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Examining the Effects of Black College Presidents Who Themselves Attended Black Colleges

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# THE EFFECT OF BLACK COLLEGE PRESIDENTS WHO ATTENDED BLACK COLLEGES

## Abstract

The scope of this analysis includes all accredited Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), specifically scrutinizing the individuals who serve in the role of president. The president, or chancellor, of a higher learning institution are essentially expected to possess the vision of the respective college or university. This work explores the notion that a president who themselves attended an HBCU affects the graduation rate. This categorization is further blocked to only include those who served in the role for 6 or more years. Additionally, measurable statistics, including retention rate and graduation rate subjectively and indirectly point to the academic performance of the institution, but still seems to hold weight in the collegiate decision process, as well as other processes involving funding and business maintenance. It was found that the average graduation rate and retention rate of HBCU presidents who did not attend HBCUs was higher than the statistics of those who did. It was also found that presidents who earned their bachelor's or both a bachelor's and master's degree had a higher average retention rate than the other categories, including the individuals who did not earn a degree from an HBCU.

*Keywords:* HBCU, president, graduation, retention

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## Examining the Effects of Black College Presidents

### Who Themselves Attended Black Colleges

For the scope of this research, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) may be defined as outlined in Title III of the *Higher Education Act of 1965*, that states:

Any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation.

As of the year 2019, there are 101 institutions that fit into this criteria, and each one will be screened for this study.

The concept of the HBCU originates in parallel with the southern United States' Reconstruction era, a time period after the Civil War, further categorized by the representation of what historical author Stamp (1965) refers to as the "ultimate shame of the American people" (p.4). The nature of this author's work stems from analysis of the social atmosphere of the time period in question, and suggests that the air of racial supremacy antagonized the growth of newly freed slaves and their immediate descendants. These higher learning institutions were subsequently founded in an effort to educate the members of this new population, although few, namely Cheney University and University of the District of Columbia, existed as early as 1837 and 1851, respectively. The idealistic essence of these institutions and their stakeholders seems

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to be holistically derived from the circumstances of their genesis, and have translated into a “strong sense of group identity” (Tatini-Smith et al., 2013) between these individuals— faculty, staff, students and prospective students alike.

Typically, one of, if not the, paramount positions of an organization is the president, or, in some educational cases, the chancellor or president-chancellor. In this analysis, all terms address the same office. It is understood that this individual is responsible for several administrative tasks of both the measurable and unquantifiable sort. Regarding the role of the president within an institution of higher learning, Kauffman (1980) offers that effective leadership requires “political effectiveness, visible leadership, the ability to teach the public, and a sense of service to the human spirit.”(p.1). The phrase “political effectiveness” takes into account the decisions being mandated by the person in this office, and thus affects the maintenance of the college or university as a business, whereas the phrases “visible leadership” and “sense of service to the human spirit” may be relatively subjective. Furthermore, Bledstein (1976) comments that “the creation of the university in America provided the necessary matrix for its development, making possible new attitudes about authority, mobility, merit, and success that have come to characterize modern American society” (p.1), outlining an overarching mission that may be applied across academia. Additionally, assuming the goals of any arbitrary higher learning institution is striving to align with generally altruistic standards (i.e., quality education and upwards business consistency) is rational, the graduation rate and retention rate of the college or university seem to be reasonable areas to begin such an extensive analysis. Yet, it would be logical for a leader placed into this position that embodies the qualities in the previous references.

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The question then becomes, “what attributes should be present in an applicant for an effective HBCU president to achieve the aforementioned goal?” One may intrinsically deduce that HBCU presidents, who themselves were once HBCU students, may be able to more directly relate with their students and their issues, and thus possess some form of favorability. Individuals that are categorized by such criteria will be referred to as “HBCU alumni presidents.”

The purpose of this analysis is to explore and determine a non-causal comparison between HBCU alumni presidents considering their respective institution’s retention rate and six year graduation rate (150% of typical 4 year program length) at their respective institutions, and the same measures of their counterparts— those who did not earn degrees from HBCUs. It is hypothesized that HBCU alumni presidents will maintain higher numerical values between both variables.

A graduation rate data of only current HBCU alumni presidents that have served for the past six years will be included. This restriction is placed due to reflect the six year graduation rate, considering that “the average president had served for nearly 7 years” (Green, 1988, p.1). An extra year also manages to loosely account for the presence of a senior class, who, assuming that the majority of members are to graduate, would not have the chance for retention during the first year of the president’s reign. Also, the 150% threshold coincides with the Student Right-To-Know Act (SRTK), which mandates that institutions submit graduation rates of only first-time and full-time students who spent up to 150 percent of normal time to complete their degrees (Shin & Milton, 2004).

