

African American Students' Perceptions of Their Preparation for College Composition and Their Actual Performance in a College Composition Course

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Abstract

The role that students assume in school often mirrors the one they take on in their adult lives. Too often, today's traditional public school is not what Horace Mann advocated: "the great equalizer." Many African American students do not receive an education designed to promote capable, independent, and critical thinkers. Education provided many African American students leads to low retention and graduation rates at the college level. At many HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), only 39 to 40% of all entering African American students go on to earn a college degree (Miners, 2010). The success of all students who enroll in college is important, but the low number of African American students at HBCUs who graduate is cause for grave concern. This article is part of a larger study examining African American students' perceptions of their high schools' preparation of them for college composition, academic tracking, and the students' actual performance. Even though the study revealed contradictions in participants' survey and interview responses, the students' perceptions of their preparation for college composition matched their actual performance. The article concludes with strategies that facilitate collaboration among students, parents, high school teachers and college professors.

Key words

HBCUs, African American students, perceptions, graduate rates, college English, actual performance

Introduction

The article focuses on the perceptions and actual performance of African American students in English 131, a required course for incoming students. The course emphasizes clear, adequate, and logical expression of thought within the sentence, paragraph, and essay. It is designed to help students to develop their reading and writing skills, to improve their critical thinking skills, and to understand and interpret essays, articles and literary works such as short stories and novels. An HBCU is any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964. The university's primary mission is the education of African Americans, and it is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting

association whose ability to safeguard quality training at the university is determined by the United States Secretary of Education. An examination of students at HBCUs is important to increasing the retention and graduation rates at such universities.

Review of literature

First-year college composition courses play a key role in students' introduction to post-secondary education. The size of most college English classes fosters face-to-face, personal attention, and engagement in class discussions. The individualized attention, writing exercises, and reading analysis characteristic of college composition classes increase the students' opportunities to reflect on their own thinking, which leads to an increase in academic achievement and student retention. Cognizance of students' high school experiences is key to the interconnectedness between the two levels: high school and college.

Research has found that high school teachers and college instructors have varied priorities in composition (Patterson & Duer, 2006), and these differences may account for the students' performance in college composition courses. Examining students' perceptions may divulge even more insightful information about students' academic learning than standardized college readiness tests such as the ACT (American College Testing) provide. ACT, Inc. is an independent, not-for-profit organization that conducts nationwide surveys of secondary level teachers and professors of typical first-year college courses to help ensure that academic achievement tests like the ACT coincide with what secondary level instructors teach and what college professors expect of their students. In an ACT, Inc. survey, high school teachers agreed that skills in evaluating and judging texts are important, but they did not approach these skills as priorities in the classroom. In college, reading and writing processes are combined. College teachers of first-year university students lament the students' inadequate skills in reading and evaluating texts (Patterson & Duer, 2006) because doing so (reading and evaluating texts) is crucial to helping students to provide adequate details and examples in their essays (Patterson & Duer, 2006).

Students themselves influence their learning in writing courses; students' perceptions of and confidence in their own strategies affect learning outcomes. When the students' aim is simply to comply with task demands, the learning activity involves a low level of cognitive engagement such as memorizing, repetition, listing, or organizing. Engaging in low levels of learning leads to students who fear having their writing evaluated because self-esteem and self-efficacy (belief in their ability to succeed in learning a task) influence mastering

skills. Such students have a poor writing self -concept which becomes evident in their sentence structure and grammar.

Another important factor surrounding learning in writing courses is the collaboration between students and teachers (Leah, 2002). Lavelle and Zuecher's (2001) study of writing approaches of university students revealed that the self-efficacy of students influenced greatly the students' approaches to writing. In the study of which this article is a part, it was apparent during the interviews that even when students were in standard as opposed to advanced courses in high school, the method their particular teachers used helped to determine the students' perceptions, efficacy, and performance in their college composition course.

