# Improving Graduation Rates for African American and Latino Students at Public Institutions

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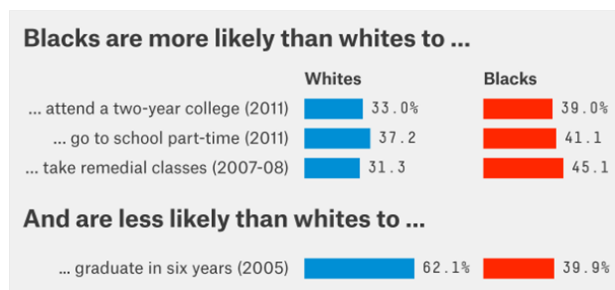Rita.SmithWade-El@millersville.edu

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It is common knowledge in academic circles that graduation rates among African American and Latino undergraduates are low. In fact, they are impressively poor with African American students having a six-year graduation rate of 39.9 %. Put another way, only one-third of all African American students who entered a four-year university as part of the 2005 cohort graduated by 2011. In an environment where education is increasingly linked to lower crime rates (Lochner & Moretti, 2003) and lifetime earnings, ensuring that our nation's growing Black and Latino population have access to the benefits provided by a college education is a matter of the public welfare. At Millersville University, a university which primarily serves the majority (but now shrinking) population of white undergraduates in Central Pennsylvania and the home institution for this paper's authors, such concerns could not be more relevant. Millersville University graduates white students at a rate of 71.9%. By contrast, African American students



graduate at a rate of 36.2% and Latino students graduate at a rate of 37.7%. This gap is likely the result of a number of factors which require immediate analysis if the hope is to avoid the creation of an uneducated underclass of minorities who lack the economic and social advantages of an education.

So, the authors set out to find, by investigating other schools similar in character to Millersville University, what strategies are the most effective in graduating African American and Latino Students. Of particular concern is establishing the methods by which an institution could ensure that these students graduate within four years, as research shows that the longer it takes to get an education, the less likely the student is to complete it. The following constitutes a summary of our goals, research and findings, as the first step in a larger project that aims to implement these findings in the form of policy at Millersville.

**Goal**

To investigate effective academic development and retention programs for African American and Latino Students at public universities with similar demographics to Millersville University and use this information to aid in the development of a cost effective program which will raise 4 year graduation rates to 25% and six-year graduation rates to 50% for both African American and Latino students.

**Method**

**Participants and Data Sources**

The participants were faculty, staff and students from eight mid-sized public universities in New Jersey (3), Pennsylvania (3), Maryland (1), and Virginia (1). These individuals were interviewed in person at their institution for seven of the eight schools and over the phone for one of the institutions. The numerical data came from the institutional research component of these same institutions. The schools were chosen because they were public institutions not classified as RU: VH Research Universities (very high research activity), mid-sized with 8% to 12% African American students and 6% to 10% Latino students. More importantly, they had graduation rates for African American and Latino students of at least 50% and gaps between graduation rates for European American students and students of color of less than 20%.

| | Undgrd Enrollment | AF AM Enrollment | H/L Enrollment | AF AM Graduation Rate (Six-Year) | H/L Graduation Rate (Six-Year) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Millersville University of Pennsylvania | 7424 | 9% (672) | 7% (521) | 38.00% | 49% |
| University A | 9201 | 8% (750) | 4.5 % (429) | 56% | 55% |
| University B | 6689 | 9% (611) | 3% (180) | 60.5 | 55% |
| University C | 6545 | 6% (347) | 10% (653) | 66% | 77% |
| University D | 7516 | 6% (456) | 10% (733) | 57% | 53% |
| University E | 8610 | 10% (859) | 5% (409) | 62% | 49% |
| University F | 17988 | 15% (3319) | 5% (1062) | 60% | 55% |
| University G | 10722 | 9% (944) | 9% (947) | 51% | 53% |

**Materials**

The materials were a set of experimenter generated open ended interview questions and a list of data requested (See Appendix A and B).

**Procedure**

The experimenters contacted each school except the home school and asked for aid in setting up a visit to campus to interview African American and Latino students and all individuals involved in the recruitment, retention and graduation of African

American and Latino students. Who this was and how many individuals were interviewed varied from school to school. In all cases except one interviews were done in person. In one case, interviews were conducted on the phone. Interviews included African American and Latino students, faculty, Provosts, Vice Presidents and other staff in Student Affairs, Financial Aid Directors and their staff, Admissions Directors and their staff, Directors of tutoring programs, writing centers, academic services and special admission programs, Enrollment Management personnel and institutional research staff.

