

# On Equal Ground: Causes and Solutions for Lower College Completion Rates Among Black Males

by Valerie Rawlston Wilson, Ph.D.

Regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or social class, all parents dream of a bright future for their children. For most, the path to this future follows a well-established pattern—graduate from high school, complete at least four years of college and secure a good job. Prior to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, this path to success was extremely narrow and traveled by few African Americans who for over 200 years after arriving in this country had been prohibited from receiving any kind of formal education, much less attending institutions of higher learning. With the help of religious organizations and the Freedmen’s Bureau, African Americans responded to these restrictions by opening the first “colleges” for blacks as early as 1837 when Cheyney University was founded in Pennsylvania. These early “colleges” served primarily as high schools for blacks and offered instruction in industrial or agricultural trades and teacher training. They ultimately evolved into what we know today as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). At either the graduate or undergraduate level, HBCUs have educated some 75% of all African-American Ph.D.s, 46% of all African-American business executives, 50% of African-American engineers, 80% of African-American federal judges, and 65% of African-American doctors. The *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision and affirmative action policies helped to further widen the path to upward mobility by allowing African Americans greater access to all American colleges and universities, resulting in tremendous strides in educational attainment. In 1960 only 3.5 percent of African-American adults age 25 or older had completed four years of college or more. By 2005, this number had grown to 18 percent.<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between educational attainment and earnings is well established. According to 2005 estimates from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, individuals with a bachelor's degree earn more than one and a half times as much as high school graduates and more than twice as much as those without a high school diploma. Also, the black-white earnings gap narrows considerably when you compare median earnings of blacks and whites with a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>2</sup> Yet, high rates of joblessness and high school dropout among black males indicate that the benefits of higher education are yet to be fully realized by many of these young men.

According to the 2005 *Digest of Education Statistics*, total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting institutions<sup>3</sup> increased by 24 percent between 1990 and 2004. Over this same period of time, the proportion of those students who were African American increased from 10 percent to 13 percent. African-American males represented less than one third of this growth. A look at degree completion statistics indicate that less than half (43 percent) of all African-American students who enrolled in a 4-year college as first-time freshmen in 1995-96 had completed a bachelor's degree by 2001, compared to 63 percent of white students. College completion rates for black males (36 percent) are roughly ten percentage points lower than for black females (47 percent), reflecting in part the greater number of women relative to men enrolled in college since the 1980s.

While much can and has been said about the failure of the public education system to adequately engage and prepare young black men to enter college or the workforce, there tends to be less discussion about the educational experiences of those who actually do make it into college. By observing the factors that contribute to success (or failure) in college, policymakers can begin to create policies and programs that not only help those already enrolled, but also better prepare students before they enter college. Aggregate enrollment and completion statistics give us a snapshot of students at the beginning and end of the college education process, but fail to address the specific dynamics at work in the decision to remain enrolled and complete a college degree. A meaningful discussion of the black male college experience must go beyond a simple statement of the facts to an analysis of how differences in socioeconomic status, family background, educational preparation and even college environment contribute to different edu-

cational outcomes. The historical significance of HBCUs adds another dimension to the analysis of the black male college experience.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities have served a unique role in educating and graduating a significant portion of economically (and often otherwise) disadvantaged, college-aged African Americans. With typically lower tuition rates and more flexible admission policies, they are credited with providing a college education to many for whom it would have been out of reach otherwise. Smaller class sizes and a sense of shared racial history and identity have also been said to cultivate a more supportive and nurturing environment for students to flourish in. The Higher Education Act of 1965 defines HBCUs as institutions of higher learning established before 1964 whose principal mission was then, as is now, the [higher] education of black Americans. All institutions classified as HBCUs are accredited or making reasonable progress toward accreditation by an approved accrediting body. Currently there are 105 institutions classified as HBCUs, representing three percent of all institutions of higher education in the United States. In 2004, HBCUs enrolled 13% of all black college students and produced roughly one fifth of all black college graduates.<sup>4</sup> While the graduation rate at HBCUs tends to be much lower than the graduation rate for black students at the nation's highest-ranked institutions, the graduation rate at a number of HBCUs is well above the average for black students nationwide and at least twenty-one HBCUs have seen an improvement in their graduation rate between 1998 and 2005. The flip side is that for a significant number of the nation's HBCUs, two thirds or more of all entering black students do not go on to earn a degree.<sup>5</sup>