Another issue is the conflation of marking papers and revision strategies. Students' responses in this study echo the findings of Scherff and Piazza (2005) who found that process writing—a cyclical process of drafting, revising, editing—was absent from most high school English classes, with 20% of students never going beyond a first draft. Data on process-writing suggests that without feedback and revision as a routine part of daily writing lessons, students missed an essential part of the writing process—revision, the stage in which studying the writer's craft (strategies and skills) takes place (e.g. Applebee, 1981, 1986; Applebee & Langer, 1987; Atwell, 1987; Olson, 2003; Scherff & Piazza, 2005, p. 290). According to Leah (2002), "Revision might be considered the most important stage in the whole writing process...It is also the stage that many writers misunderstand or just don't allow time for" (p. 51).

Procedure/methodology

Mixed method helped to explain students' perceptions and their actual ability in this study. The first set of data was quantitative - based on a questionnaire; the second set was qualitative - based on interviews and artifacts (students' writing assignments). One hundred and four (104) students in freshman composition took the questionnaire, and 10 of those participated in the follow-up interview phase. The research participants, who made up 74 % of all students enrolled in freshman composition, completed the survey after the middle of a summer semester at the university. They wrote their names and numbers on the surveys only if they were willing to participate in follow-up interviews. Each interviewee participated in two interviews, each interview lasting for approximately 45 minutes. The participants chose their own pseudonyms.

The first section of the questionnaire (Likert Scale) asked students to provide information about how they felt about their 9 - 12 grade experiences in English classes and their preparation for college. The following are sample items on the

survey questionnaire: *I believe that my high school English classes have prepared me to make a passing grade in college English; I learned how to revise and edit papers in my high school English classes; my writing assignments were marked, graded, and returned to me.* The participants chose from the following responses on questionnaire using a scantron sheet: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. These questions were designed to answer one of the Sub Questions of the study: *What are the students' perceptions of their ability to do college work in a freshman composition class?*

The second section of the questionnaire asked students to provide information about their experiences in certain tracks. These questions provided responses to Sub Question 2: *How has prior academic placement in grades 9 – 12 influenced the students' ability to do work in a freshman composition class?* The third section asked students to provide information about their experiences in college English and was designed to answer Sub Question 3: *What is the students' actual performance in a freshman composition?* The final section contained demographic information such as the gender of the students, their age (for informed consent/assent purposes), and the students' willingness to participate in the interview stage to make sure that the study included a representative group of students. The students' responses on the questionnaire helped in the effort to include, in the follow-up interviews, students who represented various demographics, genders, perceptions, etc. Subquestions one (students' perceptions of students' preparation for a college freshman composition class) and three (students' actual performance in a college freshman composition class) are the main focuses in the discussion of the study.

In phase two (qualitative), students participated in standardized open-ended interviews. The goal was to obtain detailed information about the participants' thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, reasoning, motivations, and feelings about their past and present experiences and beliefs (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Asking all the interviewees (10) the same questions in the same order helped to identify themes and to make comparisons. The following are examples of the types of questions:

1. How would you describe the difficulty of the work you completed in your high school English class?
2. What kind of activities did the high school teachers use to teach you about providing support and details in essays and paragraphs?
3. Was your college English class what you expected it to be? Explain how you thought it would be. Explain how it actually was.

An examination of the students' essays provided an idea of the students' writing ability, and several essays and homework assignments served as artifacts.

Results/findings

Perceptions are important in that they help to influence how people think of themselves and how others think of them. The way students perceive themselves as learners determines their behavior, and their behavior contributes to the students' failure or success. Both the quantitative and qualitative data in this study revealed that the students had a high perception of their ability to perform well; however, in some cases, the students' perceptions did not match their actual performance.

