The Importance of Retaining African Americans in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT
Programs in higher education designed to improve student retention lead to positive learning outcomes for all students when diversity is prevalent. The researcher conducts this study as an exploratory study in the form of a literature review solely focusing on retention, diversity, underrepresented students, and higher education. This type of research is important because it could assist institutions of higher education with the conceptual framework for how to maintain diverse populations to ensure the benefits of retention are successfully met. The researcher is broadly pursuing the question of how and why diversity impacts retention on college campuses that are either homogenous white or African American.

In September 2007, this researcher began her college career at California State University, Sacramento as an undergraduate student with hopes of succeeding in higher education. Given that this researcher was coming from a predominantly African American high school within a low-income neighborhood in Los Angeles, she was hoping to not feel alone, particularly in terms of race and ethnicity. When this researcher arrived on campus, she met students from all races, ethnicities, and nationalities, which led this researcher to agree with the popular idea that Sacramento State was diverse. The opportunity to engage in dialogue with students from different geographic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds became a unique learning opportunity. This opportunity was one she never had before (or certainly had never appreciated). However, the combination of in-class and campus experiences over time led her to challenge the claim of Sacramento State being truly a diverse campus, as African American students were noticeably underrepresented. For example, this researcher would start a class as one of four or five African American students and as the weeks rolled by that number would dwindle to her being one of three, one of two, and sometimes being the only African American student left in class. Her African American peers on campus were experiencing difficulties with retention and graduation. This researcher started to worry about the success of her community on
her campus and campuses like the one she attended. Are African American college students an endangered species? This researcher also wanted to know what factors informed the outcomes and experiences of African American college students. Finally, this researcher wanted to know what factors could and do make a difference for those African Americans who remain on campus.

PURPOSE STATEMENT
The following review of literature aims to integrate and summarize the works of those who study retention programs targeting the collegiate African American student, to synthesize any different results that appear in the body of knowledge, and to indicate directions for future studies on the topic.

LITERATURE REVIEW
In higher education, the term “diversity” is used to account for the differences between students in terms of age, gender, physical ability, religious or spiritual beliefs, geographic background, socio-economic background, and ethnic identity, to name only a few factors (Nieto 2000). While the act of defining diversity on its own is not controversial, the implications of what diversity means in relation to enrollment and graduation rates, specifically as it relates to the issues race and ethnic representation, is controversial (Takagi 1998). The disproportionate representations across racial/ethnic groups in higher education question the practices and policies around access and success. In other words, if students come into the university setting with differences, they may not be able to expect to receive an equal education when a one-size-fits-all model of education lacks the capacity to work with those differences (Ramsden 1991).

For many years in education, controversy has surrounded diversity. For example, diversity in higher education was at the root of Proposition 209 in the state of California. According to Takagi (1998, xii), “In November 1996 California voters passed by a wide margin Proposition 209—a voter initiative that banned the use of quotas in the state.” Proposition 209 eliminated race and gender as a basis for admission into the University of California (UC) system; after Proposition 209, the UC system moved their admission process into one solely based on merit (Takagi 1998). Unfortunately for many underrepresented students, merit-based admission policies mainly benefit only those with access and resources. Ballantine, Spade, and Karabel (2008) discuss how some of the nation’s top educational institutions (Harvard, Yale, and Princeton) reacted to the controversy by changing their definition of merit to create a more just admission process. The changed definition of
merit included the types of qualities that students from diverse backgrounds had to offer. During the course of changing their definition of merit, other decisions were brought into place for those students not favored by the term merit. Students were being admitted into prestigious institutions because of quota-based admissions policies to which committees had to adhere; these institutions, wanting to avoid appearing unjust, made their admissions policies and their definition of merit more holistic in nature (Ballantine et al. 2008). Regardless of the move away from quotas, the public sentiment still resides in the idea that students of color were taking the spot of students who were more traditionally qualified (Ballantine et al. 2008).

Policies implemented in higher education often incite a public narrative that victimizes diverse students, but fail to actually critique the lack of responsiveness of institutions towards ensuring the quality of education being accessed by all students. In the present research, diversity in racial and ethnic identity is of primary importance. This article reviews the existing literature to outline the experience of African American higher education in terms of retention practices and policy. This discussion will integrate and focus on retention programs targeting the collegiate African American student. This review serves as the foundation to transition from a broad discussion of retention to examine a more localized response taking place at Sacramento State. Combining the lessons learned from the literature and campus efforts, directions for future studies will be outlined as a set of policy implications.