### **Identifying Factors that Influence Persistence & Graduation Outcomes**

What role do HBCUs play in educating young black men? Are these institutions more successful at retaining and graduating African-American students than traditionally white institutions (TWIs) and do these outcomes vary for males and females? Aggregate statistics can be misleading because they mask underlying differences across students and institutions that affect persistence and completion outcomes. For example, lower graduation rates at HBCUs can be partially explained by the fact that most HBCUs are small, have a relatively high percentage of disadvantaged students, and lack many of the resources available at mainstream institutions. Empirical analysis is necessary to disen-

tagle some of the many factors affecting the decision to attend (or not to attend) an HBCU in the first place, as well as how these factors affect four-year persistence rates and six-year graduation rates for African American students at HBCUs and TWIs.<sup>6</sup>

In order to perform such an analysis I use data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) Longitudinal Study. BPS was implemented by the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES) to improve nationally representative data on participants in postsecondary education. Information is collected on first-time students as they begin their postsecondary education and their progress is updated at 2-year intervals for up to six years. The most recently available data is from the cohort of students who began their postsecondary education in 1995 with data collection commencing in 2001. From this group of students I draw a sample of 469 African-American students (146 attend an HBCU) between the ages of 17 and 21 who enrolled for the first time at a four-year postsecondary institution at the start of the 1995 fall semester.<sup>7</sup>

The first question that must be addressed is whether African-American students who attend HBCUs are inherently different from those who attend TWIs. For the sample of students used in this analysis, the two groups were demographically very similar, except for a few notable differences. First, the male-female ratio for African-American students at TWIs (0.37) was higher than at HBCUs (0.29). Aggressive recruitment of black male athletes at major colleges and universities is a possible explanation for this difference. Second, average family income was higher for those who attended TWIs (\$44,000) than for those at HBCUs (\$37,000). Finally, African-American students who attended TWIs were more likely to be top students in high school than their counterparts at HBCUs, but it is important to keep in mind that top students are more likely to attend the country's elite universities, all of which are classified as TWIs.

Taking account of individual characteristics, family background, high school academic performance and local labor market conditions in the student's home state, I estimated the probability that a student would choose to attend an HBCU as opposed to a TWI, given that they had already decided to attend college. The estimates suggest first of all that despite a relatively low male-female ratio, gender alone was not a significant determinant of

HBCU attendance for college bound African-American males and females. They further suggest that students who live in states with a greater number of HBCUs, as well as students from single parent or broken homes and those with lower SAT scores were more likely to attend HBCUs. However, the largest single factor in determining the likelihood that a student would attend an HBCU was whether their mother attended college. Those whose mothers attended college were 24.7 to 34.8 percentage points more likely to attend an HBCU than those whose mothers had less education. This is what can be called a “legacy effect” as the parents of those attending college in the nineties would have been college students in the 1960s before integration became widespread. As a result, many of these mothers could have attended HBCUs and may encourage their children to do so, as well.

Proponents of HBCUs often argue that the absence of racism on these campuses along with smaller, more intimate social and academic settings help to promote academic success among African-American students. One dimension along which this success can be measured is student persistence. Persistence refers to the decision a student makes to remain enrolled in college. In addition to individual characteristics, family background, high school academic performance and local labor market conditions, persistence is likely to also be influenced by previous investments of time and resources. After controlling for each of these factors, I found that African-American students who attended HBCUs were no more likely to leave college before completing a degree than similar students at TWIs. Differences in persistence rates between males and females also diminished once student characteristics were controlled for. Rather, persistence was most strongly affected by academic preparation. Compared to students with a cumulative high school grade average of 85 – 100 (A to B), the chances of stopping out were 5.6 percentage points higher for students with a 75 – 84 (B- to C) high school grade average. The difference was nearly twice that for students with less than a C high school grade average (10.7 percentage points). Students who scored higher on the SAT were also less likely to withdraw from college. A 200 point difference in the SAT scores of otherwise similar students was associated with a 1.5 percentage point difference in the probability of stopout. Family background also has significant effects on persistence. Students from single parent or broken homes were 4.5 percent-

age points more likely to stop out. Holding all other characteristics constant, students in the lowest income category (less than \$16,100) were 4.4 percentage points less likely to stop out in any given term than those with family income above \$53,750. This suggests more determination to remain in school and complete their college education among lower income students.

