Black Students in 21st Century Higher Education: A Closer Look at For-Profit and Community Colleges

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Black Students in 21st Century Higher Education: A Closer Look at For-Profit and Community Colleges (Editor’s Commentary)

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Most of the research on Black students in higher education today reflects their educational trajectories at predominantly White public and private four-year nonprofit institutions and historically Black colleges and universities. While this scholarship has contributed to our understanding of educational experiences and inequalities, it does not adequately capture the reality and scope of Black students in the 21st century higher education landscape.

More Black students are enrolling in college and at record rates in the for-profit and community college sector. In 1982 college enrollment after high school was 40 percent for Blacks compared with 53 percent for White students (Baum, 2013). In 2011 these rates were nearly the same, as 65 percent of Blacks enrolled compared with 69 percent of Whites (Baum, 2013). Since 1995, 82 percent of new White enrollments have gone to the 468 most selective colleges, while 68 percent of new African American enrollments have gone to the two-year open-access schools (for-profit and community colleges; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Some states boast exceedingly high numbers. California community colleges and for-profit colleges account for close to 70 percent of Black student enrollment in postsecondary education (Rooks, 2013). This commentary serves as a close examination of the community college and for-profit sector that continue to play an instrumental role in shaping access, equity, and educational outcomes for Black students in contemporary American higher education.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES: AN OVERVIEW

Community colleges in the United States have been described many ways over the years, as “democracy’s college,” the “open door college,” and the “people’s college” (Pusser & Levin, 2009). Community colleges offer a variety of services, including academic and career counseling, tutoring, and developmental education, as part of their effort to respond to a wide range of student readiness (Iloh, in press). Today community colleges serve a wide variety of functions in the educational marketplace and their importance in the economic development of this country is well-documented (Morrice, 2011). Recently, as a part of his effort to build a stronger foundation that will allow Americans to lead in the global economy, President Barack Obama announced an initiative to strengthen our nation’s community colleges, and called for five million additional graduates by 2020 (Brandon, 2009).

Community college students are usually accepted on a first-come-first-serve basis, up to the capacity of the institution (Bailey, Badway & Gumport, 2001). In addition to their commitment to meeting their local communities’ educational needs, community colleges seek to serve all who have the need and desire to participate in postsecondary education (Gleazer, 1980; Mullin, 2010). These open admissions policies have contributed to their high demand as well as concern over their funding and capacity constraints. The institutions are of particular importance as they are the primary source of postsecondary education opportunity for students of color, low-income students, and students who attended poorly funded high schools (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen & Person, 2009). Unfortunately, many community colleges today face a funding crisis, enrollment growth that strains capacity, unsustainable rates of developmental education, unpredictable shifts in labor market demand, growing competition for enrollments and revenue from for-profit providers, and a loss of leadership of daunting proportions through retirements (Pusser & Levin, 2009).

Education researchers and policymakers often debate about the role and utility of community colleges. Advocates of community colleges assert that these institutions are usually more
affordable, provide the option of transfer, and students can earn short-term certificates or associate degrees that prepare them for specific occupations. Proponents have also argued that community colleges serve a vital role for some student populations (Dougherty, 1994; Morrice, 2011). Opponents of these institutions have argued that community colleges are organizational structures that “cool” the academic ambitions of underprepared students and reproduce social inequalities (Anderson, Alfonso & Sun, 2006; Dougherty, 1994).

Some also argue that high schools play an important role in stratified community college outcomes. A California based study found that the quality of high school resources was highly related to student chances of transferring to a four-year college and the likelihood of attending a high or low “quality” high school was strongly related to race and ethnicity (Gándara, Alvarado, Driscoll, & Orfield, 2012). One third of Latinos attended high schools in the low resource category, as did 1 in 5 Black students while only 1 in 25 Whites and 1 in 10 Asians went to such schools (Gándara et al., 2012). Overall, the higher education literature tends to embrace both sides of this debate and posit that community colleges provide opportunities for some students, while sustaining inequality for others (Cohen & Brawer, 2002).

BLACK STUDENTS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Currently more than 50 percent of African American students in postsecondary education are enrolled in community colleges, while only 40 percent of their White peers select this institutional type as their point of entry (Morrice, 2011). This equates to roughly one million African American students enrolled in 1,200 plus community colleges across the country (Morrice, 2011). Furthermore, almost one-third of all degrees earned by Black students are from community colleges (Rooks, 2013). The increase of African American community college students during the last 25 years has been cited as sustaining Black–White college enrollment gaps (Cohen & Brawer, 2002). In California in 2010, only 20 percent of all students who successfully transferred to four-year institutions were Latino or African American (Gándara et al., 2012). However, the handful of community colleges in the state that is responsible for the majority of transfers serve high percentages of White, Asian and middle-class students (Gándara et al., 2012). While some might argue that African American participation in the community college sector is a sign of progress, other researchers continue to argue that enrollment gains at the community college level are evidence of sustained inequality in higher education (Morrice, 2011).