Most students (87%) reported on the questionnaire a belief in their ability to pass a freshman composition class, and all except one of the interviewees actually passed English 131. Still, some contradictions between the questionnaire, the interviews, and the students' papers were evident; there were contradictions between students' perceptions and their actual performance. Most students (83%) reported on the questionnaire that they understood most of the rules of grammar and mechanics as they learned them in high school, but 75% reported that they had lost points on papers because of errors in their college English class. The follow-up interviews of ten students in the study revealed that some teachers marked papers via a circle or check marks but did not specify the error in grammar and mechanics. When students received their writing assignments in college, they realized a marked difference between the way their high school teachers marked their writing assignments and the way college professors marked them. Professors made detailed comments about support, clarity, proofreading and editing, and other problem areas. The interview helped to clarify students' answers as some students considered a circle and a check mark without specification of the skill (error) as a teacher marking, grading, and returning the essay. In high school, receiving a writing assignment with random marks, check, circles accompanied by a high grade contradicted what the students were experiencing in college.

The students' answers during the interview and their writing samples indicated a need for further instruction in proofreading for errors in grammar/mechanics. During the *interviews*, most students revealed that they did not understand grammar and mechanics at a level that they originally believed they did, and weaknesses in some areas of grammar and mechanics caused them to lose points on their college writing assignments. The students overestimated their understanding of grammar and mechanics as most of them lost points for

not proofreading and editing adequately in college, and their graded college composition papers were evidence of their overestimation.

When a research participant, Amanda, was asked if the learning activities in high school English classes helped her to understand college English, she replied, "Sort of. High school could've focused more on grammar. I'm pretty good at providing support." Understanding grammar and usage is different from actually putting this understanding into action in writing assignments. It is much easier for students to locate errors in grammar and usage while detecting errors in isolated sentences on a worksheet than editing *their* work for such errors. Using students' errors from their own papers could be more helpful in teaching grammar and usage. In some cases, high school teachers admit to not placing an emphasis on skills such as writing strategy, organization of writing and grammar and usage (Patterson & Duer, 2007). Subsequently, students themselves do not prioritize skills such as grammar and usage. The students' constant reference to grammar/mechanics as "little problems" and "minor errors" during the interviews proves this point.

According to the survey conducted by Patterson and Duer (2006) high school teachers and college teachers place different degrees of importance on grammar and usage. The skills under the headings "Writing Strategy," "Sentence Structure," "Organization of Writing Style," and "Grammar and Usage" were rated most important by college instructors of entry-level English courses. The fairly low percentage of the aforementioned skills taught as reported by high school teachers indicates the genuine difference between the priority of high school teachers and the priority of college teachers. If skills such as grammar and usage are not prioritized in the secondary high school English classroom, it is difficult for students to grasp the skills when they arrive at college. Most college teachers mark students' papers, indicate the specific errors made, and make suggestions about improving the students' work, and particular errors in grammar/mechanics affect the students' grades on writing assignments.

Even though the students in this study at an HBCU realized quickly that they may not have understood errors in grammar and mechanics and other skills as they thought when the skills were discussed in their high school English classes, their positive perceptions of their ability to do college work helped them to address their shortcomings and then to work on making improvements. This study's findings indicate that the students' perceptions of their abilities are just as important as their academic ability. Most of the interviewees believed in their ability to succeed in a college composition class, and 90 percent of them (from different English 131 courses) passed the course.

Proofreading for errors in grammar and mechanics were not the only skills students found troublesome once they reached college. On the questionnaire, more than half (69%) of the students reported that they understood how to write essays with good content, but 41 % lost points because of the kinds of details they provided in their college writing assignments. Still, the interviewees' writing assignments revealed that most of them could provide enough details and examples to pass a writing assignment. Three students indicated that the conclusion was the hardest part of the essay for them to write, one reported the introduction, one reported the literary analysis, and two reported the thesis statement. The following is an example of a student's difficulty with the thesis statement: "In my essay I will discuss the similarities and give details to support my reasons." Often, college freshmen find it difficult to express the point of their essay in a thesis without making an announcement (e.g., I will compare...). With further instruction and practice at the college level, the interviewees said that they mastered the skill.

This research study revealed that although students may pass a specific college English course, weaknesses in their writing still exist. The students must be cognizant of the skills that they did not master because not having a firm grasp of skills (e.g., grammar and usage) will affect the students' performance in their careers upon graduation.

