Cultivating Lifelong Transitional Supports: Understanding Challenges and Opportunities Faced by HBCUs in Preparing Students with Diverse Learning Needs for Future Work

Christian D. Specks

University of Louisiana at Monroe

Abstract

Persistence in cultivating lifelong transition support is vital to a student's success, especially for those with diverse learning needs and intersecting identities, such as those who identify as racially and ethnically minoritized (REM) and as a student with disabilities (SWD). Given the importance of secondary and post-secondary transitional support services for positive outcomes, more support may be needed to articulate the needs of diverse learners, specifically REM-SWD with a range of learning abilities and needs to faculty and staff in post-secondary institutions (PSI), including the Office of Disability Services (ODS). REM-SWD are less likely to actively participate in transition planning activities during their high school years, which can be attributed to poor or limited engagement in transition planning activities and proper decision-making skills. Despite the dearth of research on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) transition supports for students in secondary educational settings, as well as disability resources and accommodations for students with disabilities in higher education, there is limited research investigating the perceptions of REM-SWD navigating the IDEA transition and the disability accommodation-seeking process in college especially within the context of HBCUs. This position paper investigates the strengths, challenges, and opportunities confronting HBCUs in cultivating lifelong transition support as they prepare students with diverse learning needs for future work.

Keywords: HBCUs, racially and ethnically minoritized students, disabilities, transition support, post-secondary institutions

Introduction

Transition services are critical for positive secondary and post-secondary institutional (PSI) results. Thus, it is critical to pinpoint the explicit attributes of students who are more or less likely to seek and adequately obtain the appropriate support and disability services (Mello et al., 2021). Students who are identified as racially and ethnically minoritized (REM) students with

disabilities (SWD) have historically experienced systematic disadvantages compared to their white counterparts, including (a) lower academic expectations (Blanchett et al., 2005), below-grade-level instruction (Losen & Welner, 2002), and fewer identifications for gifted programs (Grissom & Redding, 2015; Fallon et al., 2021). As researchers indicate, REM-SWD receives poor or limited transition planning, requires more decision-making skills (Roper, 2023), and is less likely to participate in transition planning actively (Lindsay et al., 2022; Wei et al., 2016). Facts concerning this population of students should be acknowledged, and problematic areas should be addressed. There has been long-standing evidence of unfavorable educational and employment-related outcomes for REM-SWD. Challenges such as inequitable and poor educational encounters, which are exacerbated by institutional and structural racism, can negatively impact academic achievement in college, especially for REM students with intellectual and other developmental disabilities (IDD) (Brendi et al., 2021). In addition, researchers conducted a study that suggests only 19.3% of people with disabilities are employed, according to data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), compared to 66.3% of those without disabilities (Iwanago et al., 2020), which is significant and can affect how students are perceived and received following post-secondary educational goals within the workforce.

Black, Latinx/Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaskan Native students—who are racially and ethnically marginalized are overrepresented in high-incidence disability classifications (such as specific learning disability, emotional disturbance, and intellectual disability), where decisions are often made based on data that may not be reliable (Fallon et al., 2021; Sullivan & Bal, 2013) in secondary settings. On the contrary, Bradshaw (2020) found that SWD, in general, faces various obstacles in PSI, such as unfavorable perceptions about disabilities, fear of discriminatory practices, inability to access course material, and inability to establish trustworthy relationships with faculty while building a culture that commemorates community. In addition, researchers have found that barriers that highlight intersectional identity markers for students such as first-generation college status and those from low-income homes are more likely to have impairments and are less prepared to handle the social and academic pressures that come with being a college student (Iwanago et al., 2021).

Researchers suggest that many SWDs, in general, encounter other barriers to equal, equitable, accessible support and found that PSI faculty and staff capitulated to socially constructed stereotypes and disregarded the lived experiences among SWDs due to their lack of

awareness concerning the intersection of identity traits among SWD (Bradshaw, 2020; Pena et al., 2016). Due to obstacles beyond their control, SWD may be reluctant to access and utilize the resources and accommodation provided. For example, some SWDs do not disclose or register with the disability services office (DSO), while others register but decide not to use their accommodations (Cole & Cawthon, 2015; Slaughter et al., 2020) for various reasons. Bradshaw (2020) also found that faculty and staff perceptions of SWD were limited by their immovable or rigid instructional methods, resistance to change, adapting to evidence-based approaches, and fostering working relationships with the disability support service. Although SWD faces many challenges, REM-SWD experiences are unique and exacerbated by their intersectional identity characteristics, which hinder their ability to fully access and take advantage of the resources provided.