The Representation of African Americans in Higher Education
According to the National Center for Education Statistics (http://nces.ed.gov/) in 2009, the student body in higher education was composed of: White 62.3%, Blacks 14.3%, Hispanic 1.5%, Asian/Pacific Islander 6.5%, American Indian/Alaska Native 1.0%, and Nonresident alien 3.4%. In some ways, what is happening nationally mirrors what is happening at Sacramento State. For 2011, campus admissions (http://www.csus.edu/about/2011), recorded that 7% African American, 1% American Indian, 20% Asian/Pacific, 16% Latino/Latina, 43% Caucasian, 2% International, and 11% other formed the student body. Although these numbers affirm diversity at a stronger percentage than the national average, some educational equity scholars might argue that diversity on a campus alone is not enough to represent equity in terms of access (Altbach and Lomotey 1991).

From a retention perspective, the pathway to college is not qualitatively the same (Kerr 1994) when the lack of or access to resources and opportunities over the willingness to earn seems to distinguish underserved students from—what Dill and Henley (1998) refer to as—the traditional students.
When a campus has a low percentage of underserved students and a high percentage of traditional students—or the students who, according to Dill and Henley (1998), go straight to institutions of higher education directly after completing high school—the imbalance of the two will render a qualitatively different experience (Kerr 1994). Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin (2002) would suggest that this type of demographic profile, if unchanged by the time graduation is planned to occur, reveals outcomes that can hardly be viewed as triumphant. Specifically, Gurin et al. (2002) refer to diversity in numbers (like the diversity seen at Sacramento State) without any efforts to meaningfully integrate that diversity in campus life and in the classroom as “structural diversity.” Structural diversity is a step in the right direction, but cannot do much to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of the students on campus, including African American students.

Retention
There are many different views on retention in the United States, perhaps due in some part to the differences in definitions for the term retention. Walleri (1981) defines “retention” as on-time graduation within four to five years. According to Thomas (2009, 9), retention in a higher education setting refers to “the percentage of students in a particular year who neither graduate nor continue studying in an award course at the same institution in the following year.” Seidman and Hagedorn (2005) define retention as the act of staying in school until the degree is completed. Whereas Wild and Ebbers (2002, 503) define retention as a measure and state, “student retention is significant for measuring institutional effectiveness in the prevailing environment of accountability and budgetary constraints.” Although scholars and other individuals define retention differently, there are many common ideas, most of which center on the basic idea of degree attainment from an institution. Similar views about retention focus around degree attainment, while the differences around retention focus on the different grade levels for students. The target population for retention is students from underrepresented backgrounds because of the long-held belief about succeeding in education.

If students are not retained through high school (if they do not graduate or receive their General Education Development, or GED), then they have little chance of even making it to college (Greene and Forster 200). Greene and Forster (200, ) also suggest, “Only 70% of all students in public high schools graduate, and only 2% of all students leave high school qualified to attend four-year colleges.” This statistic raises a red flag in that it suggests that all students who graduate from high school are not college ready. Haycock (2003, 2) offers a further explanation specific to African Americans: “Approximately 76 percent of white graduates and 86 percent
of Asian graduates go directly to college, compared to 71 percent of African Americans and 71 percent of Latino graduates.” The African American student who does not go directly to college often has increased difficulty returning to the idea of going to college after a few or several years of non-academic activity (Haycock 2003). Obviously, a student who never makes it to college cannot be retained; a student who struggles just to make it to college faces additional struggles with retention once she or he arrives on campus, and for a long time after that point.

Thus, retention issues at the K-12 level could contribute to retention issues in higher education. Retention (as it is defined in the present study) in K-12 education is just as significant a problem as retention in collegiate education; however, the present study focuses only on the unique challenges of retaining college students, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds. Without retention being prevalent in K-12, the issue will only worsen without students being aware of such issues affecting their education efforts.

