

Book Review



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What Works at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs): Nine Strategies of Increasing Retention and Graduation Rates (Mfume, 2015)

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What Works at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs): Nine Strategies of Increasing Retention and Graduation Rates by Dr. Tiffany Mfume introduces the historical significance of HBCUs, the challenges faced by the institutions in retaining students, maintaining (or increasing) graduation rates, and spotlights Morgan State University’s best strategies for improved outcomes. The book is a culmination of nearly 15 years of hands-on research, testing theories, and various strategies to improve student retention outcomes.

The text is organized into 10 chapters beginning with understanding the historical significance of HBCUs and their role in educating minority and underserved students to Chapter 6: “Strategic Initiatives: Programs Designed Specifically to ‘Move the Data’,” through Chapter 10’s “The HBCU Success Recipe.” The text also provides in its appendices a list of accredited HBCUs and notable Morgan State University alumni. A major focus of the text is identifying resources that helped to improve retention over time. Among those are digital learning technologies like Blackboard and Campus Labs. Mfume credits attending higher education conferences with allowing her to network and learn about valuable resources that could be used to positively influence retention outcomes.

Chapter 3, “Data Mining: Who Are Your Students, and What Do They Need?” is a bright aspect of the book in that it examines the makeup of the student body. Mfume (2016) notes that Morgan State University educates 70% first-generation college students. This chapter reveals that the higher the Pell Grant rate, the lower the retention rate, and vice versa. She points out the devastating impact of the 2008–2012 economic crisis as

having substantial impact on the retention rate. She further argues in this chapter for the need of colleges and universities to closely evaluate student data including SAT/ACT scores, Accuplacer profiles, household incomes, and high school grade point average to not only understand our students, but to also build needed supports. One of the more important points made in the text is that HBCUs and other colleges and universities should be more transparent in maintaining their data. Analyzing data can help to drive discussion on the academic and social needs of students and the structures in place to support them. She sums up this chapter with two counter arguments to the validity and performance of HBCUs citing that there are correlations between the economic standing of students and their success story. She further encourages a rewrite of the retention and cultural importance of the university.

Resources materialize in various forms for colleges and universities, and for HBCUs, those resources can be a determining factor in whether they are able to provide the needed resources for students to be successful. Mfume (2016) argues that in the retention area, which encompasses student success and college completion, funding, time, and energy are often scarce. Outside funding acts as the medium between desire to create needed structures to provide access. Chapter 7 “Leveraging External Resources: Getting the Most out of Grant” provides an overview of the grants that HBCUs receive to positively impact retention. These grants are both private grants from HBCUs and education supporters as well as Federal monies to help implement initiatives. One of the better known private grants is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Grant, which helps to fully support retention efforts by donating more than \$100,000 to colleges and universities to “increase low-income students’ college completion rates” (p. 85). The United Negro College Fund and others also assist in aiding HBCUs through scholarship finding for select students.

What shines through the text is the overwhelming sense of pride that Mfume has in improving the retention of Morgan State University students. She is a legacy graduate of Morgan State University, the same university where her mother, Lois McMillian, taught English for over 20 years. Her grandmother, Enolia McMillion, was the first female president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the first female chair of Morgan State University’s Board of Regents.

Mfume’s treatment of the history, challenges, and successes of retaining HBCU students not only informs the cultural and historical significance of these institutions, but also the deep understanding of the conditions and needs of the students whom they educate. Historically,

HBCUs have been mislabeled as inferior to traditionally White colleges, when in actuality their data is different because White students tend to come from backgrounds where they have access to resources, which helps to create a solid academic foundation that informs their academic performance in higher education. Traditionally, HBCUs students' access to resources pales in comparison to their counterparts at traditionally White colleges. As a result, their lack of access to needed resources creates an unsteady foundation for higher education performance. The role, then, of the HBCU, which McMillion's text heavily emphasizes, is closing the gap with built-in campus supports and resources.

Comparatively, Mfume's strategic text stands out among the studies and dissertations reviewed thus far on student retention and success at HBCUs. This text acts as a starting point for deepening understanding and developing strategies for supporting students through matriculation. The text is a great resource for current higher education administrators as well as secondary education administrators, or simply for individuals interested in understanding the unique challenges that students and HBCUs face in working toward maintaining matriculation.