Book Critique: The Evolving Challenges of Black College Students: New Insights for Policy, Practice, and Research

By

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In *The Evolving Challenges of Black College Students: New Insights for Policy, Practice, and Research* (2010, Stylus Publishing), editors Strayhorn (an associate professor of higher education at The Ohio State University and director of the Center for Higher Education Research and Policy) and Terrell (a former vice president of student affairs at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago and director of minority affairs at University of Toledo) offer a collection of research presenting an overview of the challenges faced by Black students across different types of institutions in higher education.

Fourteen scholars and higher education practitioners have each authored a chapter addressing some aspect of the topic. The book begins with a piece by Strayhorn discussing current data on the state of Black students in higher education, as well as a summary of unique obstacles faced by African Americans within that context. These obstacles include declining enrollments, lack of supportive relationships, psychological pressures to perform academically, unwelcoming campuses, social isolation, and discrimination. His piece particularly focuses on the plight of African American men, two-thirds of whom do not graduate within six years. This introduction creates a framework for the following chapters, each of which addresses a particular facet of the issue.

The book focuses on several areas lacking in other texts (per Strayhorn), such as the importance of spirituality amongst Black students, sexual orientation issues, and Black women’s college choice. In addition, topics more commonly discussed in existing
research are tackled. For example, academic and financial barriers, lack of family support, and lack of peer support are challenges given attention. Data representing both historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are compared and contrasted. The chapters contain a variety of quantitative and qualitative research methods, all of which are defined clearly and in full detail. An extensive list of additional literature on the specific topic is included with each chapter, as well.

The volume ends with a piece by Terrell that calls for deeper analyses of the findings of preceding chapters and suggests a variety of directions for future researchers. He emphasizes the need for additional exploration of the themes that have emerged across the varied studies.

This author found that the book, in its entirety, presents clear and strong research that speaks to the diverse experiences of Black students in U.S. colleges and universities of all types. Though each author has a different focus area, the themes Terrell refers to are evident. A sense of belonging, of having a voice and of feeling valued within a supportive and welcoming environment, all emerge as vital to the success of African American college students. In addition, the importance of identification with, and ability to form direct relationships with, faculty as mentors and collaborators is a recurrent subject. Finally, a theme regarding the importance of research methodology emerges as well. Many of the chapters’ authors stress the need to explore Black student experience though ethnographic study and qualitative analysis, rather than simply looking at quantitative measures of enrollments and outcomes.
Two areas were of particular interest to this author: the respective discussions of spirituality and Black women’s college choice.

As a staff member of a Catholic PWI with an especially high percentage of African American students (compared to other similar institutions), this author has often wondered why Black students are attracted to and successful at this institution. Answers might be found in further examination of the value of church and spirituality among Black students. The chapter addressing this topic provides compelling data on the historical importance of these within the context of both cultural identity and the push for social change by the Civil Rights movement. The connection of Black students to spirituality is expressed in terms of support and resistance, both of which are crucial for students at PWIs, specifically, where challenges faced by Black students are often greater. In other words, it appears that institutions offering a strong connection to the spiritual provide Black students with a base from which they can derive support and find the resistance to meet any challenges head on.

Black women are a particularly large population at this author’s institution, so the discussion of college choice was also particularly interesting to read. In the study presented, Black women in college often frame the decisions they make about higher education as “life or death” situations, both literally and metaphorically, often due to socioeconomic conditions they face. This applies not only to the choice of specific institution and major, but to the choice of pursuing higher education, generally. Participants viewed these choices as absolutely vital to survival and having significant impact on their lives. The author believes exploration the possible relationship between
the lack of participation and success of male Black students in higher education and these findings would be very informative and add new perspective to the conversation.

Overall, this book provides an excellent compilation of research for anyone interested in the state of Black students in higher education. The extensive additional references listed also give the reader an excellent resource should further information be needed. This author believes this book would be extremely useful to anyone interested in a well-rounded and in-depth discussion of the subject.
References