**Higher Education and the African American Experience**

A common thread within the study of retention, especially college retention, is the idea that retention as a concept is of great and growing importance. According to Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth (2004, vi), “In the face of changing workforce and educational requirements, the need to retain more students will only intensify.” The employment landscape is changing and without an educated population ready to work in that new landscape, businesses and other social institutions are in danger of failing. The only way to create that educated population is to make sure they are retained. Retention is becoming more important. Lotkowski et al. (2004, 2) also argue, “Low retention rates waste human talent and resources, jeopardize our nation’s economic future, and threaten the economic viability of our postsecondary institutions and our country’s democratic traditions.” So, poor retention rates not only threaten the health and well being of the workforce, but they also threaten our ability to continue to educate even wealthy and privileged individuals. Without high retention rates, institutions lose their connection to all of their students, which impacts both the students and the institution.

The growing importance of retention has not resulted in improved retention rates, and few scholars would argue that retention rates for all students in institutions of higher education are encouraging (Braxton, Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora 2000). In the 1990s, fewer than half (47%) of all students entering four-year institutions completed the bachelor’s degree within nine years; public universities fared even worse, with only 41% of students completing the baccalaureate degree within nine years (Astin, Tsui, and Avalos 1996; Lee
1999). Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner (2009) confirm earlier findings by Horn and Berger (2004) suggesting that student retention rates in college are lower now than they were in the 1970s. In addition, Bound et al. (2009, 2) state, “the likelihood of obtaining a bachelor’s degree, conditional on some college participation, dropped from over 45 percent in 1970 to under 40 percent in 1990” and rates are continuing to slide. Horn and Berger (2004, vii) argue, “The increase in enrollment after five years was accompanied by an overall decline in degree completion from 50 to 47 percent.” Thus, institutions of higher education (especially public schools) are struggling with retaining their students.

Retention rates for students of underrepresented backgrounds are even more frightening (Artiles and Trent 1994). Nora and Cabrera (1996) suggest that during the mid-1980s, African Americans and Hispanics had the highest college dropout rates. Smedley, Myers, and Harrell (1993, 1) agree by saying “African-American and other non-Asian minority students attending predominantly White colleges are less likely to graduate within five years.” Researchers who have studied the retention rates of underrepresented students understand the continuous cycle of alarming numbers related to this issue.

The retention situation for African Americans specifically is equally distressing (Freeman 1997). In the early and mid-1990s, only 19% of African American students completed the four-year degree within four years, and less than one-third completed the degree within six years (Astin 1996). Lee (1999) found that only 34% of African American students completed a four-year degree within nine years. These numbers show African Americans as disproportionate to their majority counterparts in higher education. Kane (1994, 881) found that “after 1980, enrollment rates by blacks began to decline, whereas enrollment rates by whites continued to increase. This type of performance has been an ongoing issue for African Americans in higher education with numbers constantly decreasing in terms of enrollment and completion.”

The retention situation with African American students in California is as bad as (if not worse than) any other state in the nation. According to Allen (2005, 22), “From 1989 to 1998, California’s African American population remained consistent, yet the University of California system experienced an 18.1% decrease in Black student enrollment.” From a research perspective, this issue (if unchanged) will continue to affect African Americans overall—specifically African Americans in California. In institutions of higher education, especially state-operated schools in California, African American students are endangered.
While African Americans are making it to college (albeit in lower numbers than their majority counterparts), they are not successfully completing the amount of years or the various requirements needed to earn a degree. There are many factors that contribute to the overall reason why African Americans as a population seem to have difficulty graduating from college. Steele (1999, 2) poses the following question: “Does the problem stem from something about black students themselves, such as poor motivation, a distracting peer culture, lack of family values, or—the unsettling suggestion of The Bell Curve—genes?” Steele’s definition of the Bell Curve is that some individuals are more genetically gifted than others, and that because of their genetic background, success follows a bell curve: some very talented students, some very untalented students, and many students of average talent in the middle (1999). Steele (1999) suggests that, in attempting to discover why African Americans continue to struggle in academia, some researchers have put the blame on genetics. Other scholars (Carnevale and Rose 2003; St. John, Paulsen and Carter 2005) focus more on the financial aspect of completing college, or the lack of proper preparation in the African American community (Sellers, Chavous, and Cooke 1998). Still other scholars (King 1993; Benton 2001) focus directly on the institutions in question. The arguments for each type of challenge are compelling.

