasons Black students attend HBCUs, little empirical research exists to explain why they do not consider or attend HBCUs. This study furthers our understanding of factors compelling Black students to avoid HBCUs. It also provides recommendations that prove not only beneficial to HBCU administrators, but calls for more critical actions from policy makers to provide equitable distribution of resources to HBCUs. As noted, it is important that HBCUs as well as their stakeholders work in tandem to disabuse the misconceptions some may have about their institutions and work effectively to attract more students or risk becoming obsolete.

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