Increasing Academic Engagement at HBCU’s Through the Implementation of an Undergraduate Research Showcase

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Abstract

According to the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE), it has been shown that academic engagement and environmental characteristics influence student success. Students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s) tend to have academic profiles that are different from students attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWI’s). These factors tend to result in a negative effect on student engagement in the academic environment. To instill academic engagement, an Undergraduate Scholarship Showcase (USS) was implemented at a public HBCU in the Southeast. The showcase allowed select students the opportunity to collaborate with faculty on current research, and disseminate the findings at an on-campus poster session.
Students attending HBCU’s (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) tend to have academic profiles that are different from students attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWI’s). These differences occur within the societal/familial domain, as well as in the intellectual domain. For example, students at HBCU’s and other minority serving institutions are often the first member of a family to attend an institution of higher learning (Allen et al., 2007; Del Rios, Leegwater, & Policy, 2008). They also tend to be from families who have lower socio-economic status (SES) (Walpole, 2003). Allen et al. (2005) reported that in 2004, one-third of all Black freshmen at HBCU’s had low-income status. Despite these findings, Walpole (2003) found that low SES students are more likely to work with faculty on research projects than high SES students if given the chance.

While engagement opportunities exist on HBCU campuses, several African-American students cannot, or do not, take advantage of them, or these activities do not always include faculty led educational engagement. Due to their low SES status, these students tend to spend more time working at a job rather than in academic pursuits. Results of a 4-year survey conducted through the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the HBCU where the study took place indicated that of the entering freshmen, approximately 40% worked more
than 15 hours per week during their last year of high school. Of these same students, nearly 80% spent less than 5 hours per week studying or doing homework during that period of time (Higher Education Research Institute, 2007).

These factors negatively affect academic preparation. Bennett and Xie (2003) found that the quality of pre-college academic experiences tends to be poorer for these students than that of their peers at PWI’s. The standardized test scores of students attending HBCU’s tend to be lower than that of students at PWI’s (Kim, 2002), and these students in general have weaker academic records (Kim & Conrad, 2006).

Davies and Guppy (1997) asserted that students from disadvantaged origins have lower probabilities of survival in advanced stages of the education system. “The United States is more successful at getting students into college than graduating them – less than half who enroll in a higher education program receive a degree in that program – and the college dropout problem is particularly prevalent for students from poorer backgrounds” (Kahlenberg, 2004, p. 7). Very few studies have examined why this phenomenon occurs, but some suggest that low income students are more likely to struggle with assimilating into the culture of higher education. Yorke and Longden (2004) found that low-income students are at a disadvantage with this cultural capital as compared to their wealthier peers who often have family members who have earned a college degree. These factors tend to result in a negative effect on engagement in the academic environment.

Research has demonstrated that engagement in educationally purposeful activities results in the desired outcomes of college including better grades, higher satisfaction, and greater persistence (Kuh, 2001). Harris (2008) defines academic engagement as “time spent doing learning activities” (p. 59), as opposed to general student engagement which encompasses the environmental characteristics mentioned above. Student engagement is more broadly defined as environmental characteristics as that which “encompasses everything that happens to a student during the course of an educational program that might conceivably influence the outcomes under consideration” (Astin 1993a, p. 81).
Providing undergraduate students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities an undergraduate research showcase may facilitate an increase in academic engagement, involvement, and add to the overall college experience, which has been shown to lead to positive academic outcomes.

**Review of Literature**

*NSSE and Academic Engagement*

The National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) measures the environmental practices central to student success to assist individual institutions in improving student learning (National Survey on Student Engagement, 2005). NSSE is the result of research conducted in 1979 by Robert Pace on student effort and perception. Pace concluded that increased student engagement in the collegiate environment results in larger learning gains. Subsequent research by Kuh (2001) has demonstrated that engagement in educationally purposeful activities results in the desired outcomes of college including better grades, higher satisfaction, and greater persistence. Therefore, the elements of academic engagement are embedded in the benchmarks of the NSSE.

These concepts are central to NSSE and have resulted in five benchmarks for educational practice: (1) level of academic challenge, (2) active and collaborative learning, (3) student-faculty interaction, (4) enriching educational experiences, and (5) supportive campus environment.

The first NSSE benchmark is the level of academic challenge and encompasses the quality of work students are engaged with in the classroom. The level of academic challenge includes three components: nature and amount of assigned work, complexity of cognitive tasks, and evaluation standards used by faculty (Kuh et al., 2005). This is accomplished by institutions promoting high student achievement via classroom expectations that promote effort and performance.
The second NSSE benchmark is active and collaborative learning and assesses the level of intensity by which students are engaged in their education and are able to make practical applications of their learning. This is demonstrated via active participation in classroom settings, working with groups on class projects, tutoring or teaching other students, community-based projects, and discussing readings and course material with others. Astin (1993b) asserted the importance of active learning as a positive influence on student learning and can be accomplished in a variety of formats.

Third, the NSSE measures the amount of student interaction, both formally and informally, with faculty members. These opportunities help students learn key skills from experts that can be applied to all facets of their learning (Kuh et al., 2005). Astin (1993b) reported that faculty represents the second most powerful group, next to their peers, in a student’s development. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) confirmed that student and faculty interaction is positively correlated to student persistence and educational attainment.