The denotation of the retention rate is to be defined as “a short-term measure that covers only one year and thus is not adjusted for students who may leave the college after the first year

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but before a degree is earned”(Hagedorn, 2005, p.88). Therefore, retention rate may be considered up to the most recent reported statistic, unrestricted from the six year threshold. Lastly, only graduation rate and retention rate at the undergraduate level is to be assessed, for these students represent a vast majority of the total population of students.

### **Literature review**

Note that no studies nor articles were found to exactly match the initial inquiry. Therefore, the following literary review is composed of articles that expound upon the elements required to give a sense of significance to the final results.

“An HBCU-Based Educational Approach for Black College Student Success: Toward a Framework With Implications for All Institutions” is a conceptually-styled article aimed to create a theoretical framework to aid in HBCU college student success, which claims to be the first of its nature. The article scrutinizes “relevant empirical research on the contributions historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have made for black student success” (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014, p.1), listing several implications concerning pre-and-post HBCU graduation factors. The authors further suggest that “Black student success, therefore, represents one of the more urgent issues in America today” (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014, p.3). This statement exemplifies the national scope of scholastic performance as faced by contemporary members of the African Americans race. Such research is imperative for analyzing the qualifying aspects regarding African Americans and their matriculation through HBCUs. After several examples reflecting the concept of student success being a general issue within postsecondary education, the work claims that “institutions that are serious about black student success must invest in faculty members who are especially skilled at delivering the requisite educational experience.”

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(Arroyo & Gasman, 2014, p.19). Although this statement blankets faculty, implying only those employees who are directly responsible for classroom instruction, it is possible that the HBCU alumni president is aware of congruent knowledge, perhaps stemming from their own collegiate experiences, and thus will support such members.

The article “Centering the Educational and Social Significance of HBCUs: A Focus on the Educational Journeys and Thoughts of African American Scholars” explores the history of HBCUs and relates those origins to the sociopolitical circumstances, positively and negatively, in which they are found contemporarily. From their qualitative findings, the authors were able to conclude that “the lived experiences of HBCU graduates provide a deeper understanding of their positionalities in the landscape of U.S. American higher education outcomes”(Bettex & Suggs, 2012, p. 1). If applied to the topic of HBCU alumni presidents, one may infer that their general life experiences in concurrence with their prior attendance at an HBCU would create coercion to push institutional policies that would holistically and principally impact the student population towards higher graduation and retention rates.

Because the list of HBCUs is comprised of both 2-year and 4-year degree institutions, graduation metrics must be assessed for both cases. For 4-year institutions, the article “Completing College: Assessing Graduation Rates at Four-year Institutions” attempts to pinpoint a method that better describes college graduation rates while considering the circumstances of which prospective and matriculating students may find themselves. The article claims that “in order to actually improve degree completion rates at an institutional, as well as state and national level, the focus needs to be squarely on creating conditions for success for all students who begin college.” (DeAngelo, Franke, Hertado, Pryor & Tran, 2011, p.1). Perhaps the presence of an

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HBCU alumni president may be one such condition, contingent upon the findings of this particular study,. The article takes this observation further, explaining that “Pressure to improve is also the result of college ranking systems which now incorporate and publish graduation rates as a measure of college quality”(DeAngelo, Franke, Hertado, Pryor & Tran, 2011, p.3). College quality therefore is another factor to be considered, for “despite significant variation, graduates from higher quality colleges enjoy a greater rate of growth in earnings during their early career” (Thomas & Zhang, 2005, p.1). It would then be logical for the highest “quality” 4-year college earns preference from collegiate prospects and their families.

As far as 2-year colleges, the article “Completion Matters: The High Cost of Low Community College Graduation Rates” gives insight to graduation statistics concerning 2 year institutions. One such statistic claims that “Community colleges are a vital component of the US postsecondary education system serving about 30 percent of all students in higher education” (Schneider & Yin, 2012, p.1). Excluding these institutions from study would be a disservice to any interpreters of the information. From an economic standpoint, the authors find that “Cutting the dropout rate by half would generate substantial gains: the 160,000 ‘new’ graduates would earn \$30 billion more in lifetime income—and create an additional \$5.3 billion in total taxpayer revenue” (Schneider & Yin, 2012, p.1). This reference highlights the financial significance of community college student success, although some data is estimated. Regardless, it is realistic to infer that the HBCU alumni president may possess qualities that affect graduation rates, consequently impacting the social and economic scope of community study.