Regarding the financial difficulties faced by many African American college students, Carnevale and Rose (2003, 109) argue that, “Within colleges, students from lower socioeconomic status families are more likely to have trouble graduating.” These researchers draw a connection between race and socioeconomic status, and argue that students from a lower socioeconomic background (many of them being African American) struggle during college and have a lesser chance of graduating from college due to the non-academic challenges they face as a result of the combination of race and socioeconomic status (Carnevale and Rose 2003). St. John, Paulsen and Carter (2005, 556) add that “A larger percentage of African Americans were...concerned about finances when they made their college choices.” While their majority peers or their peers from higher socioeconomic brackets had the luxury of making academic choices based on purely academic concerns, the African American student (particularly the African American student from a lower socioeconomic background) had to make decisions and face financial challenges in addition to racial/ethnic challenges, which they dealt with in addition to the general academic challenges faced by all students (St. John et al. 2005). Thus, if these African American students (especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds) are to be retained, they must learn how to overcome the socioeconomic-based issues and concerns.
of African American students (the issues and concerns not faced by white students of a similar socioeconomic status).

Sellers et al. (1998) suggest that inferior academic preparation at the K-12 level can explain the inferior academic performance of African American students. During the process of transitioning from high school to college, many African American students fail to learn the skills needed to succeed in college, which causes them to struggle once they become enrolled in an institution of higher education (Sellers et al. 1998). Sellers et al. (1998) suggest that if African American college students are to be retained, then they must find some remediation of the necessary skills for success.

Benton (2001, 22) looks in a different direction for the causes of African American students’ struggles in academia and asserts, “African American students continue to perceive PWIs [Predominantly White Institutions] as hostile, unsupportive, and unwelcoming.” When an African American student arrives at a campus where she or he is a minority, s/he can feel as if the entire institution is intimidating and unfriendly, while her/his majority peers have the luxury of feeling welcomed and supported (Benton 2001). These feelings can lead to the student experiencing negativity or apathy toward education in general, not just the offending individuals or the institution allowing the lack of support to continue (Benton 2001). Clearly, retention relies on a welcoming reception, the support, and the understanding that many African American students do not receive from their home institutions.

In some cases, faculty of color (specifically African American faculty) can provide support for African American students in need of it, but many African American students cannot use African American faculty in this way because those faculty members simply are not present on their campuses (King 1993). Regarding the limited presence of African American faculty, King (1993) suggests that there is a discipline-wide problem in creating and maintaining the African American professoriate. King (1993), Philip and Lomotey (1991) notes that African American teachers and professors are important because of the support services they offer to African American students. If African American faculty members are not available, then the retention of African American students becomes that much more difficult.

Eccles and Barber (1999) argue that student involvement in college campus activities leads to positive interactions between the institution and its students, and improves the students’ educational outcomes. When students take part in extracurricular activities, they begin to embrace everything their institution has to offer, and they become a part of a community to which they feel connected (Eccles and Barber 1999). Student participation in a
retention program, then, can be dually beneficial, especially if the retention program addresses all of the needs previously outlined.

Perhaps due in part to the increasing importance of retention, programs designed to improve it (especially retention of underserved populations) are becoming very popular on college campuses (Smedley, Myers, and Harrell 2003). Popularity does not equal competence, however, which is why scholarly attention to the workings of these programs is essential. Retention is the way to ensure the benefits of diversity, and retention programs are the way to ensure successful retention of students at a given institution.

**The Significance of Diversity in Higher Education**

Any discussion about efforts to integrate and maintain diversity must begin with a clarification about the importance and necessity of diversity, especially in educational settings. Many researchers who have studied the benefits of marinating a diverse population in higher education have discussed the importance of diversity. The impact of diversity on college campuses is important because it enhances educational outcomes for all students (Gurin et al. 2002). Gurin et al. (2002) go on to suggest, “Higher education is especially influential when its social milieu is different from student’s home and community background and when its diverse and complex enough to encourage intellectual experimentation and recognition of varied future possibilities”. When students embark on the higher education experience, a diverse environment is beneficial for them to learn to use critical thinking and engage in discussion with a diverse population of students. Frankenberg, Lee, and Orfield (2003) suggest that the underrepresentation of African Americans and other minority groups in education compromises the quality of learning for all students in several ways. These ways may include: anecdotal stories directly from URM students, focusing on reasons why a degree in higher education was considered or the struggles in which some of the students had to face. Frankenberg et al. (2003) also imply that schools are becoming increasingly non-white, or places where minority students are starting to receive a more equal opportunity to get an education.

