

Retaining African American Student Affairs Administrators: Voices from the Field

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In this study of African American student affairs administrators at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), the Delphi technique was used to derive four strategies that leaders at PWIs may consider when attempting to retain this population. The panel of experts for this study consisted of six African American student affairs administrators. Overall, the study found that leaders at PWIs that desire to retain African American student affairs administrators should consider the following strategies: (a) communicate and integrate a philosophy of fairness into the campus environment, (b) develop or support mentoring opportunities, (c) empower African American student affairs administrators for success, and (d) make salaries more representative of African American student affairs administrators' job contributions.

The retention of African American student affairs administrators at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) is paramount considering the ever-changing nature of the demographics in higher and postsecondary education that is becoming increasingly more diverse (Davis, 1994; Jackson, 2001). Moreover, whether serendipity or design, the presence or lack of presence for African American student affairs administrators at colleges or universities sends a message to African American students that may affect whether they will feel welcomed at the institution (Jackson, 2000). To help meet the challenge of diversity and democracy espoused by many institutions of higher learning, PWIs must consider approaches to make their institutional environment attractive and welcoming for African American student affairs administrators (Tucker, 1980). Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to identify strategies that promote retention and job satisfaction for African American student affairs administrators. For the purposes of this study, retention was conceptualized around the length of tenure in the position (Jackson, 2001). Therefore, as a suitable measure of retention, the length of tenure for African American student affairs administrators may be compared against their White counterparts (Davis, 1994; Moore, 1983). Consequently, the ultimate goal for PWIs situated in an environment of change and diversity is to equally maintain African American student affairs administrators at PWIs in their positions in comparison to their White counterparts.

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Research-based and anecdotal evidence suggested that PWIs were ineffective or marginally successful at retaining African American administrators (Bridges, 1996; Brown & Globetti, 1991; Oliver & Davis, 1994; Tucker, 1980). Davis (1994) noted that African American administrators eventually become disenchanted with PWIs, and move to historically Black colleges and universities, or leave academe altogether. If this is true, colleges and universities must develop strategies and approaches to ensure that African American student affairs administrators are retained. Thus, institutions should not just be satisfied with their increase of minority representation by “making a minority hire,” but the true test for the institution is its commitment toward retention (Jackson, 2001).

Barr (1990) identified barriers to the recruitment and retention of competent and qualified administrators. Since the original list was developed for all student affairs administrators, it has applicability for African American student affairs administrators as well. The barriers are: lack of professional identity, lack of a career path, working conditions, compensation, competition from outside the academy, and competition from within the academy. It is important to note that the aforementioned barriers are within the control of the college or university. Additionally, administrators leave institutions for reasons that are beyond the control of the college or university (Jackson, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

Although older research, Herzberg and associates delineated useful findings on employee satisfaction that are relevant today. Workers' attitudes toward their jobs provide insight into the factors that lead to job satisfaction (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1964). As a result of the research on workers' attitudes and motivation launched by Herzberg and associates, the Motivation-Hygiene Theory was developed (Herzberg, Mathapo, Wiener, & Wiesen, 1974). The Motivation-Hygiene Theory dichotomized all human needs into two distinct categories: (a) pain avoidance; and (b) growth. Based on this concept, Motivation-Hygiene Theory enables leaders at colleges and universities to consider the different types of incentives or motivators that would satisfy these two sets of needs for African American student affairs administrators. In a typical college or university setting, the primary inducements that might be suitable for the pain avoidance needs are environmental or external to the actual job or required duties of the job (e.g., managerial style of supervisor, and working conditions), which are called hygiene factors. These factors are termed hygiene factors because they can be viewed as maintenance factors and because they are preventative. That is, these factors can be satisfied by key decision makers and are not directly within the control of the African American student affairs administrator. The incentives or inducements that satisfy the growth needs are internal to the job (e.g., achievement and responsibility), which are called motivator factors.