Of the total number of students who engaged in the interview phase of the study (10), only one did not pass freshman composition. In that sense, the results coincide with the responses on the questionnaire in which the students reported that they believed in their ability to pass a freshman composition class. Also, most of the interviewees' writings revealed that they could pass a freshman composition class. Oddly, the one interviewee who did not pass the composition class reported on the questionnaire that she believed that her high school English classes prepared her to make a passing grade in college English, that she understood most of the rules of grammar and mechanics as she learned them in high school, and that she understood how to write essays with good content. Students completed the questionnaire near the end of the summer semester, so the aforementioned student may have thought that she would pass the course despite the marks on her essays in English 131.

Discussion/conclusion

One of the main reasons to research students at HBCUs is that one rarely reads journal articles or books concerning details about these particular students' learning, their attitudes, and their perceptions. The results of this research indicate the need for teachers to take more time learning about their

students. Test results tell only part of the story; students themselves tell the rest. Teachers need to do more to encourage more students to take a more active role in their learning by expressing their perceptions. Perceptions influence behavior and performance in the school environment, and oftentimes the roles that students take on in middle and high school predict the roles they will play in society later in life. Though academic achievement is definitely not less important than students' perceptions, academics could be improved when students' perceptions about their abilities are more positive.

The fact that many students in the study revealed that they were making errors in grammar/mechanics and were losing points in their writing assignments as a result is an indication that high school teachers may need to re-evaluate how they teach students how to proofread and edit their papers—in other words, incorporate more true process writing and revision. Many students who fail essays and other writing assignments in college do so because they need a stronger mastery of proofreading and editing skills, which could also be accomplished through ongoing peer revision activities such as peer editing. High school teachers should collaborate more with college instructors in order to help students to address skills in all areas. However, high school teachers need the support, resources, and time to provide detailed comments about students' essays so that students will have a greater understanding of proofreading and editing, increasing their chances and degree of success in college English classes.

College teachers must not assume that earning a high school diploma means that the students know how to proofread and edit papers for errors in grammar/mechanics. Often, college teachers complain about students' inadequate proofreading and editing skills, and some do not think that it is their responsibility to teach these skills to students who have reached the college level. However, college instructors everywhere must work with the student population they have, and they must not "pass the buck" or "play the blame game." Instead, as Leah (2002) reported, more collaboration between students and teachers is needed. As it is now, there are two cycles: in the first cycle, the students do all the work writing papers and in the second cycle, the teacher does all the work grading the papers. Of course, there is no way to get away from this pattern completely, but with more give and take at various stages of the process, faculty-student communication would improve. Instead of two cycles, there could be moments between student writing and teacher grading when students help to propose ideas relevant to grading criteria, submitting papers, etc.

Parents and students must work on ways to encourage an interest in learning in the first place and then to work on figuring out how the students learn best. What takes one student two hours and one teaching method to learn and

complete a task may take another student four hours and various methods to do so. The length of time does not necessarily mean that one student is less academically inclined than the other. What it means is that students must learn more about themselves and their own learning styles so that they can have more control over their academic endeavors, regardless of the academic track (standard or advanced) the students and/or their counselors choose. The academic track that the students enroll in does not dictate the students' academic, social, or economic future. More of the students who participated in the interview portion of this study were placed in a standard track, but it was clear that their perceptions of their ability influenced their performance and final grades.

Recommended teaching strategies

The most effective English language arts classrooms practice interconnectedness; they make connections between school and home, between explorations of key concepts and questions over the course of the semester or year, connections between canonical texts and other alternative texts, and revisiting related ideas and experiences (Applebee, 2002). Without connectedness, teachers, too often, present information about key concepts in isolation of writing and reading. Such is the case with students completing worksheets on random sentences with grammar errors in them without examining the whole essay (support, thesis, transitions, etc.). Knowledge about one aspect of writing (e.g. support) is futile without an understanding of the usage of grammar and usage to convey the message in the support. This study revealed that some students provided adequate support, but the errors in grammar and usage detracted from the point the students were attempting to make in the paper.

