African Americans Enrolling and Receiving Degrees in Graduate/Professional Degree Programs

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Abstract

After decades of exclusion from graduate and professional education opportunities, the number of African Americans seeking advanced degrees has been gradually increasing since the mid-twentieth century. However, the participation of African Americans across the professions and the academy remains low. The authors explore the "pipeline" leading to graduate and professional education and present evidence that there is a critical bottleneck between initial enrollment in post-baccalaureate programs and successful degree completion.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the dearth of African Americans in graduate and professional schools was not seen as a national concern. The remnants of slavery were still present. For thousands of African Americans so recently released from the humiliating and degrading conditions of slavery, the reality of a graduate or professional school education was seen as a myth. Although small scatterings of African Americans completed education beyond the undergraduate years – distinguishing themselves especially in technological inventions – graduate and professional school education was generally viewed as a privilege for middle and upper class White Americans.

A rapidly expanding American economy, accelerated by two world wars, gradually triggered the need for more African Americans with graduate and professional school degrees. Before the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that outlawed separate educational opportunities, the concept of "Separate but Equal" conditions had created an unrecognized void in the number of African Americans with training beyond the baccalaureate degree. In making "Separate but Equal" null and void, it appears that the "54 Decision" served as the catalytic agent to accelerate the movement of African Americans to all educational opportunities, including acquisition of advanced degrees.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, the rise in the number of African Americans seeking degrees in higher education has indeed increased. However, the rise still appears insufficient to meet the needs of a growing and developing American society. A case in point is the continuing diversity issue in the professoriate. One-fourth of college students are people of color. However, only one out of every thirty faculty

members at predominately White institutions is a person of color (Abraham and Jacobs 1999). An improved ratio between students of color and faculty of color works to enhance the climate of support in a university department and, in turn, promote degree completion requirements. But as graduate degrees are required for faculty status irrespective of color, an increase in the number of faculty of color can come only with an increase in graduate and professional degrees by this group. Thus, the focus must be on the pipeline from undergraduate enrollment through the awarding of graduate and professional degrees. Is there a "bottleneck" somewhere? The answer may come from an analysis of percentage gaps in enrollment and degrees awarded.

Enrollment of African Americans in Graduate and Professional Schools

The path toward graduation from graduate and professional degree programs begins with enrollment in undergraduate programs. In the fall of 1992, there were 1,275,864 African American students enrolled in institutions of higher education in the United States. By 2003, this number had increased to 1,743,018. Table 1A compares the percentages of African American undergraduate, graduate and first-professional enrollments for 1992, 2002, and 2003.

Table 1A
Percentage of African Americans Enrolled in Institutions of Higher Education: 1992, 2002, and 2003

Year	Percent of TOTAL Undergraduate Enrollment	Percent of TOTAL Graduate Enrollment	Percent of TOTAL First-Professional Enrollment
1992	10.2	5.6	6.5
2002	11.7	8.4	7.5
2003	12.1	8.8	7.4

Source: Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Analysis of NCES data sets of enrollment and degrees 1992, 2002 and 2003.

The year 2003 witnessed enrollment increases for African Americans in all three major levels of higher education – baccalaureate, masters, and doctoral. However, by this year, the indication of an improved pipeline of African American students from undergraduate to graduate levels was not evident. In 1992, African American representation in graduate enrollment (5.6 percent) was about half the representation at the undergraduate level (10.2 percent). This difference decreased to 3.3 percent in 2002.

In terms of first-professional enrollments over the expanded period from 1992 to 2003, there was only a 0.9 percentage point increase from 1992 to 2003, 6.5% to 7.4%.

The role of the predominately Black institutions and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in producing enrollments also declined over the period 1992-2003. Table 1B shows the following: the combined percentages of African Americans in predominantly Black institutions and HBCUs decreased from 26.2 percent of total enrollment in 1992 to 24.6 percent in 2003.

Table 1B
Enrollment Percentages of African Americans in Predominantly Black Institutions: 1992, 2002, and 2003

Year	Percent of TOTAL Undergraduate Enrollment	Percent in Predominantly Black Institutions
1992	10.2	26.2
2002	11.7	24.2
2003	12.1	24.6

Source: Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Analysis of NCES data sets of enrollment and degrees 1992, 2002 and 2003.

