

Original Paper

Understanding the Challenges of Graduation Rate Faced by Two Education Preparatory Programs in the State of Mississippi

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Abstract

In this study, the authors described the contribution of student's academic performance indicators as predictors of graduation rate in two Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) Education Preparatory Program (EPP) in the State of Mississippi. The authors interviewed two EPP chairs in summer 2019 and used qualitative inquiry to code and look for themes to provide meaning and add additional explanation to the students' graduation rate. The main findings of the study suggest that teacher candidates' ACT/SAT scores are predictive of graduation rates. Similarly, socioeconomic status showed a positive relationship with admission to the EPP and graduation rate. Each EPP faces the challenge of graduating a sufficient number of certified teachers to ensure its continuity. The EPP needs to ensure that students are capable of passing the state certification exams and graduating to be successful. Graduation rate is an indicator of EPP performance and its likelihood of continuity and longevity.

Key words

graduation rate, HBCU Education Preparatory Program (EPP), rural education, cultural support of learning

1. Introduction

Graduation rate is an indicator of an Education Preparatory Program's (EPP) performance and its likelihood of continuity and longevity. The Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) requires that each EPP graduate 18 teachers in three consecutive years. Failure to achieve its goal will result in the loss of the EPP.

The traditional EPP's role in preparing high-quality teachers in the State of Mississippi is to prepare preservice teachers in content knowledge and teaching skills, provide relevant field experiences and student teaching, and ensure students pass state certification exams. To be screened and accepted to an EPP, all preservice teachers must pass the Praxis Core areas of reading, math and writing with scores of 156, 130 (previously the math score was 150), and 162, respectively. Or students could obtain a passing score on the ACT test with a composite score of 21 or above or have a SAT test score of 1060. In general, there has been a slight increase in required test scores over the years according to the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE, 2019). After the completion of the major courses, students must take and pass state certification exams, the Praxis II and Principles of Learning and Teaching (PLT), before engaging in student teaching. Since 2016, the state requires that all teacher candidates pass the Foundations of Reading test with a score of 229 or above. The teacher candidates receive their teaching licensure upon the completion of the EPP and are assumed to have the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities to be a successful teacher.

The State of Mississippi has been facing a severe shortage of teachers. The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) currently allows "individuals to teach with a bachelor's degree unrelated to the subject matter they would be hired to teach" in order to address the teacher shortage (U.S. news 2019). MDE (2021) has found "the importance and urgency of teacher workforce disparities in the state, especially those in high-needs areas where large percentages of students from low-income households and students of color are taught by less effective teachers" (MDE, 2021).

The impact of qualified teachers on student achievement are significant. This is no more apparent than in the Mississippi Delta. In October 2016, the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) released the Mississippi Assessment Program (MAP) results in English Language Arts (ELA). The test results ranged from accountability Level 1 through Level 5 that reflected minimal, basic, passing, proficient, and advanced English language skills. As an example, consider the six-grade test, the statewide average performance levels (for Levels 1 through 5, respectively) were 16.3%, 24.0%, 30.5%, 21.7%, and 7.5%. By contrast, the average percentage performance level for the four target school districts located in the center of the Mississippi Delta were 30.6%, 30.4%, 25.78%, 11.0%, and 2.28%. According to the MDE, students scoring level 3 (receiving 65 points and higher) and above are meeting or exceeding expectations. Over 61% of the six grade students from the target districts do not meet or exceed expectations. This compares with the state average of 40.3%.

After the NCLB Act of 2001, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015) continues to address the need for improving student achievement. Yet, challenges remain. The Graduation rate depends on the students' successful completion of the EPP and passing the state exams. In this study we described student academic parameters as predictors of success in two EPPs from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the State of Mississippi. We examined whether an EPP prepares preservice teachers to meet the expectation of bringing today's students up to competency as required by the state. What academic parameters predict graduation rate? What challenges may a HBCU face in light of this

educational expectation? How do these educational demands affect the HBCU teacher education programs?