Enriching educational experiences is the fourth NSSE benchmark and reflects the quality of the curricular and co-curricular opportunities available for students that complement their academic experience (Kuh et al., 2005). These are manifested via diversity programming, involvement opportunities (such as the Undergraduate Scholarship Showcase described in this paper), leadership development, technology, internships, community service, and capstone courses.

The level of support a student receives on campus is the fifth NSSE benchmark. Students who were satisfied with the relationships they form on campus were more likely to persist and were more committed to their academic success. Yorke and Longden (2004) found similar results in their retention study involving six universities in the United Kingdom. Specifically, students were more likely to persist when they perceived the institution to be supportive both academically and socially. This benchmark is especially important when working with first generation college students and students of color whose perception of campus climate directly affects their persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).
Through the implementation of the Undergraduate Scholarship Showcase, all five NSSE benchmarks were fulfilled or partially fulfilled. The following section outlines the process for the development and implementation of the event. It is important to recognize the planning process in order to facilitate the academic platform.

**Undergraduate Scholarship Showcase**

The Undergraduate Scholarship Showcase (USS) was implemented at a public, Historically Black College/University (HBCU) in the Southeast. It originated from a departmental faculty member’s suggestion of increasing undergraduate academic engagement in faculty research and improving their overall understanding of scholarship. A committee consisting of select faculty members representing each of the seven programs within the department was formed during the Fall semester. This method of selection was conducted in order to maintain equity among the departmental programs in regards to showcase planning, availability, and accessibility. The committee first met in September, and held monthly meetings until the actual showcase event in April. During these meetings strategic decisions were made in order to ensure the quality of the showcase, as envisioned by the committee members.

The first task of the committee was to determine the overall purpose for the showcase. In the beginning, the reasoning was solely based on increasing undergraduate scholarship activity. However, the committee quickly realized that the showcase should and would serve as a catalyst for improving faculty and student working relationships, specifically in regards to ongoing research. The showcase would also serve to identify exceptional students who were capable of contributing to the scholarship being conducted within the department. These students would also serve as role models for the other students, with hopes of improving the students’ perceptions of research.

The committee members concluded that each departmental faculty member would be invited to identify a single undergraduate student that, in the faculty member’s opinion, demonstrated the academic capability and integrity to participate in ongoing research and present
it at the showcase. All of the faculty members’ nominations were reviewed by the committee in order to select the proposals that best fit the scope of the showcase. Essentially, the committee desired data-driven research or comprehensive literature reviews. The committee did not want to include class projects even if they were exceptional, since these submissions would not adhere to the purpose of the showcase, which was to foster an opportunity for additional growth via participation in a faculty member’s ongoing research. As submissions were made and time went by, the committee narrowed the proposals to twelve abstracts, which represented all programs within the department.

After the twelve participants were identified by the committee, the faculty and students met often and completed the research for their project together. Several hours a week were dedicated to this project over a twelve week span. This engagement, which was outside of normal class projects, was the critical component of the program.

Some projects that went through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) were presented at conferences, and one resulted in a national publication. This type of quality academic engagement with a faculty member has been found to influence student success (Astin, 1993b; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

With a clear purpose of the showcase defined and the mechanism for identifying students in place, the fiscal considerations for the event were addressed. A showcase requires financial assistance, especially if it is to exemplify the quality of scholarship that was desired. The university’s administration was contacted, and it overwhelmingly supported the concept of student engagement. A working budget was established, which would specifically cater to the committee’s needs for developing the showcase appropriately.

It would have been naïve to think that identifying students who would want to participate and having them develop a poster presentation would be the only tasks involved in creating a showcase. The committee also had to contend with material development, logistics, and advertising concerns. This is why the committee, although initiated early in the fall semester, foresaw the need to schedule the showcase late in the spring semester. The planning was also impacted by the fact that this was the first time such an event was ever produced on that campus.
The question of what medium to use in order to present the scholarship was brought up within the committee meetings. The objective was to mirror academic scholarly meetings, such as conferences and symposia as much as possible. However, the reality of the situation also had to be considered. It would be unrealistic to expect undergraduate students to fully present the details of the faculty member’s research via an oral presentation to a large audience. This would seem unreasonable regardless of how engaged the student was in the scholarship, as the student would clearly not be an expert in the discipline or specific item of interest.

The final decision was to present the information with research poster presentations. This was chosen for several reasons. First, research poster presentations are prominent in a majority of educational meetings (conferences, symposia, etc.) across several academic disciplines, thus the projects would mirror professional academic standards. Second, posters would provide the details of the research and allow the student to communicate with the audience and permit the faculty member to also be present in a supportive role. Third, the posters would provide uniformity to ensure equity among the presenters. The printing of the posters was a great challenge, keeping in mind a working budget that had to address all other expenditures. A bulk price was identified with a nearby printer, which greatly reduced cost. This was done by using a single template for the posters, which also contributed to our desire for uniformity. It also made the overall aesthetic look more professional.