Methodology

Initially developed by the RAND corporation to predict military defense needs and related strategies (Beech, 1999; Uhl, 1983; Wilhelm, 2001), the Delphi technique has been used to develop criteria and benchmarks in a number of fields and industries, including nursing, marketing, and education (Beech, 1999; Clayton, 1997). A modified, two-round Delphi technique was used as a method to collect data for this study (Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975; Murry & Hammons, 1995). The intent was to develop strategies that leaders at PWIs could use to retain African American student affairs administrators. Specific ways in which the methodological framework of the Delphi technique informed the study are described in subsequent sections of this paper.

Panel of Experts

In a typical Delphi study, the participants who make up the panel are referred to as “experts” (Murry & Hammons, 1995). Clayton (1997) added, “The Delphi method requires that a panel of experts on the subject under study be selected. An expert is someone who possesses the knowledge and experience necessary to participate in a Delphi” (p. 378). Thus, a panel of experts was established from institutions located throughout the United States at public state universities with a student of color population of 10% or less. Participants’ selection was based on the tenets of purposeful sampling and included the strategy of finding typical cases where the African American administrator satisfied the criterion of a senior administrator (dean level or above) at a PWI. Participants for the study (i.e., expert panel members) were selected on the basis of their professional roles and/or recognition by their peers and their familiarity with student affairs administration. Six administrators were invited and agreed to participate on the panel of experts. Demographic data on the participants showed that four were male and two were female. Three expert panel members were Vice Presidents of Student Affairs, two were Deans of Students, and one was an Associate Vice President of Student Affairs. All of the panel members worked in public PWIs. Subjects were treated in accordance with the “Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct” (American Psychological Association, 1992). No subject names or identifying characteristics were used in reporting the results of the study.

Data Collection

According to Murry and Hammons (1995), the Delphi method should occur in five-stages:

- (1) deciding whether Delphi is a valid methodology for the study in question,
- 2) determining the panel size and membership,
- 3) inviting the panel members to participate,
- 4) deciding the appropriate number of

rounds of Delphi questionnaires, and 5) determining when to end the Delphi procedure. (p. 427)

The present study, following Murry and Hammons's (1995) recommendations, occurred in five stages. In the first stage, the Delphi method was chosen because we were particularly interested in reaching a consensus among African American student affairs administrators regarding how leaders at PWIs could best retain African American student affairs administrators. Since the Delphi "uses rounds of written questionnaires and guaranteed anonymity with summarized information and controlled feedback to produce a group consensus on an issue" (Beech, 1999, p. 283), we chose this methodology over other procedures to collect data on this important issue.

In the second and third stages of our Delphi study, we selected the number and characteristics of the individuals in our study and asked them to participate. Existing literature on the Delphi technique has reported inconsistent information regarding the most appropriate panel size to use in a Delphi study (Murry & Hammons, 1995). In the absence of general agreement on the most appropriate number of participants to include in the expert panel, we chose to invite six panel members to participate in the study based on the recommendation by Clayton (1997) who suggested that Delphi panels should contain about 5-10 members, particularly when the expert panel consists of individuals who work in various levels of a system or organization. Since our study utilized expert panel members who were Vice Presidents of Student Affairs, Deans of Students, and an Associate Vice President of Student Affairs we deemed it appropriate to have six expert panel members.

In a Delphi study, consensus is usually achieved in "rounds" which is the term given to the actual process of submitting structured or open-ended inquires to the expert panel members (Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975; Murry & Hammons, 1995; Uhl, 1983; Wilhelm, 2001). A round usually ends with the researcher(s) organizing and ranking the responses given by the expert panel members. Another round begins when the researcher(s) submits the revised list of issues and statements to the panel to provide the panel members with another opportunity to contribute their thoughts and ideas (Uhl, 1983). In the fourth stage, we decided that our study would consist of two rounds. The first round consisted of the development of a list of retention concepts. Specifically, the first round consisted of typical first round activities in which each expert panel member brainstormed and listed approaches and strategies that leaders at PWIs could use to retain African American student affairs administrators. This step was supported by Uhl (1983) who noted: "The traditional Delphi study is characterized by a first round in which the participants have an opportunity to provide free responses to rather unstructured questions" (p. 90). Following the first round, the researchers organized the set of comments and suggestions provided by the expert panel.