Additionally, most students who stopped out chose to do so before the beginning of a new academic year (which begins in the fall) as opposed to the middle of the year. Though not very pronounced, there was also some evidence that the chances a student will stop out at any point in time decreases the longer a student has been enrolled.

Since the ultimate goal of college attendance is degree completion, the final indicator of success is how well this goal is accomplished among African-American students at HBCUs and TWIs. Again individual characteristics, family background, academic performance and local labor market conditions are used to estimate the probability of completing a bachelor's degree within six years. And again, holding all of these factors constant, there is no evidence that degree completion rates differ significantly for African-American students at HBCUs or TWIs, nor were there significant differences between African-American males and females. Not surprisingly, academic performance is the strongest determinant of college completion as well. For example, students who had a B to C (75 to 84) high school grade average were 20 percentage points less likely to graduate within six years than those with an A or B (85 to 100) high school grade average. Similarly, the probability of graduating within six years increases by 6.8 percentage points per 100 point difference in SAT score.

Graduation outcomes for African-American students do, however, vary by family income. Students in the lowest income quartile, as well as those in the second highest income quartile were more likely to graduate than those in the highest income quartile by at least 35 percentage points. This again tends to indicate that lower and middle-income students are more driven to complete their college education than otherwise similar upper-income students.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Ultimately, the question is what, if anything, does the absence of a distinct HBCU effect really mean? The answer to that question is determined by the

basis upon which we choose to evaluate what matters. On one hand, if students with similar educational and family backgrounds are just as likely to persist and complete a degree at an HBCU as they would be at a TWI, then there is some advantage to be gained (at least economically) in attending an HBCU at a fraction of the cost of attendance at a comparable TWI. On the other hand, although degree attainment is the primary reason why colleges and universities exist, the observation of this outcome alone gives no consideration to the quality of education, prestige of the school, or the personal satisfaction and pride derived from the educational experience; all of which help to shape future aspirations and post-baccalaureate outcomes.

The most important point to take away from this analysis is that success in college begins long before students ever enroll. In fact, a student's performance in the higher education arena is intricately linked to his or her ability to develop the skills necessary to compete and meet the demands of college before they arrive. Observed differences in persistence and completion statistics across schools as well as between African-American males and females exist largely because of differences in academic preparation and performance. Inadequate academic preparation is also a major barrier to initial college enrollment, affecting observed differences in enrollment rates between African-American males and females. Contributing also to differences in enrollment is the fact that 15 percent of young black males (age 18-24) are high school dropouts, compared to 11 percent of young black females. A major revamping of the American educational system—including quality and type of instruction as well as re-integration of schools along racial and socioeconomic lines—is necessary. Better access to college preparatory and advanced placement classes are needed for all African-American students at the high school level. Since achievement gaps appear even before kindergarten, early childhood education is important. Furthermore, the preparation necessary to complete more challenging high school curricula must begin at the middle and elementary school levels. At the college level, remedial courses are needed to help disadvantaged students get up to speed.

A second major determinant of persistence behavior is the student's family or support structure. In fact, students from single parent or broken homes—meaning parents were either divorced, separated or never married—were five percentage points more likely to stopout than students

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from two parent homes, even after controlling for family income. This is especially relevant since nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of African-American children live in single parent homes. While additional analysis would be needed to discover exactly how college outcomes and the student's home environment are related, it seems apparent that the family structure has important implications for well-being beyond the childhood years. Mentoring programs and other means of offering additional support to African-American students, be it through parents, teachers, or others concerned adults, could be effective ways to improve college persistence. Also, since students are most likely to stop out between the second and third year of college, the earlier college administrators can identify problems and offer appropriate interventions the more likely students are to persist.

While money does not appear to be as big a barrier to persistence and completion as it is for initial enrollment, need-based aid programs, like the Pell grant should be expanded to insure that students with a desire to complete college have the means to do so.

