

# CONTINUING HBCUS' HISTORICAL COMMITMENT TO PERSONNEL PREPARATION: PREPARING TRANSITION PROFESSIONALS TO SERVE STUDENTS OF COLOR WITH DISABILITIES

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Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are “Black academic institutions established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and still is, the education of Black Americans” (Roebuck & Murty, 1993, p. 3). These institutions were founded decades following the Civil War primarily by the federal government’s Freedmen’s Bureau, abolitionist missionaries, and Northern philanthropists whose motivation was to train African-Americans for the industrial enterprises (Gasman, Spencer, & Orphan, 2015). HBCUs, the only higher education option for African-Americans until the mid-1960s, also trained African-American teachers and preachers (Gasman et al., 2015). Higher education options for African-Americans expanded to include Predominantly White Universities (PWIs) after the Civil Rights Movement (Ellis, Smith, & Barnett, 2016; Palmer, 2010). However, HBCUs have remained a viable choice for students, primarily for students of color. Currently the 105 HBCUs enroll 11% of Black students in the United States, yet they represent less than 3% of colleges and universities in the country (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

While degree offerings at HBCUs have expanded significantly through the years, these institutions have maintained a demonstrated commitment to the preparation of educational professionals, including teachers and school leaders, as 80% (84) of the 105 HBCUs currently have teacher education programs and over 50% of the African-American teachers with bachelor’s degrees in some states were prepared at HBCUs (Irvine & Fenwick, 2011). As institutions consisting primarily of administrators, faculty and students of color, HBCUs commit their research agendas and limited resources to responding to and solving educational problems faced by students of color, especially African-American students.

Given HBCUs’ historical commitment to populations of color, these institutions have demonstrated the ability to prepare culturally responsive teachers who understand the academic, development and social behaviors of students of color, and African-American students in particular (Irvine & Fenwick, 2011). As a chief supplier of teachers in today’s workforce, HBCUs are uniquely positioned to train and develop personnel who are prepared to meet the needs of students of color with disabilities in transition education, an area of significant need. Transition education is intended to prepare students with disabilities for success beyond high school and may include a transition curriculum offered in the elementary years through graduation; integration of transition education themes and concepts into core academic content at the secondary level; and a data-driven transition plan that is collaboratively developed, implemented, and monitored by a multidisciplinary team, including students and their families. These services benefit both students receiving transition education services and a national economy in need of a skilled workforce. Transition education therefore serves as a critical function in the nation’s economy by strategically preparing students with disabilities to meet the high demand for skilled workers.

According to the American Institutes for Research (2013), the United States has a shortage of three million skilled workers necessary to meet workforce demands. Like their general education peers, students with disabilities are capable of meeting this demand when provided high-quality preparation for the domestic workforce. To date, however, they continue to fall below their general education peers in terms of postsecondary outcomes (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009). While the number of students with disabilities who attend two-year colleges is comparable to the rate for their general education peers, only 7.6% of students with disabilities attend four-year universities. Additionally, students with disabilities earn less than their general education peers after eight years in the workforce at 10 dollars and 40 cents per hour, and experience almost double the rate of unemployment at 16.2% (American Institutes for Research, 2013). In terms of postsecondary preparation, students with disabilities are less likely to be enrolled in academic classes that best prepare them for readiness in college or careers (Lombardi, Kowitz, & Staples, 2015). The situation is further exacerbated by culturally and racially-based barriers imposed upon students of color who are negatively impacted by these barriers to a great extent (Gatlin & Wilson, 2016). African-American students with disabilities, for example, are less likely than White students with disabilities to live independently (4% vs. 19%), earn above the minimum wage (77.4% vs. 90.2%), and participate in postsecondary education (28% vs. 36%). White students with disabilities, on the other hand, are 40% more likely to find employment than students of color (Geenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2005).

While advancements in transition education should apply to students across demographic backgrounds and disability categories, this commentary focuses on access to transition education initiatives among students of color with disabilities, for whom the efficacy of transition education activities largely depends on the extent to which they are culturally responsive. These students have unique, multidimensional cultural backgrounds and experiences and face myriad challenges within educational settings. Generalized, culturally-neutral approaches to transition education will indeed yield instances of post-school success among students of color; to improve outcomes for significant numbers of students of color, however, innovative and evidenced-based approaches tailored to their unique cultural needs must be considered. Initiatives intended to prepare students of color with disabilities must (a) be grounded in students' cultural realities; and (b) mitigate the extent to which the interaction of race, culture, and disability impacts postsecondary outcomes for these populations of students. An essential component of successful transition education initiatives for students of color include the preparation of transition professionals who are equipped to design, lead, and evaluate culturally responsive transition initiatives.

When teachers and transition professionals recognize the complex and multifaceted cultural realities of students, they are better equipped to implement culturally responsive, evidence-based practices that facilitate post-school success for students of color. The importance of embedding students' cultural background and experiences into academic programs has been well-considered (Au & Jordan, 1981; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Singer 1988). Almost three decades ago, Singer (1988) suggested that "cultural congruence in an inherently moderate pedagogical strategy that accepts that the goal of educating minority students is to train individuals in those skills needed to succeed in the mainstream society" (p. 1). This notion fits neatly into the overall goal of postsecondary transition education.