The second round consisted of the integration of recommended concepts into one set of strategies and the redistribution of that set to the panel of experts. Since the majority of “convergence of panel responses occurs between round one and two” (Murry & Hammons, 1995, p. 429), the second round of the process primarily served as a clarification step to check the accuracy of ideas presented from the expert panel in round one. Specifically, participants were asked to comment on the usefulness of the strategies and to provide further information that may be needed to improve the set. Once the expert panel members returned their rank and explanation statements, the Delphi procedure ended. Both rounds of the Delphi procedure were conducted online via electronic mail.

Data Analysis

In a typical Delphi study, “consensus reached by the group reflects reasoned opinions because the Delphi process forces group members to logically consider the problem under study and provide written responses” (Murry & Hammons, 1995, p. 426). Therefore, the analysis of data in a typical Delphi study occurs during each round of the study (Wilhelm, 2001). Thus, in the present study, the analysis of data occurred in three interrelated stages: (a) data reduction, (b) data display, and (c) conclusion and implications (Keeves, 1988, p. 518). The analysis and classification of ideas (i.e., themes) from the expert panels’ responses facilitated data reduction. The displayed data consisted of the strategies derived from a consensus by the panel of experts. It should also be noted that expert panel members, through a series of rounds, have multiple opportunities to evaluate their previous statements and ideas. This process of member checking is a hallmark of the Delphi technique and enhances the validity of the findings of the study (Clayton, 1997). The results and subsequent discussion display the final list of strategies and a discussion of them. Where appropriate, actual panel member’s comments are shown for further clarification.

Results

The panel of experts provided a variety of recommendations and suggestions regarding appropriate strategies that leaders at PWIs can employ to retain African American student affairs administrators. Since the Delphi method focuses on consensus among the panel, the results that follow represent the suggestions by the panel in which they were asked to list retention strategies that leaders at PWIs could employ to retain African American administrators. The following strategies were listed in rank order as the most appropriate ways to retain African American student affairs administrators: (a) communicate and integrate a philosophy of fairness into the campus environment, (b) develop or support mentoring opportunities, (c) empower African American student affairs administrators for success, and (d) make salaries more representative of African American student affairs administrators’ job contributions.

Communicate and Integrate a Philosophy of Fairness into the Campus Environment

The panel overwhelmingly agreed that leaders at PWIs must communicate and integrate a “philosophy of fairness” that demonstrates to African American student affairs administrators they are appreciated and highly regarded. Using this philosophy may ultimately impact the academic culture. They also noted that the recruitment phase is an important time period in the retention process of African American student affairs administrators because it is during this phase that the university displays its intentions and manifests its commitment to diversity and fairness. A panel member stated:

Retention of African American administrators begins with an institution’s recruitment and hiring practices. A university that has well thought out and printed practices for recruiting and hiring staff of color sends a positive, welcoming and supportive message to incoming and current staff of color. Institutions must go a step beyond just having these policies in place, they must move toward reaching and maintaining goals and objectives for its desired diversity mix.

The results reported here indicate that leaders at PWIs seeking to hire and retain African American student affairs administrators must engage in a careful review of hiring policies, job descriptions, and current practices. This review must be targeted and focused on identifying and eliminating those philosophical or programmatic components that suggest duplicity and a lack of commitment. Additionally, this strategy suggests that all levels of leadership must communicate that this goal is paramount. Moreover, leaders at colleges and universities must do more than just affirm the principles of diversity, but seek to actualize this commitment in their hiring procedures, print materials, web-based communications, and day-to-day dealings with students, faculty, as well as African American student affairs administrators.