Despite the fact that minority students are able to attain an education, the lingering idea of not succeeding is still placed upon them as they enter the doors of higher education institutions. These stigmas are placed on them partially due to the long-held belief of failure. Frankenberg et al. (2003) suggest that the fastest growing minority groups are Latino and Asians; these two ethnic groups have experienced some struggles in the educational system, but the collectivist approach common in their cultures (the idea that the group or the collective comes before the individual) has led to important strides being made in education. The educational benefits of collectivism,
introduced at least in part by communities of color, reach all throughout the educational institution (Frankenberg et al. 2003). Without diversity, these benefits disappear. Chang (1999) found that, from a psychological perspective, racial/ethnic diversity has a significant positive impact on the type and quality of education received by all students at a given institution. Brown (2004) suggests that institutions of higher education are more than places where diversity can be explored: colleges and universities have the responsibility and duty to maintain their diversity due to their assigned task of preparing the world’s citizens. Because colleges and universities hold the leadership position in training future generations, they must take seriously the charge of protecting diversity (Brown 2004). Educating African American students in higher education is important because of the past unpleasant experience African American students in education have had to endure. Giving African American students the opportunity to explore the notion of what education fully means not only breaks the long held belief of not educating them, but also digs deeper into the issue by giving all an equal opportunity to learn and use critical thinking amongst each other. Without offering African Americans the quality education other students receive, it is then that race matter and students are being judged on the color of their skin, but not the ability to learn, engage, and use critical thinking.

If a diverse student body enriches learning and ensures a civil future, then educators, administrators, and other interested parties must discover how to retain and ensure the graduation of those students who create diversity on campus in order to keep the benefits of that diversity (Gurin et al. 2002). In other words, to keep the benefits of diversity, educational institutions need successful retention programs.

Purpose and Mission: Retention Programs Addressing Diversity and Higher Education

Perhaps the importance of retention has spread, or maybe education in general is becoming an attractive business opportunity, but retention programming has caught the attention of consulting firms that claim to be able to increase institutional retention rates (Tinto 2006). Unfortunately, businesses paying more attention to retention has not resulted in better retention programming or improved outcomes, and “most institutions have not yet been able to translate what we know about student retention into forms of action that have led to substantial gains in student persistence and graduation” (Tinto 2006, 5). The inability of business to answer the retention problem reinforces the idea that continued scholarly attention is necessary.

Lotkowski et al. (2004) approached their study of various retention programs from an academic perspective instead of a business perspective, and created a
list of characteristics of successful retention programs. They found that there are two main categories of factors that can lead to a retention program’s success or failure (and, by association, a student’s success or failure): academic factors and non-academic factors (Lotkowski et al. 2004). Retention programs in general are more successful when they can access correct and “comprehensive information about students, their needs, and the factors that affect retention” (Lotkowski et al. 2004, 4). Obviously, retention programs are more successful when they include programmatic features that target the academic side of a student’s life, such as time management strategies or study skills (Lotkowski et al. 2004). The work of Lotkowski et al. (2004) echoes the arguments made by Sellers et al. (1998), who suggested that a lack of basic skills prevents underrepresented students from excellence. Lotkowski et al. (2004) seem to confirm that retention programs that include efforts to get the targeted students up to speed (academically) are the ones that are successful. Non-academic factors, typically assessed once the student is enrolled, can include: level of commitment to obtaining a degree, level of academic self-confidence, and level of academic and social integration into the institution (Lotkowski et al. 2004). Therefore, in order to be successful, a retention program must target the whole student and all parts of her/his life.

Thomas (2002) agrees with Carnevale and Rose (2003), and St. John et al. (2005) in recognizing the importance of a financial component in retention programs. Many students cope with poverty, high levels of debt, and the significant burdens that come along with having a job while being a student (Thomas 2002). Retention programs with financial benefits (such as a stipend or tuition waiver) can combat this challenge faced by many college students, especially students from underserved populations.