Challenges meeting students' of color transition goals are magnified when teachers and transition professionals fail to view transition through the cultural lenses of students, which are shaped by race, ethnicity, religion, familial background, and overall life experiences. Teachers must also be prepared to understand often subtle but important "cultural nuances" when teaching such skills as self-determination (Rowe et al., 2013b, p. 9). This helps professionals design transition activities that reflect self-determination as a psychosocial process influenced by students' perceptions of their racial and cultural identities, as well as perceptions of their disability (Trainor, 2005).

Cultural responsiveness is a deliberate, continuous, and interpretive process that calls for educators to (a) systematically explore their own biases, misunderstandings, and lived experiences in relationship to their students; (b) develop a propensity to consider the affirmative, complicated cultural identities of their students when making educational decisions; and (c) demonstrate an ability to translate abstract understandings into concrete actions that lead to greater student outcomes for students from culturally diverse backgrounds. All teachers must engage in this work, including teachers of color who are not necessarily culturally responsive because their own racial and culturally identities align with those of their students.

A culturally responsive force, however, cannot exist in the absence of teacher of color, as the benefits of a racially-diverse teaching force in terms of raising outcomes for students of color cannot be denied. Research demonstrates the potential of teachers of color to improve academic outcomes and school experiences for students of color (Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015; Griffin & Tackie, 2017; Klopfenstein, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). For example, Egalite et al. (2015) found small but significant positive effects of same-race/ethnicity teachers on achievement in reading among African-American and students and positive effects in math among African-American, White and Asian/Pacific Islander students. The researchers also found an effect on students' performance levels, noting that lower-performing African-American and White students appear to particularly benefit from being assigned to a race-congruent teacher. Klopfenstein (2005) also found that increasing the percentage of same-race math teachers has a nontrivial, positive impact on the likelihood that African-American students in geometry classes will enroll in a subsequent rigorous math course.

The presence of teachers of color in transition education initiatives increases the likelihood that students of color with disabilities will experience success in meeting their postsecondary goals. Proposing the inclusion of postsecondary transition in certificate or degree offerings at HBCU directly aligns with the mission of these institutions' schools of education. While each HBCU school of education has its own mission statement, each mission emphasizes social justice, educational access, and opportunities for African-American and other underserved populations within local, national, and global contexts. Their respective missions, coupled with the significant number of educators of color prepared by these institutions, situate HBCUs as key contributors to the effort of improving postsecondary outcomes for students of color with disabilities.

The impetus for special educators to gear professional efforts towards successfully transitioning students into adulthood has existed for over three decades. The reality of scarce offerings in transition education in teacher education programs has been persistently problematic. In-depth transition education is currently taught to aspiring teachers and transition professionals on a limited basis in a few institutions of higher education. In 2003, Anderson et al. reported from a national survey of special education personnel preparation programs that less than half of the programs (i.e., 43%) offered a stand-alone course devoted to secondary transition. In recent years, however, PWIs have created university-based programs for aspiring professionals who

wish to lead transition initiatives. Examples include transition education programs at George Washington University, Auburn University, and The University of Oklahoma. These programs show promise for the evolving field of transition education by both recognizing the need to prepare educators and leaders who possess deep knowledge and skills in transition education, and strengthening the legitimacy of the transition field in both research and practice.

There is concern, however, that transition education in teacher education programs exists solely at PWIs. The full-time faculty roster at aforementioned PWI programs is 90% White and the majority of students in these programs are also White. It is in the best interest of the educational field that PWIs continue to seek ways to integrate culturally responsive themes and concepts into program content in order to build a culturally responsive teaching force. Programs at PWIs, however, are currently not meeting the high need to provide a diverse, culturally responsive transition workforce.

To date, no HBCU has a certificate or degree program solely aimed at educating those who aspire to become transition education professionals and further research is needed to explore reasons for not prioritizing transition education in program offerings. Additionally, HBCUs have not provided clear guidance on transition personnel preparation that will lead to improved in-school and post-school outcomes for students with disabilities, especially those of color.

Offering a postsecondary transition certificate and/or degree program at an HBCU will allow these institutions to be included among institutions of higher education currently preparing transition professionals. HBCUs may build upon and deepen PWIs' preparation efforts by creating culturally responsive programs of study. Given the large number of students of color with disabilities who receive transition education services, the need for culturally responsive evidence-based practices at HBCUs is critical for mainly three reasons. First, it affirms culture as a context for deep learning and mitigate the concomitantly negative impact of race, culture, and disability on students. Second, there is a lack of racial and cultural diversity of both faculty and students in these programs. Lastly, there exists a high need for HBCUs to strategically prioritize funding and resources to develop programs in transition education in their respective teacher education programs. We contend that personnel preparation in transition education—which seeks to improve academic and postsecondary outcomes for all students, including those of color—will not reach its greatest potential until HBCUs take part in these efforts.

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