Develop or Support Mentoring Opportunities

The panel of experts also agreed on the notion that successful mentoring relationships that focused on professional and personal development could help to retain African American student affairs administrators at PWIs. Specifically, a panel member commented: “Mentor relationships can assist African Americans with career development, understanding the dynamics of an institution, and addressing issues of alienation. It could prove effective if mentors were solicited from both on- and off-campus.” Another panel member added this point a view: “Provide mentoring opportunities with dedicated university officials who will take the time to nurture African American administrators’ talents and future endeavors.”

As suggested by a member of the expert panel, mentoring relationships can assist African American student affairs administrators with the necessary cultural connection and support frameworks needed to be successful at PWIs. The data reported in this section suggests that a concerted effort by university officials to establish mentoring initiatives and allocate resources that would enable African American student affairs administrators to attend national conferences is essential.

Empower African American Student Affairs Administrators for Success

Empowerment (Herzberg refers to this as responsibility) involves providing employees with the opportunity to make decisions without the need for authorization or approval. In the present study, the panel members agreed that the ability to do their jobs is oftentimes difficult because senior administrators may not totally relinquish decision-making power. One of the African American student affairs administrators in the expert panel stated: "Administrators must be given the power to make changes when necessary (e.g., the power to influence policy and overall direction of their division, department, and the institution as a whole). Empowerment speaks to overall job satisfaction." Based on this result, the researchers contend, leaders at PWIs who empower African American student affairs administrators reduce barriers or obstacles that may inhibit success. More formally defined, "Empowering institutions" are colleges and universities that support administrators in their positions and encourage innovative and autonomous decision-making. In the words of one panel member:

PWIs should be cautious not to set someone up for failure by delegating assignments to and/or placing African Americans in positions in which they do not have the appropriate aspirations, skills, abilities, or potential. These conscious or unconscious set-ups can be professionally and personally demoralizing.

In addition, empowerment refers to the extent to which administrators can make relevant decisions affecting their career and professional development. Thus, empowering institutions provide supportive working environments that facilitate growth and personal development. A panel member summarized:

First, I need to be on the same philosophical and educational page as the person to whom I report. This person must have a vision and mission of purpose compatible with mine. Secondly, I need to know this person will support me when difficult decisions are made. Third, I need to be allowed to do my job without micro-managing. Fourth, I need to have my professional aspirations supported and endorsed.

Make Salaries More Representative of African American Student Affairs Administrators' Job Contribution

The findings of this study also suggested that leaders at PWIs must recognize that African American student affairs administrators are often required to perform additional duties (not listed in their job descriptions) that involve mentoring African American students, serving as advisors for various student groups, and participating in university-sponsored task forces that need a minority presence. If African American student affairs administrators are required to perform several duties that are not listed in their job descriptions, salaries and benefits should be commensurate with this reality. One panel member exclaimed: "Many times we are called upon to provide 'expert' opinion on or intervene in issues that involve some aspect of race/ethnicity." Thus, a more competitive financial package that accurately assesses the value of African American student affairs administrators will go a long way to help to retain this important constituency.

Subsequently, leaders at PWIs must take a detailed look at the specific job tasks and duties of African American student affairs administrators. This knowledge should then be used to accurately develop financial incentives that reflect their specific job duties, job responsibilities, and service to the university community. To ensure coordination of these efforts, leaders at PWIs could also collaborate with other institutions to collect information that facilitates the development of an appropriate pay structure that incorporates adequate pay increases and promotions. Taken as a whole, the four strategies reported and discussed in this study may help leaders at PWIs to retain African American student affairs administrators.

Discussion

The present study highlights some strategies that can be used to guide leaders at PWIs and assist them in retaining African American student affairs administrators. Using the Delphi technique, this study yielded four strategies or suggestions that PWIs may follow to achieve success in retaining African American student affairs administrators. First, it was suggested that leaders at PWIs should seek to integrate and communicate a philosophy of fairness and respect into every facet of a campus environment. Herzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman (1964) found that interpersonal relations, working conditions, policies, and administration, positively impacted job satisfaction, which reinforces the emergence of these strategies. Clearly, this strategy is within the control of leaders at PWIs and should be considered as a useful strategy for initiating retention efforts.