2. Literature Review

2.1 *The Impact of Low SES on Educational Success*

The academic achievement of the students is affected by the students' home environment. Students from low-income households may experience more challenges in academic achievement than those from high Socioeconomic Status (SES) (Burney & Beilke, 2008; Duncan & Seymour, 2000; Gabe, 2013; Gladieux, 2004; Kim, 2004, Petersen, Allen, & Spencer, 2016; Turner & Juntune, 2018; White, 1982). Turner and Juntune (2018) found that "students raised in poverty face challenges all through their academic journey including their pursuit of an advanced degrees. People living in poverty are the least-educated demographic class group" (p. 110). Kim (2004), Duncan and Seymour (2000) and Petersen, Allen, and Spencer (2016) found that children growing up in low SES enter school with limited literacy exposure. These children have difficulty in letters and sounds, word recognition, and sentence patterns. These weak literacy skills do not support subject learning.

Hall, Smith, and Wicaksono (2017) reported findings by Bernstein (2003) that children from linguistically deprived conditions or working-class families have limited use of adjectives and adverbs, short and grammatically simple sentences, and syntactical construction. On the other hand, middle class children tend to use sophisticated adjectives and adverbs, grammatically complex sentence level, and conjunctions and prepositions indicating logical relations. Children use language as a vehicle to learn subjects. Therefore, children with poor language skills could face severe challenges in subject matters' learning.

Thompson, McNicholl, and Menter (2016) studied poverty and teacher education and found a link between poverty and educational attainment. In their study, the authors showed a tendency for student teachers to associate low achievement more strongly with family and cultural factors than with socio-economic or school factors. They found "a cultural deficit view of the correlation between poverty and educational attainment" (p. 222) and lack of support and inspiration from the low-income family parents.

Debnam, Johnson, Waasdorp, and Bradshaw (2013) echoed the statement made by the National School Boards Association 2012 that a "schools' ability to create a climate where all adolescents regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status can succeed is the hallmark of public education" (p. 448). It is ideal and it is expected that all EPPs support teacher candidates to meet the needs of standards and close the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged in learning.

2.2 *Cultural Identity*

The amended Higher Education Act of 1965 defines a HBCU as: "...any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association

determined by the Secretary [of Education] to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation” (USDE, 2020).

In examining African American culture and student education, Hollis-Prime (2014) found school intertwined with a student’s cultural identity as factors contributing to a student’s academic success. Elwood L. Robinson, Chancellor of Winston-Salem State University stated that.

Our value is in the HBCU experience. We provide a culture of caring—a culture that prepares students to contribute to their communities, a culture that builds confidence and that gives them the essential skills they need to cultivate a career. That is a culture that is good for everyone and can help bridge the academic achievement gap that exists in America today (<https://www.affordablecollegesonline.org/college-resource-center/hbcu-history-and-modern-importance>). (2021)

Wang and Facolner (2005) reported that lack of cultural and contextual knowledge would result in incompetency in academic learning. Although the participants in the study were English as second language learners, the finding could apply to academic settings where cultural identity is critical to all learners. “People are confident when they have their own cultures; people are insecure when they lose their cultures” (Wang & Falconer, 2005, p. 21).

It is the culture of caring and familiarity that brings African American students and other diverse students to an HBCU campus. HBCUs prepare students to succeed personally and professionally. That is the goal of any institution of higher learning—to educate students regardless of their differences in culture, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and the like.

3. Methodology

We employed a qualitative inquiry to describe challenges faced by two EPPs in increasing graduation rate. The qualitative inquiry provides insights and extract meaning from the data (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). This method permits the in-depth exploration of the factors affecting students’ performance in the EPP program.

We gathered qualitative data by interviewing two department chairs from the two institutions, both are HBCUs located in the State of Mississippi and governed by the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning. The structure of degree programs and requirements for graduation are similar making program comparisons possible. Three semi-structured questions served as the basis for the interview: 1) What is your teacher candidates’ academic performance in general, 2) What challenges have you faced to increase the graduate rate, and 3) What interventions you have implemented to increase graduation rate. We audiotape interviews, transcribed verbatim, and conducted member checks for accuracy against the original recordings. We coded and looked for patterns in chairs’ responses to provide meaning and add additional explanation to the descriptive data from EPP1 and EPP2. We chose a pseudonym for each chair to protect his/her identity: Dr. Green for EPP1 and Dr. Brown for EPP2.