African Americans Receiving Graduate and Professional School Degrees

The percentages shown in Table 1A provide the expected picture of natural attrition. Not all undergraduates move on to graduate school, an obvious finding irrespective of group membership. However, a comparison of percentage differences in enrollments and degrees awarded show another aspect of the situation.

Tables 2A and 2B extract the 1992-93 and 2002-03 graduate and professional school enrollment percentages for African Americans (from Table 1A) to compare them with the corresponding percentages of master's, doctoral, and professional degrees awarded to African Americans in these respective years, 1992-93 and 2002-03.

Table 2A

African Americans Enrolled in Graduate Programs and Receiving Master's and Doctoral Degrees as Percents of Total Enrollments and Degrees Received

Year	Percent of TOTAL Graduate Enrollment	Percent of TOTAL Master's Degrees Awarded	Percent of TOTAL Doctoral Degrees Awarded
1992-93	5.6	5.1	3.1
2002-03	8.8	7.8	5.1

Source: Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Analysis of NCES data sets of enrollment and degrees 1992, 2002 and 2003.

Table 2B

African Americans Enrolled in First Professional Degree Programs and Receiving Professional Degrees as Percents of Total First Professional Degree Enrollments and Degrees Received

Year	Percent of TOTAL First Professional Enrollment	Percent of TOTAL Professional Degrees Awarded	Percent of Black Professional Degrees Awarded from Historically Black Colleges/Universities
1992-93	6.5	5.4	16.0
2002-03	7.4	6.7	22.8

Source: Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Analysis of NCES data sets of enrollment and degrees 1992, 2002 and 2003.

Table 2A shows that both the percentages of enrollments and degrees awarded increased over the period under consideration. However, Table 2A also shows that during this same period, the percentages of masters and doctoral degrees awarded each year were lower than the percentages for enrollments. Table 2B indicates similar data–a declining pattern–for the comparison of enrollments in first-year professional degree programs and the corresponding degrees awarded over the period under consideration. However, the noticeable difference in Table 2B is the percentage increase in professional degrees awarded by Historically Black Colleges and Universities during both years, 1992-93 and 2002-03.

Tables 2C and 2D calculate the specific year percentages of African American enrollment and degrees awarded, reflected in Tables 2A and 2B, into percentage differences between the two reporting spans, 1992-93 and 2002-03. Table 2C shows these differences with respect to graduate school programs. When a comparison of percentages is made between the two spans, the data in Table 2C shows a narrowing of the gaps in percentages from first-graduate enrollment through masters degrees awarded to doctoral degrees awarded—3.2, 2.7 and 2.0 percent.

Table 2C
Percentage Differences of African Americans Enrolled in Graduate School Programs and Receiving Graduate Degrees between 1992-2002.

Year	First Graduate Enrollment	Masters Degrees Awarded	Doctoral Degrees Awarded
1992-93 to 2002-03	3.2	2.7	2.0

Source: Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Analysis of NCES data sets of enrollment and degrees 1992, 2002 and 2003.

Table 2D reflects a similar comparison of percentage differences in first-degree professional school enrollments and professional degrees awarded for the same year span, 1992-93 to 2002-03. In this table, the noticeable finding is with respect to professional degrees awarded from Historically Black College and Universities. In 1992-93, sixteen percent of the total professional degrees awarded were from HBCUs; in 2002-23, the percentage increased to 22.8. Table 2D shows the results of these data being calculated into percentage differences between the year spans. For HBCUs in particular, the narrowing of the gap in percentage points between the first and second year spans was 6.8, wider than the similar gap for total first-professional enrollments, 0.09, and total professional degrees awarded, 1.3.

Table 2D
Percentage Differences of African Americans Enrolled in First Professional Degree Programs and Receiving Professional Degrees between 1992-2002.

Year	First Professional Enrollment	Professional Degrees Awarded	Professional Degrees Awarded by PBIs & HBCUs
1992-93 to 2002-03	0.9	1.3	6.8

Source: Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Analysis of NCES data sets of enrollment and degrees 1992, 2002 and 2003.