Finally, without adequate information, even well-intended policies are misguided. Due to the scarcity of data on African-American students attending HBCUs, the sample sizes used in empirical analysis tend to be small and often represent only a fraction of the 105 HBCUs in this country. Availability of data is tantamount to the ability of researchers to produce precise and reliable results that inform public policy. If we as a country are serious about strengthening the nation's historically black colleges and universities and addressing the challenges faced by African-American males at these and other postsecondary institutions, a detailed, longitudinal HBCU database is needed.

## REFERENCES

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, U.S. Census of Population, 1960; U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey*, March 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2006/section2/table.asp?tableID=475>

<sup>3</sup> Degree-granting institutions are defined by the National Center for Education Statistics as postsecondary institutions that grant an associate’s degree or higher and are eligible for Title IV federal financial aid.

<sup>4</sup> Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center of Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Source: *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (Winter 2006/07).

<sup>6</sup> A discrete time hazard model is used to estimate the probability that a student will stop out of college for the first time in any semester, given that they have been enrolled for each previous semester. An instrumental variable estimator is used to identify the “pure” effect of attending an HBCU apart from other factors associated with both HBCU attendance and persistence behavior. Complete tables including the estimates discussed in this essay are presented in the Appendix to this chapter. The reference for the full analysis is Wilson (2006).

<sup>7</sup> While this is a small sample size, the nature of the population and question being analyzed automatically limits the number of observations available from nationally representative samples. Ehrenberg & Rothstein (1994) only had a sample size of 638, with 298 coming from HBCUs.

**Table 1**

**Means of Explanatory Variables for Fall 1995**

*(Standard Errors in Parentheses)*

<b>VARIABLES</b>	<b>Total (N = 469)</b>	<b>TWI (N = 323)</b>	<b>HBCU (N = 146)</b>
Male	0.35	0.37	0.29
Family Income	\$41,495 (51,477)	\$43,552 (58,144)	\$36,943 (31,859)
Father's Education			
Less than High School	0.04	0.04	0.04
High School Graduate	0.40	0.40	0.40
Some College (Less than Bachelor's Degree)	0.15	0.14	0.16
Bachelor's Degree or Beyond	0.33	0.34	0.33
Single Parent/Broken Home	0.45	0.41	0.51
Mother's Education			
Less than High School	0.03	0.03	0.02
High School Graduate	0.41	0.43	0.38
Some College (Less than Bachelor's Degree)	0.20	0.20	0.21
Bachelor's Degree or Beyond	0.34	0.32	0.39
Took the SAT	0.97	0.98	0.94
SAT Score	792 (187)	813 (186)	741 (181)
High School Grades Available	0.90	0.92	0.87
High School Grades			
A to A- (100 - 90)	0.20	0.24	0.12
A- to B (89 - 85)	0.36	0.35	0.40
B to B- (84 - 80)	0.16	0.18	0.11
B- to C (79 - 75)	0.14	0.11	0.21
C to C- (74 - 70)	0.03	0.03	0.03
C- to D- (69 - 60)	0.01	0.01	

Table 2

**Probability of HBCU Attendance**  
(Marginal Effects)

	Linear Probability)
Male	-0.043 (0.046)
Family Income: 25th Percentile (<\$16,100)	0.004 (0.075)
Family Income: 50th Percentile (\$16,100 - \$31,500)	-0.099 (0.069)
Family Income: 75th Percentile (\$31,500 - \$53,750)	-0.043 (0.064)
Father High School Grad	-0.136 (0.112)
Father has Some College (No Bachelor's Degree)	-0.102 (0.123)
Father has Bachelor's Degree or Higher	-0.131 (0.118)
Single Parent/Broken Home	0.116 (0.046)*
Mother High School Grad	0.156 (0.084)
Mother has Some College (No Bachelor's Degree)	0.247 (0.091)**
Mother has Bachelor's Degree or Higher	0.348 (0.094)**
SAT Score/100	-0.043 (0.014)**
Didn't take SAT or ACT	0.043 (0.191)
High School GPA: 84 to 75	0.020 (0.060)
High School GPA: 74 to 60	-0.220 (0.127)
State Weekly Earnings in Mfg. Sector/1,000	0.320 (0.361)
State Unemployment Rate	0.027 (0.023)
Number of HBCUs in Home State	0.222 (0.055)**
(Number of HBCUs in Home State) <sup>2</sup>	-0.052 (0.015)**
(Number of HBCUs in Home State) <sup>3</sup>	0.003 (0.001)**
Constant	0.062 (0.344)
Person-Spell Records	2590
R-Squared	0.18
P-Value for Test of Joint Significance of Instruments	0.00

Robust Standard Errors in parentheses.  
\*Significant at 5%; \*\* Significant at 1%.