Another strategy is cultural relevance in teaching. Ladson-Billings (1995) pointed out the importance of having students' home/community culture and the school complement each other. According to Landt (2006), for example, the literature in school remains mostly Eurocentric and providing an array of perspectives is critical, but exposing students to these works is a challenge. Students are aware of the absence of their culture in school. Truth, one of the participants in this study of students at HBCUs, expressed a desire for more readings about African Americans. Educators should also consider the prevalence of multimodal tools that make it necessary to redefine notions about reading, composing, etc. That way, educators can incorporate digital literacies in their English language arts curriculum since students use them on a daily basis (Doerig, Beach, & O'Brien, 2007). A major part of cultural relevance and listening

to students is taking the time to find out how they communicate inside and outside of the classroom.

It is important for young adults to see how others experience life because they are in the process of becoming independents in a world beyond school and the community; exposing students to varied texts allows them to engage in understanding the self. Also important is for students to consider who is missing from their textbooks and how this may influence the self-esteem of those who are not featured in the texts. Readers need to see images of those like them in order for them to make connections between literature and their everyday lives. If adolescents read about others similar to and different from them, they get to see that unfamiliar aspects of other cultures are less foreign when viewed through the lens of familiar issues.

A key practice, providing feedback to students, could lead to self-regulation among students. Feedback can be focused at the self-regulation level, including greater skill in self-evaluation or confidence to engage further on a task. Whether the students in this study made errors in grammar and usage because they simply did not take the time to proofread, their high school teachers did not establish proofreading and editing as a priority, or they do not have an understanding of grammar and usage, feedback from teachers could help to decrease problems with proofreading and editing. A similar approach should be taken while teaching students other elements such as support, transitions, the thesis, creativity, etc. An example of a feedback could be, "You already know the key features of the opening of an argument. Check to see whether you have incorporated them in your first paragraph" (Hattie & Timperly, p. 93, 2007). Such feedback has major influences on self-efficacy, self-regulatory proficiencies, and self-beliefs about students as learners.

A final strategy could be more communication among stakeholders such as high school teachers, college teachers, students, and parents. A key element of successful schools is "shared responsibility which includes students, teachers, school administrators, parents, and policy makers" (Linn, 2003, p. 3). Collaborations lead to accountability, which empowers teachers to implement strategies that ensure academic achievement among all students. In one research study, many college students specifically identified their experiences and interactions in college as being essential in forming their felt identities (self-concept) (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004). Communicating with their teachers facilitates students' sense of confidence in the learning environment. The students in this study made few comments about their communication with their high school teachers, thereby indicating a need for more information about the

way students communicate with their teachers and the degree of said communication.

Research indicates that parents and teachers sometimes have different meanings of academically successful students. When a parent expressed concern because her child had made *C*'s and *D*'s on a report card after teachers informed her throughout the grading period that the student was doing "fine," the child's teachers were perplexed about the parent's dismay and encouraged her to stop "pushing" the student. The parent and teachers differed about what constituted success for the child (Delpit, 1995). While the parent's perceptions were high, the teachers settled for mediocrity. Such teachers' perceptions often influence students' academic achievement. There are other cases in which there is a distinction between what parents want and expect of their children and what teachers expect of the students.

Focusing on students' views could lead to greater retention rates at HBCUs. A greater retention rate leads to enormous opportunities and success. Students have opinions and voices that need to be revealed in order for them to become responsible, informed citizens. Responses from a larger number of HBCU research participants would be helpful in learning even more about students. In this study, students completed the questionnaire after midterm during a "nine" week summer semester; conducting the study after midterm during a "sixteen-week" fall semester could provide more information. Ultimately, information that teachers gain from students could help to reduce the gap in the academic achievement of minority students and, thus, increase retention and graduation rates at HBCUs.

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