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) can contribute tremendously to supporting REM-SWD transitions to college needs by cultivating further skill development and culturally responsive practices to enhance their self-concept, self-esteem, and self-advocacy skills to promote continued sustainability as they pursue higher education endeavors. The overarching objective of this position paper is to investigate the strengths, challenges, and opportunities confronting HBCUs in cultivating lifelong transition supports as they prepare students with diverse learning needs for future work.

Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCUs)

Prior to the inauguration or establishment of HBCUs, systemic barriers and challenges, such as exclusionary practices, were appalling and posed a threat to the academic advancements for Black Americans or people of color. Cheyney University of Pennsylvania was noted to be one of the first and oldest established HBCUs in 1837 (Clayton et al., 2023) and was formed in alliance between Black preachers and Quakers to abolish slavery prior to the Revolutionary War (Bly, 2008; Wade, 2021).. Furthermore, Wilberforce University was established in Ohio (1856) and exclusively administered by African Americans (Wade, 2021). Although these establishments were momentous in numerous ways, challenges were still apparent and required a significant change in policies and practices, especially concerning PSI. Notably, the First Morrill Act of 1862 allowed states to create a land-grant university, providing additional accessibility to PSI (Clayton et al., 2023), and the establishment of other HBCUs such as Bowie State University in Maryland (1856) and Howard University in Washington, DC (1867) (Bonner et al., 2024).

The historical context of HBCUs is paramount for students, faculty, and the staff involved in enhancing the knowledge, skills, and abilities of REM-SWD, especially. Historically, Black students were not always able to access a high-quality or advanced level of education. The foundational goal of HBCUs was to give these students access to quality education, providing an equal and equitable environment and opportunities to acquire high-quality educational experiences in a safe and culturally secure environment (Clayton et al., 2023; Kim, 2002). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) highlighted vital enrollment data trends between 1976 and 2010 followed by data collected between 2010 and 2022. These reported revealed significant increase of 47 percent in HBCU enrollment (223,000 to 327, 000) during data collected between 1976 – 2010; subsequently, enrollment declined by 11 percent (289,000) from 2010-2022 (NCES, 2021). These vital keys aid in understanding the significance of HBCUs while securing a safe space to live, learn, love, and grow. It is important for REM-SWD take advantage of the support and services offered by HBCUs to enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities to achieve their post-secondary goals successfully.

Current Strengths

Through their foundational pillars of educating Black Americans, HBCUs were created to strengthen academic and educational opportunities for this population (Price & Viceisza, 2023) and employ rich historical values such as significantly personalizing individual experiences and providing sound, consistent, and culturally affirming environments for students to thrive (Clayton et al., 2023; Blacknall & Johnson, 2011; Fleming, 2001; Thompson et al., 2019; Tobolowsky et al., 2005). Moreover, it continues to constitute significant strength. In addition, the frequent narrative of some HBCUs is known for their longstanding efforts in securing equitable practices and funding opportunities, even receiving a lack of recognition for programmatic accomplishments (Johnson, 2023), which constitutes another significant strength. Finally, HBCUs have historically proven relevancy and consistency evident by the production the largest number of African American graduate students pursuing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields (Bonner et al., 2024). The significance of HBCU strengths is relevant and attests to the outstanding contributions produced as a result of its induction .

Current Challenges

A recent study conducted (Newman et al., 2021) confirmed a significant challenge that most educators and staff and college higher education professionals are oblivious to the mass number of students with disabilities attending their institutions, enrolling in courses, participating in co-curricular activities, and using support services as nearly two-thirds of post-secondary students who received special education services in high school do not disclose their disability when they attend college (Newman et al., 2011; Newman et al., 2021). Other research studies revealed that, according to parents, 14.2 % of their adolescent child(ren) receives Section 504 academic accommodations. In contrast, only 40% of them receive services under IDEA and have an IEP in place for academic support (DuPaul et al., 2019). This data suggests that more transition planning should be prioritized, especially for these students who may have these conditions and may not receive services at all.