“Strategic Moves for Retention Success” is an article that shares several practices and ideals for cost-efficient collegiate student retention. The work opens with a broad credo that

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reads “The success of an institution and the success of its students are inseparable.”(Levitz, Noel & Ritcher, 1999, p.1). Upon a smaller spectrum, one may relate this statement to HBCUs, and infer that the success of the students of these institutions is positively correlated with the success of the institution itself. This notion combined with the social phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecy, defined as “situations in which false beliefs about the possibility of certain outcomes lead people to engage in new behaviors that actually make these otherwise unlikely outcomes more likely” (Stukas & Snyder, 2015, p.1), suggests that HBCU alumni presidents who are seen as, subjectively, successful by their student body, are able to foster inspirational environments in which the students motivate themselves to become what they individually define as success. Furthermore, the article states that “If information on students’ goals is collected, preferably at the beginning of each term, then whether an individual student persists to the completion of his or her educational goals can be measured” (Levitz, Noel & Ritcher, 1999, p.1). While this statement can be seen as a study limitation, one may still agree with the concept it carries. Whether this concept is calculable or not is irrelevant, for an HBCU student who attends an institution led by an HBCU alumni president would have another factor to consider, adding exposure to assist in the creation of their ideal success initially. In other terms, because these students are able to see a successful individual in the lead, their drive for success may increase, which could have a positive impact on the retention rate of the institution in question.

Lastly, leadership qualities must be discussed in an effort to explore what, in addition to the mere fact that an HBCU president happened to attend an HBCU themselves, would make such an educational leader thrive in their field. The article “Qualities of Effective Leadership in

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Higher Education” analyzes the factors that may promote or hinder the success of a leader in the realm of higher education. The article lists several factors that seem to translate into the capabilities of an effective leader. Because college presidents, as mentioned earlier, are synonymous with the overall vision of the institution, for “their job is to inspire and guide the process of change, reward risk taking, help people think big, and open doors.” (Kauffman, 2004, p.1), the list of qualities from the vision and goals segment of the aforementioned article reflects that ideology. Black (2015, p.61) numerically lists these qualities as follows:

1. Establish a stable, shared long-term vision and a common sense of purpose
2. Identify what is happening to, or affecting, results (teaching, research, productivity)
3. Set clear, short-term achievable goals
4. Ensure flexibility in all levels of planning
5. Consider views of stakeholders and partners
6. Ensure plans start with understanding performance relative to institutional purpose
7. Ensure staff embrace institutional aims & culture (vision, goals, understand the system)
8. Get people to measure performance relative to aims in teaching, research and enterprise
9. Advocate good governance: institutional, departmental, academic, and in complex projects
10. Ensure congruency between plans, action on the ground, and results

Although the entire composition of the list is essential to this analysis, the seventh element in particular embodies the potential advantage HBCU alumni presidents have over their

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counterparts. HBCU alumni presidents have experienced an unwordable, unquantifiable difference in culture in degree pursuit, and may bring those qualities into their workplace. If the presence of such an individual with these qualities is maintained, a culture with community-driven undertones manifests and student performance and retention may increase, for Cohen & Walton (2010) claim “even minimal cues of social connectedness affect important aspects of self.”(p.1).

### **Methods**

The data was collected and analyzed from a quantitative perspective. Data represents the graduation rate and retention rate as reported by each institution from their official website. Additionally, biographical information was gathered about the respective president from the institution’s website as well. This information included the institutions in which the president attended, as well as if those institutions are current HBCUs or defunct. The education level was also a comparable factor, considering if the president attended the HBCU as an undergraduate, masters level student, doctoral level student, or a mixture. This excludes honorary degrees, for recipients may not have physically attended the awarding institution. The scholastic area of the degrees earned will not be included. In the event that the institution's website failed to list coveted information, data was retrieved from the National Center for Education Statistics database. This database, however, gives statistics for retention of both part-time students and full time students. Because the measures accounts for undergraduate students, institutions that only offer graduate degrees will be excluded. In this case, part time student retention will be omitted. In the case where the only available measurement is of part time students, the statistics will be considered. The database was also compared to available official website statistics for accuracy.

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Additionally, retention rate data is included for 2 year technical and community institutions. As mentioned earlier, only presidents who have served for 6 or more years will be represented, and all 101 qualifying institutions were screened. Intertim presidents will also be accounted for retention, for they inherit the duties of the position. Presidents whose first year of service is current will be excluded from graduation rate and retention rate calculation, for students would not have had a chance to retain the following fall semester.