Discussion

The writers contend that African Americans encounter "bottlenecks" on the path toward graduate and professional degrees. We have compared differences between graduate school enrollments versus graduate degrees awarded. The percentages of both enrollments and degrees awarded between 1992-93 and 2002-03 were also compared and converted to percentage point differences. It is the differences in these percentage points over the two periods under consideration that reveal a pattern of enrollment that does not match the pattern of degrees awarded.

Enrollment

Irrespective of the total percentage enrollment increases of African Americans in undergraduate schools, over the period from 1992 to 2003, there was a decrease in the enrollment percentage gap of African Americans in undergraduate and graduate schools. In 1992, the gap in percentage points between undergraduate and graduate enrollment was 4.6, (10.2 - 5.6); in 2002 it declined to 3.3 (11.7- 8.4); in 2003 the difference remained at 3.3 (12.3 - 8.8). Therefore, in spite of increases in African American undergraduate enrollment, the proportion of African Americans moving from undergraduate to graduate school appears to have, at best, stabilized. A decrease in the population of African Americans attending undergraduate school in the predominantly Black institutions and HBCUs may have contributed to the overall stabilization of these students matriculating at graduate schools to receive advanced degrees.

Degrees Awarded

Focusing on the gaps in percentages for enrollment and degrees awarded between 1992-1993 and 2002-2003, the data reflect opposite trends. For African Americans in graduate programs, the percentage differences between the year groups declined, from first graduate enrollment through masters degrees awarded to doctoral degrees awarded. This means that in this group there was a wider gap in enrollment percentages between 1992-1993 and 2002-2003 than the corresponding percentage gap in degrees awarded over the same period; i.e., more students were entering graduate programs, but fewer were completing requirements for the graduate degree.

However, the data show the converse for African Americans in first-professional (e.g., law, business, and medicine) degree programs. Over the periods under consideration, increasingly more students were receiving professional degrees than those enrolled in first-degree programs. Perhaps those receiving degrees included students who had previously dropped out only to return at later dates. In any case, the 6.8 increased percentage gap between 1992-1993 and 2002-2003 by predominantly Black institutions and HBCUs indicates an accelerating role of these institutions in awarding professional degrees. More research is needed to determine if predominantly Black institutions and HBCUs are more prone than predominately White institutions to attract returning African American professional degree seekers. Results of such

research may prove to be useful by all institutions in improving both enrollment and graduation rates of African Americans pursing a graduate education.

Regardless of the role predominantly Black institutions and HBCUs are apparently playing in awarding professional degrees to African Americans, there is still evidence of a "bottleneck" in the pipeline from enrollments to the award of graduate degrees. The bottleneck appears when contrasting the percentages of graduate school enrollments of African Americans with the corresponding percentages of graduate degrees earned by this group.

Three scenarios that may contribute to the above condition are proposed as follows. First, the academic preparation of many African Americans for rigorous graduate-level study may be inadequate for success in graduate school. Large numbers of African American students live in the communities of "urban" K-12 schools. Many of these schools of late are being declared as "failing schools." By inference, their pre-collegiate preparation programs are negatively affected. Secondly, the climate of graduate school departmental support for African Americans, especially in the predominately White institutions, may be insensitive to what these students really need to be successful in their graduate studies. By way of example, on many occasions, first-year students in the Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) State Doctoral Scholars Program (DSP) have reported feelings of isolation and being overwhelmed with graduate school requirements. For this reason the SREB-DSP launched its annual Institute on Teaching and Mentoring for all of its enrolled doctoral-level students. For ten years, this Institute has been hailed across the nation as a model for all graduate schools to emulate. Thirdly, financial aid for graduate study appears to be on the decline at all levels. The emerging trend of financial aid awards is one that is tending, of late, to focus primarily on merit, and only secondarily on need. Of course, graduate school aid should be offered to those who have shown the promise for making maximum use of the funds. However, as African Americans in general continue to have far less abilities than White Americans to pay for a graduate school education, financial aid awards to African Americans should not dismiss the condition of "financial need."

Thus, there does appear to be a "bottleneck" in the pipeline. It is located between the enrollment of African Americans in graduate schools and the final awarding of their graduate and professional degrees.