Finally, research on retention suggests that successful retention programs must attempt to address the other non-academic factors that could impact a student’s experience in college, including the cultural environment of the campus (Benton 2001), participation of supportive faculty (King 1993), opportunities for student involvement in extracurricular activities (Eccles and Barber 1999), or, especially for African American students, the cultural factors of motivation, peer culture, and family values (Steele 1999). In attempting to meet the standards prescribed by Lotkowski et al. (2004), retention programs face a battle that seems impossible to win, but that has not stopped many retention programs from giving that battle their best shot. Some retention programs use the “divide and conquer” strategy in this battle: instead of attempting to remedy the retention problem as a whole, they target only a small part of the population in danger, in hopes that other programs will target other parts of the population. Programs that target specific
segments of the general underserved or underrepresented population (such as a specific ethnic minority, students from low-income backgrounds, or students who are the first in her/his family to attend college) are often able to target that segment’s specific challenges (Bragg and Barnett 2006).

The federal government funds some of the programs that target students who are underserved or underrepresented in higher education. These programs are known as TRIO programs. TRIO programs date back to 1964, when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed a bill in an attempt to assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds; the bill passed and the first three programs (hence the name “trio”) were born (McElroy and Armesto 2003). Today, there are a total of eight TRIO programs, including the following: Educational Opportunity Centers, which provides information and advising on college admissions; the Ronald E. McNair Baccalaureate Achievement program, which aims to prepare qualified students for doctoral study; Student Support Services, a program that provides resources to institutions to help them advise and tutor disadvantaged students; Talent Search, which provides support and counseling for underrepresented students interested in higher education; the Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs Staff, which assists institutions interested in becoming TRIO campuses; Upward Bound, which provides opportunities for pre-college students; Upward Bound Math-Science, which applies Upward Bound principles to those interested in math and science; and Veterans Upward Bound, which applies Upward Bound principles to qualified Veterans (http://www2.ed.gov/ accessed August 6, 2011).

Perhaps, due to their federally funded status, these programs are high profile and have drawn both popular and academic attention. For example, McElroy and Armesto (2003) studied TRIO programs and found that one of their most significant contributions was that they were responsible for breaking the idea of failure as an option. Becker (1999) argues that TRIO programs help students by including (instead of excluding) all parties who could be helpful in getting the student to succeed (such as family members or members of the student’s community). Blake (1998, 329) adds that, “In one generation, these programs have implemented numerous successful strategies that have been shown to work effectively with first-generation-college, minority, and low income students.” In their study of the Educational Opportunity Program (or EOP), Loo and Rolison (1986) found that minority students benefit from special retention programs. They reported reactions from the students served that included ideas such as “EOP helps a lot” and “EOP offers a lot of support” (Loo and Rolison 1986, 68). More recent studies about EOP have revealed similar results (Gautreau and Novemsky 1997; Hamermesh and Bean 1998). The TRIO programs have not been around very long, but they
have already had a huge impact (Ward 2006). In these ways, TRIO programs seem to meet the challenges for retention programs set by Lotkowski et al. (2004).

TRIO programs might be the best-known retention programs in the world of education, but they are certainly not the only programs in existence. There are other federally funded retention programs that target specific parts of the underserved population. One of these programs is the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP). CAMP is a program in higher education geared towards students who are or who have parents who are seasonal farm workers (http://www2.ed.gov/ accessed August 6, 2011). Researchers have studied CAMP with particular focus on its effectiveness (Twigg 2004; Reyes 2007). Twigg (2004) discovered that CAMP participants enrolled in an algebra class increased from 70% to 80% while CAMP students also passed the entire algebra class. These numbers demonstrate improved participation and success in math among CAMP students (Twigg 2004). Reyes (2007) argues that programs like CAMP work because they empower students who previously had little or no academic power. Thus, the research of Twigg (2004) and Reyes (2007) supports the research of Lotkowski et al. (2004): retention programs that target the academic side of the student, as well as the parts of the student that are more difficult to measure, are most likely to be successful.