Using IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software, the affirmative of a president's attendance in a certain category was noted as a "1" and otherwise as a "0." In certain cases, presidents have attended HBCUs, but did not receive a degree from the institution. These individuals also received a "1" in the nonattendance category. In one case, the individual, Dr. Ray Belton, was found to be the president-chancellor at multiple institutions within a system spanning multiple institutions. Consequently, the Southern University system retention rate was calculated as the average of the found retention rates of the composed institutions, Southern University at New Orleans, Southern University at Shreveport and Southern University and A&M College. However, Dr. Belton was counted only once, and the graduation rate was excluded. This is due to the finding that Dr. Belton served for more than six years as the president of Southern University at Shreveport, yet he technically did not assume the mantle of president-chancellor at the other institutions until 2015. SPSS was then utilized to create graphics in an effort to visually convey data. Because this data represents specific population variables, error bars were not included in bar graph rendering.

After these exclusions and exceptions, a total of 93 presidents were assessed of the 101 HBCUs.

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## Analysis and Results

Once the data was collected and quantified, several relevant statistics emerged. Again, 93 presidents represent the total amount of data points. The following are core numerical findings from the collected data concerning the amount of presidents that fell within each category:

- 61 presidents earned at least one degree from an HBCU
- 32 presidents did not attend an HBCU
- 30 earned only a bachelor's degree from an HBCU
- 2 earned only a master's degree from an HBCU
- 3 earned only a doctoral degree from an HBCU
- 16 earned both a bachelor's and master's degree from an HBCU
- 3 earned both a bachelor's and doctoral degree from an HBCU
- None earned both a master's and doctoral degree from an HBCU, without a bachelor's
- 7 earned degrees of all levels from an HBCU

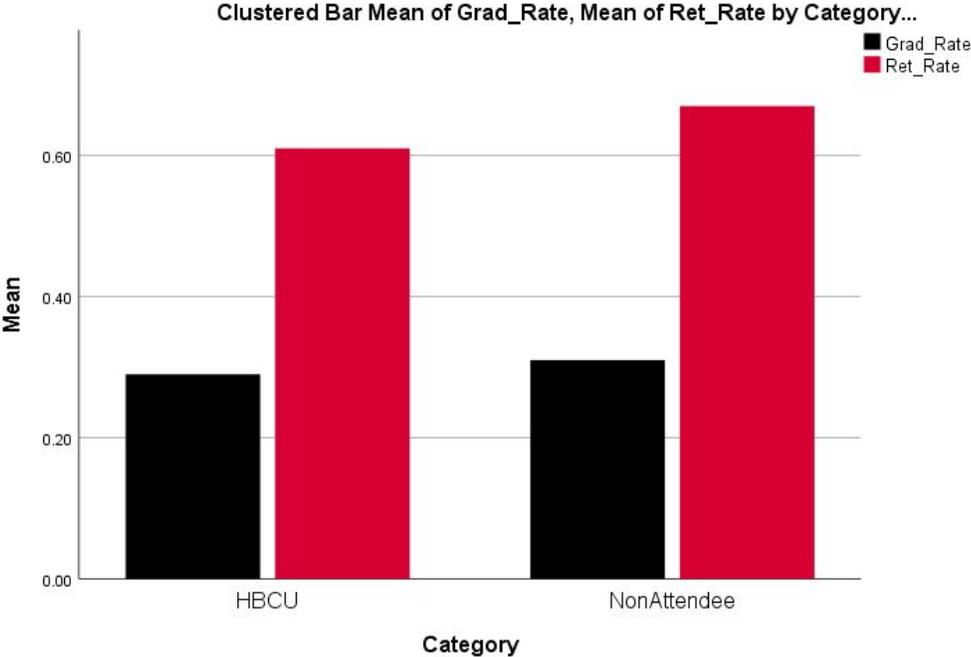
Additionally, it was found that 25 of 93 presidents have been in office for 6 years or longer, and thus only their graduation rate was recorded. Present are also 23 of 93 presidents who are within their first year of service, thus excluding their respective retention rates. With this information as support, the following graphic displays statistics concerning the overall graduation rate and retention rate.