Summary and Conclusions

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, graduate degrees for African Americans were not seen as realities. During the past century, a greater number of African Americans, albeit it slight, have achieved graduate and professional degrees. Today, the idea of more graduate and professional degrees for all American citizens is seen as a means of not only maintaining but also accelerating the United States position as a global leader. The more active participation of African Americans in and receipt of graduate and

professional degrees can contribute significantly to this national challenge.Since the awarding of graduate degrees must follow the status of undergraduate and graduate school enrollments, an analysis of the pattern of enrollments is the first priority. By making a comparison of percentages enrolled and awarded degrees over a ten-year period, this review has revealed the following: (1) The undergraduate enrollment of African Americans, in an overall sense, has increased; (2) the enrollment of African Americans in predominantly White institutions and HBCUs has decreased; and (3) the enrollment of African Americans in graduate schools has increased; however, the percentage of graduate and professional students graduating from public colleges and universities has decreased.

Thus, with the exception of undergraduate enrollments in predominantly Black institutions and HBCUs, the trend has been for more African Americans to meet the first and second requirements for the awarding of graduate degrees, namely enrollment in (1) undergraduate and (2) graduate school. The sheer lack of African American students enrolled in either undergraduate or graduate school does not appear to be the major problem with respect to the awarding of graduate degrees as the next step in our analysis explains.

The next step in this analysis was to contrast the pattern of African American's enrollment in graduate school with the corresponding pattern of graduate degrees awarded. What we found was that irrespective of enrollment increases, the real stumbling block in the pipeline appears to be between graduate school enrollment and receipt of graduate degrees. By contrasting differences between percentages enrolled and percentages awarded degrees over the ten-year period, a declining pattern was revealed. This means that the somewhat acknowledged pattern of fewer African American graduate students receiving graduate degrees than the corresponding number of these students receiving degrees is getting worst. Three explanations or rationales have been suggested: (1) The undergraduate academic preparation for rigorous graduate level study is unsatisfactory; (2) the climate of departmental support in many graduate schools, especially in predominately White institutions, is one of insensitivity and counter-productive to African American students receiving graduate degrees; and (3) financial aid at all levels – federal, state, and local – for graduate school study is on a perilous decline. As such, the following recommendations are made.

Recommendations

1. National, state, and/or local funding agencies should develop initiatives for African American middle and high school students to participate in the more rigorous academic subjects.

   Example: The federally mandated No Child Left Behind act is addressing this issue head on through, e.g., 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLCs) funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

2. Schools should develop in-school tutorial/counseling programs that will rehearse the pre-collegiate academic skills required for success in postsecondary institutions, especially for success during the collegiate freshman year.

   Example: In 1997, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, in cooperation with the Miami Urban League, the Florida Department of Education, and the College Board, established a pre-collegiate initiative to help high school students in Miami's Liberty City District prepare for the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) and the College Board's Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT). FCAT test results were critical factors in the evaluation of public schools in Liberty City and this initiative helped to improve the overall evaluations of two high schools in the district. This initiative provides for special pre-collegiate tutorial and reading programs for both students and parents. Liberty City is primarily populated by African Americans, Cubans, and Haitians.

3. Federal, state, and local agencies should develop more financial aid programs to support African Americans enrolled in graduate and professional degree programs.

   Example: The Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) State Doctoral Scholars Program (established in 1993 as a component of the National Compact for Faculty Diversity) is a highly competitive initiative that provides funds for minority students (including African Americans) to participate in three to four years of graduate study that will lead toward a Ph.D. degree. State higher education offices and charitable organizations contribute to this fund.

4. Postsecondary institutions in cooperation with other state and local organizations should develop programs to improve the academic climate for African Americans on their respective campuses through "diversity initiatives."

   Example: The SREB State Doctoral Scholars Program (cited above) also provides an annual Institute on Teaching and Mentoring that includes sessions to illustrate how college faculty may promote better departmental climates of support for African Americans (and other minority groups). The Institute has been in operation since 1994 and has received accolades across the country.

5. Predominantly White institutions should develop academic mentoring and counseling programs to inspire more of their African American students to move toward graduate and professional degrees.

   Example: The Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program, a component of the Federal TRIO Program, operates on a host of PWI campuses. African American undergraduate students in the McNair Program are given mentoring and academic preparation for graduate studies. McNair students attend SREB's annual Institute on Teaching and Mentoring (cited above) to expedite their preparation for graduate school.

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