Logistics were somewhat difficult at first. Identifying a location on campus that would allow for such an event was problematic, especially when planning toward the end of an academic year. A location was identified that met several needs, including square footage, accessibility for incoming and outgoing traffic, and proximity to food services for catering needs. It was also beneficial because it was in a centralized building on campus, thus encouraging the entire university community to visit. Establishing the showcase date was critical, as it dictated the timeline for proposal submission, poster printing, and advertising needs. The committee learned that scheduling the location is a primary action, and next year’s location has already been secured as a consequence.
Advertising was another factor for the committee to consider. A secondary purpose of the showcase was to serve as a model for other students and it was important for the selected students to be recognized for their work by university faculty, staff, and administrators, as well as fellow students. The showcase participants were modeling behaviors that reflected a genuine interest in the research topic, process, and presentation. These behaviors were not previously being displayed on campus. Advertising was also needed in order to ensure an adequate audience.

Advertising took place in the form of signage, brochure development, and word of mouth, which included person-to-person, voice mail messaging, and email. Attempts to advertise via the local television and newspapers were made; unfortunately these media venues did not express interest. As a result of the advertising on campus, the showcase was a success in regards to audience turn out. During the two hour duration, there were always more than fifty faculty, staff, and students present, engaging the presenters at their posters. At some moments, a larger room would have been nice, as the room capacity was being met.

**Program Review**

Departmental support is a must in order to ensure success and includes several areas, such as financial support, participation, and mentorship. Our department covered the costs of the entire showcase, which ended up being a very modest expenditure. The two largest expenses were the printing of the posters and the program brochures. We were able to work with a university print shop and get posters 3’ x 5’ for a very reasonable fee. Additionally, we also designed and printed about 200 programs which were in color and printed on glossy paper. The programs included the student’s name, faculty sponsor, presentation title, and three sentence abstract. Signage and refreshments also needed to be budgeted in as well. Although institutional policies will vary, we incurred no facility charge or rental fees for necessary tables and linens.
All departmental faculty were asked by the department chair to include the showcase on their course syllabi and to bring their classes to the showcase on the day of the event. This was made easier by the fact that a “scavenger hunt” quiz was designed by the showcase planning committee. This quiz contained one question about each of the 12 presentations. Most faculty members agreed to collect them and discuss the results in their courses. This quiz served an additional benefit: attending students had to go to each poster and interact with those who were presenting so that they could get the answers for the quiz. These efforts, in addition to the other promotions, resulted in more than 250 students attending the showcase.

A good planning committee was essential to the success of the showcase. The event took almost an entire academic year to plan and implement. Monthly meetings and specific areas of responsibilities required a faculty member’s most precious commodity, time. A full calendar year is recommended as our first committee meeting was held in the second full month of classes, and our showcase was in the last full month of classes. If the department chair and departmental faculty were not fully supportive and committed, program’s success would have been improbable.

Although no data were collected, participating faculty did report that they had significantly more academically minded contact with the students outside of the normal classroom hours and students met, or surpassed, both research and course grade expectations. Every student that started this 12 – 15 week project completed it and presented their collective work (faculty and student) at the showcase. Several of the students were asked to present again at administrative meetings, faculty gatherings, homecoming galas, and open house fairs.

There were collateral benefits to the participating faculty as well. This showcase provided a great deal of exposure to the department on campus, as several deans from the university were in attendance and commented on how well it was run. Participating faculty were recognized for their time and engagement they spent with their students “outside of the classroom” in mentoring capacities.

There are also a few areas which we would like to offer suggestions for improvement. Probably the greatest challenge we faced was the fact that historically, very little research had
taken place in our department. How could we foster an environment of research when so little was being done by the faculty? Will the few that actually are conducting research have the time to volunteer to help undergraduate students out to actually perform some research with them? These were the tough questions we had to address.

The undergraduate research showcase project actually encouraged faculty to “revitalize” (or initiate) their research agendas and all twelve faculty members reported that they enjoyed working with and encouraging their sponsored students. Faculty also reported that their participation with this project made them reserve some time out of their busy schedules and set it aside for research. Many faculty members have kept or adopted the practice of setting aside a few hours a week to conduct research.

**Conclusion**

Faculty at a Historically Black Colleges and University planned and executed an undergraduate research showcase involving the collaboration and extracurricular academic engagement between faculty and students. It has been shown that academically engaged students and students involved in educationally purposeful activities result in the desired outcomes of college including better grades, higher satisfaction, and greater persistence (Kuh, 2001). Providing an undergraduate research symposium engages students in all five of the benchmarks outlined in the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE). Specifically, it provides an increase in the level of academic challenge (benchmark 1), fosters active and collaborative learning (benchmark 2), encourages student-faculty interaction (benchmark 3), enriches the educational experience (benchmark 4), and helps provide a supportive campus environment (benchmark 5).

Providing undergraduate students at an HBCU an undergraduate research showcase may help to increase academic engagement, involvement, and positively add to the overall college experience that has been shown to lead to positive academic outcomes which are the cornerstone of higher education institutions.
References


Higher Education Research Institute. (2007). *Cooperative Institutional Research*