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**Statistics**

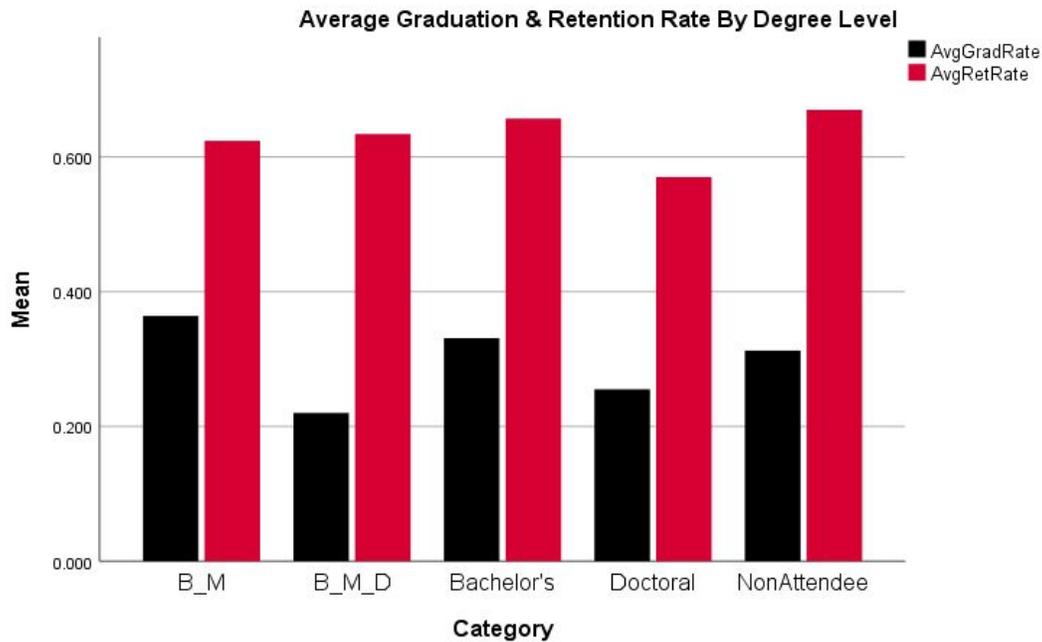
		GradRate	RetRate
N	Valid	25	71
	Missing	68	22
Mean		.3108	.6194
Median		.2900	.6300
Mode		.24	.50
Std. Deviation		.16416	.12631
Variance		.027	.016
Range		.74	.57
Minimum		.02	.34
Maximum		.76	.91

Now that these parameters are established, the following visual represents the average graduation rate and retention rate of HBCU alumni presidents, lumped in comparison to the graduation rate and retention rate of presidents who did not earn a degree from an HBCU:



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The next visual slices the lumped HBCU alumni presidents into the degree-earned categories, excluding Master's and Master's-Doctoral, for these categories do not correspond with sufficient data. These measures become comparable to the non-attende category.



## Interpretation and recommendation

### Limitations of the study

Within the first list of findings presented in the results section, one may notice the large numerical discrepancy between several of the measures. For example, it was found that approximately two thirds of HBCU presidents attended an HBCU in some capacity. Perhaps there are considerations made within college president searches that were not identified in this study. Also, the metrics of the sliced categories, in particular, the Master's only and the Master's-Doctoral statistics had so few data points that they did not impact the data as a whole. Also, the data was not compared to the national averages, therefore inferences about the current

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graduation rate and retention rate of HBCUs on a broader scale could not be made. There was an initial thought to exclude unaccredited HBCUs, but this was overturned due to a technicality present in the work's original definition of what comprises an HBCU, which includes institutions that are unaccredited as long as strides are being made in an effort to recapture accreditation from the appropriate authority.

Present are also instances where the presidents preceding the current first-year presidents served for more than six years, which would validate the use of the institution's most recently reported graduation rate. However, these were still discounted in favor of keeping the information current, especially when recording the degrees-earned information.

### **Analysis and Application of Results**

It was hypothesized that the presence of an HBCU alumni president would render a higher graduation rate and retention rate than a president that did not attend an HBCU. Data shows that this prediction was not wholly correct. The bar graph that weighs the HBCU alumni president's average graduation rate and retention rate against the same variables of non attendees shows favor to the non attendees. Specifically, the HBCU alumni president's average graduation rate (29%) was lower than the non attendee's graduation rate (31%). The retention rate of the non attendee (67%) also edged the HBCU alumni president's (61%). Although a difference of 6% seems minute, the finding may be financially significant, considering the amount of students, institutions and the length of institutional longevity. Assuming this difference is constant, the generation of retentional revenue over a relatively short period of time would be several thousands of dollars.

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Furthermore, the hypothesis is not completely rejected, for it still holds within certain circumstances. In the sliced data, one may observe that the graduation rate of HBCU alumni presidents that earned either a bachelor's or a bachelor's and master's degree from their institution render a higher average graduation rate than non attendees (33.1% and 36.4% respectively). However, we still may conclude that the retention rate of non attendees is still greater in either case.

In retrospect, an unquantifiable myriad mount of personal and economic factors pull upon the variable strings of graduation and retention. However, this information may be useful when boards are in the process of selecting an individual to lead an institution of higher learning, assuming they operate in the best interest of the student population.

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