4. Findings

We present the primary findings of the interview results and descriptive data from EPP1 and EPP2. The following is the descriptive information on each EPP in this study and the average ACT score for students at eight public universities in the State of Mississippi. Table 1 provides a listing of elementary education majors declaring their respective program for the years 2014 through 2018.

Table 1. Declared Major Numbers of Students in Elementary Education from Fall 2014 to Fall 2018

Program	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total
EPP 1	79	72	51	44	39	285
EPP 2	386	397	379	324	239	1725

Table 2 provides the total number of elementary education majors admitted to EPP 1 for the years 2014 through 2018.

Table 2. Admitted Numbers of Students in Elementary Education from Fall 2014 to Fall 2018

Program	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total
EPP 1	2	1	3	1	2	9

Three-point-two percent of the declared major students met the criteria and were admitted to EPP1 for the years of fall 2014 through fall 2018.

Table 3 provides the number of graduates for EPP 1 for the years of fall 2014 through fall 2018.

Table 3. Graduated Numbers of Students in Elementary Education from Fall 2014 to Fall 2018

Program	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total
EPP 1	1	0	1	0	0	2

Twenty-two percent of the total number of admitted students graduated from EPP1 from the years of fall 2014 to fall 2018.

Tables 1-3 provide a picture of regression for EPP1 from declared majors (EPP1 n=285) to admitted candidates (EPP1 n=9) and graduates (EPP1 n=2) for the years 2014 through 2018. Let us take another look at one of the requirements for declared majors to be admitted to an EPP--ACT composite scores 21 or above.

Table 4 provides the average of ACT scores for the first-time entering students at the eight public universities in the State of Mississippi for the years 2014 through 2018.

Table 4. Average ACT Scores for Students Atthe Eight Public Universities in the State of Mississippi from Fall 2014 to Fall 2018

University	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Average
University 1	18.4	18.4	19.1	19.6	20.3	19.2
University 2	20.7	20.6	21.6	21.4	21.4	21.1
University 3	18.9	19.3	19.2	19.3	19.3	19.6
University 4	24.4	24	24.4	25.1	25.6	24.7
University 5	21.1	21.5	22.1	21.2	21.5	21.5
University 6	17.4	17.5	17.5	17.8	17.7	17.6
University 7	24.3	24.7	25.2	25	25.1	25.9
University 8	22.5	22.7	22.9	22.8	22.7	22.7

The Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning Fast Facts (2019)

It is obvious that ACT scores play an important part in both the admission to a university and admission to an EPP. The interviews revealed that while both chairs indicated that their students perform well in the respective programs, they also shared the challenges of maintaining elementary education graduation rates and implementing short and long-term interventions to increase graduation rates in their program.

Challenges faced in graduating students

Three themes emerged from the discussion of challenges each EPP faced in graduating students: difficulty in passing the Praxis Core, recruitment, and limited resources.

Passing the Praxis Core: Both chairs noted that the main challenge for the department is passing the Praxis exam. Even though the students are enthusiastic, teachable and coachable, Dr. Green from EPP1 stated that the department might not be “graduating completers because of rigorous intense testing requirements from the state”, and the students “are going to have to be led down the path of becoming a fully licensed and highly qualified educational professional for the State of Mississippi” (August 17, 2019). Dr. Brown from EPP 2 noted, “We are fortunate enough to have some students to come to us with 21 or above ACT that means they are exempt from Praxis Core” (July 24, 2019).

Recruitment: Dr. Brown believed if they could have students as first year students entering their program that would be helpful in increasing their numbers because the basis of their retention rate is the number of students they receive. Dr. Green echoed Dr. Brown regarding the recruitment challenge, for a decade or two, “education courses have turned to be a five year degree because of the number of hours the State of Mississippi requires” (August 17, 2019) and her department was working with the university college to “get into their system to work with freshmen who have declared either elementary or secondary education as a major”, and “it is kind of doing co-advisement with university college and provide freshmen an introduction to the profession”.