It is important to note that not all retention programs are federally funded, especially when the field is narrowed to include only programs that target a specific segment of the underserved population. Kim and Conrad (2006) argue that some of the retention programs that are specifically designed for African Americans, for example, are found only at Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs). One such program is the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program. According to Battin (1997, 15), the Mellon Mays program provides “students interested in college teaching careers with a mentor support system designed to encourage and facilitate their work toward graduate study in a PhD program.” Having retention programs on HBCU campuses is critical because “historically Black colleges and universities … have served an important role in promoting access to higher education for African Americans when other venues were closed to them” (Palmer and Gasman 2008, 52). In the war of retaining African American college students, the HBCUs must be on the front line, which means that retention programs on these campuses must follow every suggestion for improvement and growth.

However, the reality is that most African American students do not attend HBCUs; most African American students will need the support of retention
programs at PWIs (or Predominantly White Institutions) (Furr and Elling 2002). For example, the Meyerhoff Scholars program at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County targets African American students interested in doctoral study in math and science (Maton, Hrabowski, and Schmitt 2000). While not framed specifically as a retention program, the Meyerhoff Scholars Program works as such because its students “achieved higher grade point averages, graduated in science and engineering at higher rates, and gained admittance to graduate schools at higher rates than multiple current and historical comparison samples” (Maton et al. 2000, 629). The Meyerhoff Scholars Program has thrived in part because its goals and guidelines fit with what Lotkowski et al. (2004) established as the defining characteristics of successful retention programs (Summers and Hrabowski 2006).

It is possible that the success of programs like the Meyerhoff Scholars Program is due in some part to a further fragmentation of an already fragmented population. The Meyerhoff Scholars Program targets a small segment of the larger underserved population (African Americans) and then makes that segment even smaller to focus only on African Americans interested in math and science (Maton et al. 2000). Perhaps the increased customization allows the program to target specific issues without the distraction of treating the symptoms of a disease the students do not have, or spending time covering material that is not explicitly relevant to the group being serviced. The same logic surely applies to programs that aim to include gender as a relevant variable. For example, Allen (1992) found that collegiate enrollment rates for African American females are increasing while rates for males are decreasing. Garibaldi (1992) also found that African American males are struggling in college, at different rates and for different reasons than their female counterparts. Thus, retention programs that include a focus on African Americans and gender could improve upon the recommendations made by Lotkowski et al. (2004) and others by increasing the amount of specialization. In other words, in addition to targeting the whole student as Lotkowski et al. (2004) prescribed, retention programs must also specialize and narrow the amount of ground they aim to cover.

CONCLUSION

According to researchers like Gurin et al. (2002), diversity is beneficial in higher education because of the impact it has on students, faculty, and institutions. Without the benefit of diversity in education, institutions would struggle with student success (their most important reason for existence), which is why diversity should be maintained through retention. Most individuals understand the benefits that college students get from diversity,
but Gurin et al. (2002) considered the additional benefits to society. Those disadvantaged students retained in the nation’s colleges and universities can influence those around them, and all individuals and institutions are improved. Many of those retained students go on to become leaders and global citizens (Lotkowski et al. 2004). The importance of retention programs cannot be underestimated.

When retention programs are a part of an institution’s plan, retention rates of underserved or underrepresented students improve. This results in higher completion rates and better citizens, ready to become the next generation’s workforce. Without quality retention programs, all students (not just African American students) are indeed an endangered species.

This researcher hopes to pursue this area of study by further investigating the differences in currently existing retention programs. This researcher would like to study retention programs for African Americans on campuses that are homogenous and predominantly white, campuses that are homogenous and predominantly African American, and campuses that are heterogeneous, or diverse. This researcher aims to discover which of the aspects of successful retention programs appear in the various programs. This researcher also aims to discover whether the kind of campus makes a difference in the success of the program. This type of data collection and analysis could also reveal the major implications the programs are facing in the 21st century. The present study has demonstrated the importance of retention and retention programs; future studies could demonstrate what retention programs need to do to remain viable, including:

- Offering programs designed specifically for African American students who fit the category of underrepresented or underserved.
- Organizing unity days at various diverse institutions where faculty, staff, and students learn to appreciate each other.
- Hosting a series of events, which will target the student body population. Events will focus on issues surrounding diversity and the importance of it.
REFERENCES