FOR-PROFIT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES: AN OVERVIEW

For-profit higher education is comprised of privately funded institutions that generate profit by providing post-high school degrees or credentials (Deming, Claudia, & Katz, 2012; Dill, 2005). For-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs) have highly focused missions targeted to specific segments, particular industries, and limited to specific fields of study (Ruch, 2001). In responding to labor demands of numerous employers, trades and professions, FPCUs develop and offer programs that train students for positions where there is sufficient demand, and for which investment in schooling is likely to be “recoverable” with increased wages they can accrue (Hentschke, Lechuga & Tierney, 2010). Ruch (2001) stated that the typical student pursuing a degree at a for-profit university often fits the following demographic profile: 27-year-old female, ethnic minority (African American, Hispanic, or Asian), U.S citizen, married with one or two dependents, holding a full- or part-time job while going to school, and having some prior college experience.

Proponents of for-profit colleges cite several potential advantages of for-profit colleges for traditionally underserved students:

- the institutional imperatives of for-profit corporations to continually grow via increasing enrollment and retaining students;
- greater convenience for working students or students with children through flexible course scheduling and multiple course start dates; and
• degree and course options tailored to skills needed in the labor market, which might be particularly appealing to students from disadvantaged backgrounds who want an immediate payoff (Harding, 2010).

Moreover, Bailey and colleagues (2003) asserted that the for-profit sector has prospered and grown because:

• the for-profits are a competitive threat to community colleges and other sectors of higher education;
• the for-profits provide more flexible, convenient, and responsive education than community colleges; and
• the for-profits “train” while community colleges “educate.”

Many have raised numerous counterpoints about for-profit higher education such as concerns of a low quality education due to part-time faculty, lack of liberal arts education, minimal facilities, and fewer classroom hours with instructors (Harding, 2010). Other criticisms of the for-profit higher education industry include its aggressive marketing and a lack of admissions criteria (Seiden, 2009). Some for-profit institutions have been sanctioned in the past for overly forceful marketing and enrollment tactics.

Perhaps the most pressing concerns regarding proprietary higher education are student debt and gainful employment. While President Obama has goals to expand the community college sector, he has expressed concern with the for-profit sector. In a recent question-and-answer session at the State University of New York at Binghamton, President Obama shared that some for-profit colleges are taking advantage of students (and in particular veterans) and that these abuses were more prevalent in the for-profit than the nonprofit sector (Fain & Jaschik, 2013). While all sectors of higher education—two-year and four-year, private and public—are expected to bestow benefits on their graduates, the for-profit institutions provide the least certain educational and economic advantages (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2010; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2002).

Black Students at For-Profit Colleges

Black students are among those who are increasingly opting for a postsecondary education at for-profit colleges (Iloh & Tierney, 2013). During the 2011-2012 school year about 14 percent of all undergraduate students in were enrolled in for-profit institutions (Baum, 2013). Black students—particularly Black women—disproportionately enrolled in for-profit institutions. Of the percentage of Black students that enrolled in the for-profit sector, 19 percent of these students were Black men and 23 percent were Black women (see Figure 1; Baum, 2013). As of 2011, the nation’s top producer of Black baccalaureates was the University of Phoenix, the country’s biggest for-profit college (Hing, 2012). Ashford University, another for-profit college, is another top provider. From the 2004 to 2009, Black enrollment in four-year for-profit schools increased by 218 percent, while their participation in public four-year institutions and public two-year institutions increased by only 24 percent and 27 percent, respectively (Hing, 2012). For-profit institutions are clearly changing the choice patterns of students in general and Black students of color, in particular (Iloh & Tierney, 2013).

Outcomes and Implications for Black Students

Vocational Orientation

While for-profit and community colleges often compete for students (Cellini, 2009), their emphasis on vocational training varies. Most for-profit colleges focus solely on vocational preparation while community colleges are challenged with trying to fulfill multiple institutional
goals including sending students to four-year colleges or providing them with vocational skills to support a direct move into the labor market (Iloh & Tierney, in press; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2009). Critics posit that the vocational character of community colleges and for-profit colleges represents a business-dominated strategy to help manage the supply of labor and the demands of capital. Some worry that working-class, female, and minority students might even be cooled out in terminal vocational-technical programs (Anderson, Alfonso & Sun, 2006).