Limited resources: In addressing helping students pass the required tests, Dr. Brown suggested that she would like to provide workshops that offer a waiver for students with financial barriers and provide financial assistance to those students. The Praxis exam is expensive for some students. Some students can only take certain parts of the exam and cannot afford to take other parts. Dr. Green was fortunate in obtaining support from university funds to provide the students free workshops on Praxis Tests. Dr. Green mentioned that Educational Testing Service provides a test fee waiver to all students majoring in education if they enroll as a full-time student in the following semester.

Interventions to increase graduation rate

Education Preparatory Program 1 is taking two interventions to increase graduation rate: encouraging education majors to take Praxis Core as early as freshmen and changing the content of methods courses so they align with Praxis II test content. Dr. Green noted that the Mississippi Delta region, which has a severe shortage of certified teachers, is where her students participate in field experiences essential to preparing them to teach. Because of the existing shortage, her students may not “observe a highly qualified teaching going on or the act of teaching going on, they are not going to see a lot of pedagogy that they should observe” in the classroom. As a result, she started requiring the students to watch ATLAS videos (a library of authentic video cases showing National Board-Certified Teachers at work in the classroom [authors’ note]).

Dr. Brown from EPP2 is working on relationships with individuals and companies that that could sponsor students so they could attend workshops (on passing state-required tests) for free. She also noted that students were required to take two specific courses when admitted into the elementary education major. These new offering sproduced a significant drop in course enrollment, while helping students consider changing their major much earlier in their academic process instead of attempting to pass the exam at a later time. (Author’s note: They might have stayed in the program too long before they decided to change their major). Dr. Green also requires her students to change majors if they fail to pass Praxis Core after a few attempts.

Advisement is also an intervention to help students understand the nature of requirements that they need to meet to be retained in the program. Dr. Brown charged her students:

To understand the need to take the Praxis Core earlier rather than later in their studies

Know about workshops. Know the requirements for continuation in the program and especially what GPA is required. Be aware of everything they need to know to help them remain in the elementary education major and pass the required exams so they can complete their studies (July 24, 2019).

Dr. Brown developed a survey for those students who requested to change their major to understand what the cause(s) for them leaving the education major might be:

I just see an opportunity to have a discussion with the student and retrieve data in a way of learning why they change their major and if it is due to the Praxis. My experience, most of the time, is that it is due to the Praxis. Hopefully that would allow us to target some things and make some adjustments. That will prevent them from leaving our elementary education program (July 24, 2019).

At the end of the interview, Dr. Brown added that based on what we know, and what our data has already shown us about our students, our faculty agrees to take the further step to redesign our programs. It is beautiful to be able to do it on our own court and on our own time. We are doing proactively (July 24, 2019). Even though it is challenging to pass all the state required tests to achieve certification, Dr. Green said that her students need to accept the challenge and be “serious about becoming licensed and be able to do the job with fidelity” (August 17, 2019).

5. Discussion

The disparity between of the number of the declared majors and those admitted to a program is dramatic. Only 3.2% of declared major students met the criteria for admission to EPP1 for the years of fall 2014 through fall 2018. Twenty-two percent of the total number of admitted students graduated from EPP1 from the years of fall 2014 to fall 2018. The striking difference of the percentage changes between those admitted to the program and those remaining in the program and those who graduated (EPP 1, declared major=285, admitted=9, graduated=2) indicates clearly the challenges of obtaining an ACT with a composite score of 21 or above (and avoiding the necessity of passing the Praxis Core assessment). This finding confirms the study by Clark, Kara-Soteriou, and Alfano (2018) that teacher candidates SAT total scores relates to their ability to pass one of the state mandated tests, the Foundations of Reading.

Graduation rates for these two institutions are 22% from 2014 to 2018 and 100% as reported by the EPP2 chair. For EPP 1, 78% of the admitted students did not graduate. There is no record reporting where these students went, if they graduated from other institutions, if they encountered financial difficulty in continuing their education, or if they had personal reasons to leave the program.