Data was requested from the Institutional Research Department of each university concerning demographics, graduation rates, admission status, g.p.a., major, minor, SAT's, etc.

**Findings**

Only the findings from the interviews will be presented since this qualitative information is most relevant to the purpose of this study.

**The "Will"**

The answer that best summarizes the factor that is most important in increasing the graduation rate of African American and Latino student is "The Will," At first glance, this statement appears trite, but an institution will not allocate the time, personnel and funds at the level required unless there is significant commitment at all levels of the administration.

*Recruitment*

Non-RU/VH universities need to recruit African American and Latino students who have the skills and background to succeed at their institution with the support that the institution can provide.  Because of the drop in potential college students and the push for diversity, there is a great deal of competition for quality African American and Latino students. State-related and more research-oriented  public universities are not only more well known to African American and Latino students and their families but are able to offer more financial aid, especially non-need-based aid.  This requires admission personnel who have developed  relationships with high school teachers and counselors who will allow them to make presentations to groups of students,  have these students visit the

campus (including overnight visits) and will recommend this university as one who has a reputation for providing a positive experience for and graduating African American and Latino students. A benefit of this approach is that, if successful, a cadre of students is created that become *de facto* recruiters for the schools.

## Finances

Since many quality African American and Latino students come from homes where the family contribution according to FASFA is not $0, if only need-based aid is available they choose schools which have additional non-need based aid.  Also, even when the family contribution is nil, much of the aid available is in the form of loans. Institutions which have programs that provide aid so that for at least the first two years, students do not have to take out any loans have much higher graduation rates for African American and Latino students.  Often this additional aid is tied to maintaining a specific G.P.A. This appears to provide incentive for the students to put forth the extra effort needed to succeed.  Also, since most African American and Latino students who do not graduate are lost by the end of their sophomore year, these students and their families who are initially reluctant to take out loans are more willing once the sophomore year is completed. This may be because it will result in a smaller loan debt and/or they are now surer that they will graduate.  Additionally, all students receiving any financial aid are allowed to obtain all their needed textbooks until refunds are received. This assures that these students do not attempt to succeed without their textbooks for two to three weeks into the semester.

## Faculty Recruitment

Institutions with higher African American and Latino graduation rates report they recruit and hire African American and Latino faculty who can serve as role models and mentors. Moreover, they recruit and hire mainstream faculty who are committed to diversity and have proven records of teaching diverse students.

## Faculty Training

One institution which had been very successful actually provided a workshop to some faculty which was based on the academic practices of  public high schools in the

state. Many faculty were surprised to learn that students could retake a failed exam with no penalty, or that often, work was graded on whether or not it was present or complete, not on its quality. Most students had never had to turn in a paper of more than 2 to 3 pages and had never learned a specific formatting style. This did not cause these faculty to lower their standards but to realize what they needed to teach and the pedagogical strategies necessary to assure their students meet their standards.

## Faculty-Student Interaction and Staff/Student Mentors/Integral part of the University

Another key factor in raising graduation rates among African American and Latino students is faculty-student interaction. African American and Latino students who collaborate with faculty on research or other academic projects are simply more likely to graduate. Moreover, students that work for faculty or in university offices are also more likely to graduate probably because these students have individuals who serve as mentor, and provide support and advocacy for the students. Furthermore, this ensures that students and faculty see African American and Latino students as an integral part of the University. At these universities, African American and Latino student work in every component of the university including academic components like the writing center and tutoring (even in the STEM fields). Peer mentorship also seems to be an important factor since they can communicate effective strategies to other students.

## Non-stigmatization

One of the big problems encountered by African American and Latino students is that programs designed to provide them with remedial skills and knowledge or other support often results  in the students being stigmatized. Universities with high African American and Latino graduation rates create programs that are perceived as high status and are often utilized by all students.

## Campus climate/student organizations

Finally, it is important that the campus has events year-round that are of interest to African American and Latino students and help the university community understand and appreciate the culture, contributions and issues confronting African Americans and

Latinos. The existence of student organizations open to all students but focused on African, African American and/or Latino culture and issues can also be a great asset.

**Anomaly**

To conclude, an anomaly needs to be addressed. One school with very high graduation rates for African American and Latino students did not have any special academic and remedial programs for African American and Latino students. The reason for their success was that they already had in place many of the basic elements necessary to graduate these students because their primary cohort of students were from rural Appalachia. Much like African American and Latino students, the white rural poor face a number of social and economic factors as barriers to their graduation and success.