Second, the expert panel members suggested that leaders at PWIs should consider developing or allocating resources to support mentoring opportunities. Stated differently, this study found that leaders at PWIs that

develop inter- or intra-university based mentoring relationships for African American student affairs administrators may assist them in becoming socialized to the PWI by networking with other colleagues and specifically administrators of color. This finding is supported by Herzberg, Mathapo, Wiener, and Wiesen (1974) who found that interpersonal relations with peers were shown to predict job satisfaction. The opportunity to receive advice and feedback from more experienced professionals and administrators represents a good opportunity for growth and development. Consequently, leaders at PWIs should consider developing formal or informal mentoring initiatives for African American student affairs administrators.

Third, this study found that leaders at PWIs must empower African American student affairs administrators to make job-specific and career-related decisions without undue regulation. This finding is in line with Herzberg, Mathapo, Wiener, and Wiesen (1974) who found that the degree of responsibility given positively impacted job satisfaction. That is, workers who were given an opportunity to express themselves and use their training in appropriate ways to make relevant job-related decisions had greater job satisfaction.

Finally, this study found that leaders at PWIs must seek to make salaries more representative of the job duties that often befall African American student affairs administrators. This finding suggests that leaders at PWIs must specify the parameters of African American student affairs administrators' job descriptions to ensure they are linked to an appropriate reward structure. This finding is also consistent with Herzberg, Mathapo, Wiener, and Wiesen (1974) who found that if workers perceived that their salary was equitable and reasonable they were more likely to have higher levels of job satisfaction.

It should also be noted that African Americans represent a diverse group. Therefore, leaders at PWIs must assess retention concepts with African American student affairs administrators on their respective campuses and use the findings reported as a framework for action. However, this study yields findings that may help leaders at PWIs to initiate these retention efforts. In conclusion, it is recommended that leaders at PWIs view the retention of African American student affairs administrators as a top priority. This means that leaders at PWIs should integrate a foundation for success in which institutions allocate needed resources to facilitate a healthy campus environment, formulate strategic plans that incorporate the ideas of diverse persons, and conduct annual campus climate surveys that include faculty, administrators, and students in order to ascertain the level of community and collegiality on campus.

Limitations of the Study

The Delphi study reported in this paper contains a number of limitations. Primarily, these limitations are a function of the disadvantages associated with

employing the Delphi technique as a data collection procedure. Other researchers who utilized the Delphi technique have reported similar limitations (Beech, 1999; Clayton, 1997; Murry & Hammons, 1995). First, the panel of experts was not selected at random and thus may not be representative of all African American student affairs administrators (Beech, 1999). Second, the researchers' initial questions may have impacted the results of the study (Murry & Hammons, 1995). For example, in the present study, the researchers asked an open-ended question regarding what are the most effective ways to retain African American student affairs administrators at PWIs. Perhaps responses would have been different if a structured questionnaire were used that listed in a multiple-choice format some common strategies to retain minority professionals in other settings. Third, the Delphi method does not have any way of assessing whether the panel of experts were responding to the inquiry as freely as they would if other data collection techniques were used (e.g., face-to-face interview, and paper-and-pencil survey). Clayton (1997) added, "The issue of individual acquiescence or tacit approval of the groups' perception cannot be measured, and although responses in each of the rounds may be reliable, they may not constitute valid personal responses" (p. 385). While the aforementioned limitations existed in the present study, the findings are very useful as an initial step in determining the most optimal strategies for retaining African American student affairs administrators at PWIs.

Future Research

This study is an important initial investigation regarding how best to retain African American student affairs administrators at PWIs. However, additional research is needed to extend the utility of the research findings reported in the study. First, future research should be conducted to incorporate a larger panel size. Specifically, additional research (utilizing the Delphi technique) should consider taking a nationally representative sample of African American Vice Presidents of Student Affairs at 2-year and 4-year colleges. Second, research is needed to document the strategies currently used by leaders at PWIs to recruit and retain African American student affairs administrators.

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