Education Preparatory Program 1 has a low initial enrollment of students the majority of which did not have an ACT composite score of 21. Such students are likely unable to pass the required tests necessary to permit their continuation in the program and eventual certification. Furthermore, with EPP1 losing 78% of candidates who were admitted into the program in the course of study, EPP1 needs to set up a program management system to follow up with those students admitted to the program to ensure their completion.

Even though this is the case for EPP 1, EPP 2 Chair expressed she had a 100% graduation rate. However, Dr. Brown felt pressure for the survival of the programs because the low number of admitted students, “if they pass ACT (test), they will pass the rest of the tests” (Dr. Brown, July 24, 2019). With larger enrollments, losing students due to their inability to pass the tests may not be as notable. The 100% figure requires that students who remain in the program pass the required tests. The graduation rate of 100% reflects those students, at the same time it reflects the efficiency of the program management.

There is no question about the importance of sustaining an EPP with a good graduation rate. Offering

free ACT workshops to students could be a means to help students pass the required state tests particularly for those who have financial difficulty in pursuing their education. Students lacking relevant content knowledge would also likely benefit from such workshops increasing the likelihood of passing state required examinations after passing their core education courses. Administering evaluations of the workshops may help identify students' needs and give essential feedback to the providers so they can adjust the content of the workshop as needed to meet student needs. Establishing the role of the supervisor (advisor, author's note) as mentor can foster the development of student confidence. Confident and well-supported students stay in a program and increase that program's graduation rate (Geven, Skopek, & Triventi, 2018).

Another option is encouraging students to take the required tests as early as the first year of college. Students familiar with the test may recognize areas needing improvement, thus, enhancing their likelihood of passing on later test-takings. Program awareness of student needs can lead to alterations in the curriculum to meet those needs or the development of individualized programs of study that would improve student capabilities and increasing the likelihood of their passing the tests. On the other hand, encourage students to take the test early enough to inform them and make a decision to continue the program or seek another major. An interesting suggestion comes from Xu, Coats, and Davidson (2012) who proposed that providing culturally relevant new teaching will promote students' interests in learning. This may be especially true for students at HBCUs where cultural relevance is a significant factor in fostering their education. This implies that the program and its teachers adopt pedagogies that provide cultural relevance as a way of sustaining interest and growth in the program. When coupled with an alignment of methods courses content to Praxis test requisite knowledge, the result may be an increased likelihood of students passing the Praxis Core.

Equally important is the need to encourage students to accept the challenges of passing the required tests and becoming serious about their choice of education as a major. Here too, emphasizing the cultural relevance of their educational experience can significantly help students take on the responsibility for their choice of major and make a sincere effort to accomplish the tasks the major requires. To achieve this end, an EPP needs to design a highly structured program to provide support, resources, interventions, as well as an enticing culturally relevant learning environment where all students can succeed.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Raising a child in a nurturing learning environment and supporting that child in their desire to learn is fundamental for the child's future academic success. Similarly, for the aspiring teacher, an EPP can provide a variety of supports to ensure their success. This would be particularly important for those students who have financial difficulty. As a result of the EPP's effort, an increase in the graduation rate may occur to sustain the EPP. In regard to HBCUs, further study of the factors that ensure student success in the EPP would be beneficial. It may be useful to compare HBCUs in the State of Mississippi

with HBCUs from other states to see if regional variations occur.

Also, if a methods course design aligns with Praxis test content, how beneficial would it be in ensuring student success on the assessments required for graduation? Are there any consequences to letting the test lead our teaching or modifying our teaching to teach to test? Factors influencing graduation rates within the EPP do not exist in isolation. Rather, the graduation rate for an EPP is a complex issue concerning admission requirements such as Praxis Core score, recruitment, and rich resources to support learning, the cultural relevance of the educational experience and the like. Education preparation programs try to bring students up to a level where they become fully certified to teach in a classroom with confidence, competency, and passion in the K-12 setting. By pursuing this goal an EPP ensures its continuity and longevity.

Even though we could not collect quantitative data as planned, the qualitative data and descriptive data shed light on the challenges of graduation rate each EPP from HBCUs faces. We hope by reading this report will raise the reader's awareness of the severity of such an issue as the graduation rate. Low graduation rates may endanger an EPPs likelihood of continuity and longevity.

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