**Discussion**

Based on this above information, the authors have deduced that there are essential elements which must be present to assure high African American and Latino graduation rates.

First, it must be mandated from the top.  This means it must be clear that the Chancellor 's Office,  as well as the Board of Trustees and  the President and his/her cabinet must, make it clear the graduation gap between white and African American and Latino students will disappear.

Admission offices must have close ties and relationships with public schools and communities with large numbers of African American and Latino students. The schools and communities must trust that African American and Latinos students referred to these universities will succeed and have a positive experience. This will help admissions offices to recruit students likely to succeed.  Furthermore, it will help admission's offices develop events to aid in the recruitment of these students as well as programs that will assure families and the knowledge and motivation to help their children to succeed.

Universities that are successful in this regard have summer and academic year programs for regular admit and special admit African American and Latino students which include remedial courses (if necessary), mentoring, advising, and support groups.

Financial support must exist and be a priority for the administration and entire institution. Minimizing the indebtedness of students and assuring that they have books and necessary class materials at the beginning of the semester are essential. Also these student need to not feel poverty-stricken relative to the rest of the student bodies and need to be able to have supplemental income provided by flexible on-campus employment as opposed to external employment.

Additionally, havens where students stressed by interacting with majority individuals can find respite are also important. Research suggests that interracial interactions, especially being a minority in an unfamiliar majority environment, can cause reduced cognitive function through resource depletion (Richeson et al., 2003, Richeson & Trawalter, 2005). That is to say that African American and Latino students interacting in majority-white environments may be expending cognitive resources that otherwise could be devoted their studies. As difficult as it sounds, the opportunity for exposure to an environment that is less taxing cognitively may increase student performance, and thusly graduation rates.

Faculty, staff, graduate student and peer mentoring are also a major factor in success. This can be a combination of a formal mentoring programs and informal mentoring that results from employments in university offices and/or collaboration with faculty and graduate students. An important component of this is a critical a number of faculty, staff and graduate students of color to serve as role, models, advocates and mentors. Since these number of African American and Latino staff, faculty and graduate students is never going to be sufficient to provide enough mentors and advocates all prospective faculty should be screened for a willingness to and experience working with African American and Latino students, Add to this faculty and staff development to assure understanding of the academic experience and cultural values the students bring to the institution and you have a winning combination.

**References**

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**Appendix A**

Interview Questions

1. What strategies have been used by you, your office, or your institution to increase the graduation rate of African America and Latino Students?

2. .Which of these strategies do you feel has been the most successful? Why so?

3. .What special programs exist at your institution to aid in the retention and graduation of African American and Latino Students?

4. Are your programs based on any particular research, or on programs from other institutions? What do you see as the "best practices" in this endeavor?

5. . What do you see as the biggest hurdle(s) for African American and Latino students to their graduation?

6. What do you see as the biggest obstacles to African American and Latino student graduation from the institutional side?

7. In what ways has your program improved? What would you consider to be the centerpiece of your program?

8. In what ways could your program be improved?

9. Do you think that stereotype threat is a factor hindering success among African American and Latino students?

10. In your opinion, do African American and Latino students feel out of place among white students at your institution? Do they have difficulty adjusting to the campus culture? Does this affect their success?

11. Do you think that African American and Latino Students find interacting with mainstream students and staff stressful?

12. What do you think the role of faculty and staff is, especially on an individual level?

13. Do you have any comment on the role of student organizations in African American and Latino graduation rates?

**Appendix B**

Data Requested

1.                    High                    School(s)                    Attended
2.                    High                    School                    GPA
3.                              Class                              Rank
4.          SAT                    or                    ACT                    Scores
5.                                                            Major(s)
6.                                                            Minor(s)
7.                              Major                              GPA
8.                              Minor                              GPA
9.          Change          of          Major          (if          applicable)
10.          Did          the          student          receive          financial          aid?
11.     Was the student ever on academic probation?

12.          Whether          the          student          was          ever          suspended
13.          Did          the          student          ever          withdraw          and          reason          given?
14.                    Graduation                    Status                    and                    Date
15.          How     many     active     semesters     spent     at     the     University?
16.               Credits               at               Graduation               (if               applicable)
17.                                                            Gender
18.                              Age                              (at          admission)
19.                                                            Race
20.                                                            Ethnicity
21.                              Admission                              Status
22.               Special               Programs               (if               applicable)
23.          Was     the     student     involved     in     intercollegiate     athletics?
24.          Was     the     student     involved     in     disciplinary     action?
25.     Did the student receive disability accommodations?