Full regression includes a constant term, and dummy variables for missing parental education, and missing high school GPA.

Table 3

### Probability of First Stopout (Marginal Effects)

HBCU	-0.093 (0.078)
Spring 1996	0.093 (0.020)**
Fall 1996	0.005 (0.016)
Spring 1997	0.073 (0.021)**
Fall 1997	-0.009 (0.015)
Spring 1998	0.029 (0.019)
Fall 1998	-0.026 (0.013)*
Male	-0.034 (0.031)
HBCU * Male	0.129 (0.097)
Family Income: 25th Percentile (<\$16,100)	-0.044 (0.021)*
Family Income: 50th Percentile (\$16,100 - \$31,500)	-0.023 (0.020)
Family Income: 75th Percentile (\$31,500 - \$53,750)	-0.036 (0.018)*
Father High School Grad	-0.038 (0.041)
Father has Some College (No Bachelor's Degree)	-0.064 (0.044)
Father has Bachelor's Degree or Higher	-0.072 (0.043)
Single Parent/Broken Home	0.045 (0.016)**
Mother High School Grad	-0.035 (0.060)
Mother has Some College (No Bachelor's Degree)	0.015 (0.063)
Mother has Bachelor's Degree or Higher	-0.024 (0.066)
SAT Score/100	-0.015 (0.005)**
Didn't take SAT or ACT	0.013 (0.073)
High School GPA: 84 to 75	0.056 (0.018)**
High School GPA: 74 to 60	0.107 (0.048)*
State Weekly Earnings in Mfg. Sector/1,000	-0.079 (0.080)
State Unemployment Rate	0.009 (0.006)
Person-term Records	2,590
N	469
R-squared	0.05

Robust Standard Errors in parentheses.  
\*Significant at 5%; \*\* Significant at 1%.

Full regression includes a constant term, and dummy variables for missing parental education, and missing high school GPA.

Table 4

**Probability of Degree Completion Within Six Years**  
(Marginal Effects)

HBCU	0.883
	(0.543)
Male	0.016
	(0.102)
Male * HBCU	-0.165
	(0.276)
Family Income: 25th Percentile (<\$16,100)	0.351
	(0.174)*
Family Income: 50th Percentile (\$16,100 - \$31,500)	0.236
	(0.173)
Family Income: 75th Percentile (\$31,500 - \$53,750)	0.383
	(0.174)*
HBCU * Family Income: 25th Percentile (<\$16,100)	-0.833
	(0.547)
HBCU * Family Income: 50th Percentile (\$16,100 - \$31,500)	-0.639
	(0.595)
HBCU * Family Income: 75th Percentile (\$31,500 - \$53,750)	-1.137
	(0.589)
Father High School Grad	0.098
	(0.111)
Father has Some College (No Bachelor's Degree)	0.198
	(0.127)
Father has Bachelor's Degree or Higher	0.188
	(0.127)
Single Parent/Broken Home	-0.051
	(0.059)
Mother High School Grad	0.087
	(0.135)
Mother has Some College (No Bachelor's Degree)	-0.055
	(0.144)
Mother has Bachelor's Degree or Higher	0.090
	(0.149)
SAT Score/100	0.068
	(0.020)**
Didn't take SAT or ACT	0.216
	(0.195)
High School GPA: 84 to 75	-0.200
	(0.058)**
High School GPA: 74 to 60	-0.167
	(0.116)
State Weekly Earnings in Mfg. sector/1,000	0.305
	(0.350)
State Unemployment Rate	-0.015
	(0.024)
N	469
R-squared	0.04

Robust Standard Errors in parentheses.  
\*Significant at 5%; \*\* Significant at 1%.

Full regression includes a constant term, and dummy variables for missing parental education, and missing high school GPA.