A recent study on for-profit and community college website marketing to students of color found that the overwhelming emphasis on for-profit college websites was vocational training and career development whereas most community college websites only emphasized graduation (Iloh, in press). On the occasion that White students were also shown on for-profit website homepages, they were usually not shown in “helping occupations” as students of color were, but rather those that were more entrepreneurial (Iloh, in press). And while degree completion is important to outcomes at for-profit and community colleges, these open-access institutions fare worse even in cases where students are more academically prepared. Students with low-test scores at the 468 most selective colleges graduate at higher rates than students with high-test scores at open-access two- and four-year colleges (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

**Student Tuition, Debt and Earnings Outcomes**

One of the most noticeable differences between for-profit and community colleges are their price. The average cost of a two-year associate’s degree at a for-profit college is $35,000 while the average cost of an associate’s degree at comparable community college is $8,300 (Lee, 2012). Mullin (2010) found that all levels of for-profit institutions have tuition and fees significantly higher than those of community colleges, requiring over 90 percent of their students to take out loans, compared to just over 10 percent at community colleges. In 2011-2012, only about one-half of all African American undergraduate students took out federal loans to pay for college and only nine percent borrowed as much as $10,000 for the year (Baum, 2013). Among those enrolled in
community colleges, 78 percent took no federal loans and less than one percent borrowed as much as $10,000 (Baum, 2013). Among those enrolled in the for-profit sector, three-quarters borrowed, and 15 percent borrowed $10,000 or more for the year (Baum, 2013). As it pertains to student earnings outcomes, Cellini and Chaudhary (2011) found both community and for-profit colleges generate earnings gains of around eight percent per year for students who complete associate’s degrees and do not continue onto four-year colleges.

Resource Allocation

The community college and for-profit conundrum also presents a problem for the resources provided to Black students, since Black students are less likely to be enrolled in the selective institutions that bestow the most resources to students. The 82 most selective colleges spend almost five times as much annually per student and the most selective 468 colleges spend twice as much on instruction per student as open access schools (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). For-profit colleges spend the least amount per student among all sectors of higher education, spending on average, $9,758 per student in 2008-2009, while public colleges spent almost double that amount and private non-profits spend nearly four times as much per student (Bennett, Lucchesi, & Vedder, 2010).

Because of these differences in resources and student spending, more selective colleges provide considerably more resources per student, leading to higher graduation rates, allowing greater access to graduate and professional degrees, producing higher lifetime earnings, and ultimately providing greater access for White students to managerial and professional elites (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Technology, costs, demographic shifts, and emerging occupational requirements are creating fundamental changes in the higher education landscape for Black students. In 2001, four HBCUs were among the top 10 for enrolling Black students. In 2011, no HBCUs were in the top 10, and only one (Florida A&M University) was in the top 20. The top 10 colleges for enrolling Black students consist of three for-profit colleges, four community colleges and three public four-year institutions (Toldson & Esters, 2012).

The migration patterns of Black students in higher education offer important insights into imperatives to effectively recruit and retain Black students. High schools that educate the largest percentage of Black students are less likely to offer a college bound curriculum and are more likely to have teachers who are not certified to teach the courses they are assigned to teach (Toldson & Lewis, 2012). These opportunity gaps make it difficult for many Black students to gain admission and contend at competitive colleges and universities. In addition the growing economic gap between Black and White families and the rising cost of higher education create barriers for Black students who have difficulty affording higher education.

For-profit colleges do not offer obvious financial advantages for Black students; however they offer flexibility to students who cannot afford to leave their jobs to pursue higher education. For-profit colleges also have marketing prowess and effectively streamline the application process to ease some of the inconveniences of a traditional admissions process.

Lack of college readiness among Black students and economic challenges among Black families, have expanded the role of community colleges and for-profit colleges. However, without conclusive research, it is difficult to ascertain whether these colleges offer long-term strategies to ameliorate educational and economic inequities, or ineffective bandages for racism that is entrenched in the economic and educational structure of the United States.

Importantly, Black male and female student representation in higher education is proportional to the Black representation within the overall population. However, lack of adequate guidance and academic rigor in high schools and economic inequities have resulted in Black students being...
underrepresented at competitive universities and overrepresented at community colleges and online universities.

HBCUs in particular, which have traditionally provided accommodations to Black students, should examine the changing landscape of higher education to enhance services for Black students. Specifically, to more effectively recruit, HBCUs should enhance marketing and recruiting efforts, use technology to streamline the admissions process, work with area high schools to improve counseling and guidance services, and offer advanced placement classes to local high school students. For retention and graduation, HBCUs should provide services to students who need transitional support, offer distance learning, improve student aid and scholarships, and improve advisement for post-baccalaureate plans.

Higher education is critically important to our understanding of the Black individual in the 21st century because postsecondary education serves as a window into Black educational, social, and economic experiences and outcomes. Unfortunately, this understanding is limited since the institutions that have the largest populations of African American students relative to their campus size have the smallest presence in the higher education scholarship. Future research on Black students in higher education must carefully move past issues of just access and carefully assess the manner in which the role of for-profit colleges and community colleges narrow or exacerbate existing inequalities.

REFERENCES


**AUTHORS**

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