As HBCUs prepare for the enrollment and transition of REM with diverse learning needs, their level of understanding must affect the students as they transition from high school to college, which can be challenging. REM students with diverse learning needs may experience unique challenges that HBCUs must recognize during early transitions. For example, researchers confirmed that students with ADHD may experience lifelong variations in their symptoms as this condition is recognized as a chronic disorder with childhood onset (Barkley et al., 2008; Hustus et al., 2020; Simon et al., 2009); therefore, HBCU must continue to support and foster a healthy environment and community to support growth. In addition, research studies conducted conveyed that students with disabilities or diverse learning needs may experience added stressors and anxiety-related symptoms due to financial burdens, academic pressures, social stigmas, and isolation, which exacerbates the risk of depressive symptoms and leaves them at a higher risk for dropping out of school (Gibbons et al., 2012; Iwanago et al., 2021). Finally, conceptualizing the gap between secondary and post-secondary endeavors is vital as bridging the gap between the two, especially when each has its processes, funding obligations, constraints, and college-based transition programs, can be challenging to navigate, design, administer, and manage (Schillaci et al., 2021).

Secondary and Post-Secondary Transitional Supports

Transitional secondary or high school support is vital to students' post-graduation outcomes. As students enter high school, transition planning should begin with guidance and assistance from primary school stakeholders, including parents and teachers. Data from the

National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2) showed that while 70% of students without disabilities aspired to college, only 19% of students with disabilities enrolled in a 2-year institution and 9% in a 4-year institution after high school (Newman et al., 2009, 2011; Ressa, 2020). Additionally, REM students with conditions such as ADHD and autism have lower engagement in transition planning (Lindsay et al., 2022; Wei et al., 2016). Therefore, transitional support during these vital years may affect the student's confidence and abilities to pursue desired college pursuits. Researchers have shown through various studies that high school students with ADHD impairment have eight times the likelihood of dropping out of school compared to their counterparts without ADHD, as well as an increased risk of class failure, school suspension, and incomplete assignments. (Hustus et al., 2020; Kent et al., 2011). Other challenges such as executive functioning demands placed on emerging adults attending school include attending lectures, drafting papers, reading lengthy articles or books, keeping organized, and making plans ahead of time—all of which are challenging for those with ADHD (Lefler et al., 2016; Lefler et al., 2020). Researchers highlight, through a recent study conducted, the persistent lack of knowledge of ADHD-related school-based services for REM students and their parents (Golson et al., 2022). More research is needed to ascertain the impact of support services by type of impairment on post-secondary completion rates (Newman et al., 2020).

Historically, legislative mandates for support and services, including transition support, for students with disabilities served in K-12 settings were apparent. The need for states to monitor the number of children with disabilities serviced by race/ethnicity as part of the 1997 modifications to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 (Fallon et al., 2021) was enacted. As transition outcomes were examined, student graduation rates are important to consider as students plan transitional needs following graduation. According to Iwanago et al. (2021), the graduation rate for Black students is approximately 42%, much lower than 62% for their counterparts, which is significant because if Black students are graduating at a much lower rate, of proper transition engagement or participation could be delayed or affected by graduation rates. In addition, underlying issues regarding the significance of identifying disadvantaged populations' underperformance were shown to be disproportionate representations by the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (Fallon et al., 2021). As other concerns became more, revisions were warranted. Thus, because of further disparities in disability categorizations and deficits in educational outcomes noted among REM students, significant priority was given

to address these concerns as the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 (Fallon et al., 2021; Fletcher et al., 2004).

Given that transitional supports are important activities that require more student involvement, students must actively participate in the creation of their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and Transition Plans (ITPs), according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) (Cavendish et al., 2020). Unfortunately, students who require more assistance in making decisions or who have received inadequate or insufficient transition planning may require assistance expressing their requirements as they transition to college and deal with the Office of Disability Services (ODS) and/or a professor (Roper, 2023). Thus, the likelihood of significant student involvement may pose some limitations.

Post-Secondary Disability Support Services

The number of students enrolled in colleges and universities has dramatically increased in recent years, especially for students with cognitive, neurodevelopmental, or invisible disabilities such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (DuPaul et al., 2021; Eagan et al., 2017; Weyandt & DuPaul, 2013), English language learners (ELL), students from disadvantage or low-income homes, and REM-SWD (Bradshaw, 2020). Some students transitioning to PSI may experience unique challenges that may include encounters associated with negative attitudes and stigmas associated with their diverse learning needs, such as race, ethnicity, and disability status. (Brendi et al., 2020; Durodoye et al., 2004).

Student enrollment for students with diverse learning needs is on the rise. According to a recent study conducted, this increase in enrollment for SWD, or diverse learning needs is on the rise, and the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 are to blame (Slaughter et al., 2020; Rothstein, 2004). According to the National Center for Education Statistics 2019, approximately 11% of college students were identified with one or more disabilities (DuPaul et al., 2021; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). ADHD and specific learning disabilities (SLD) are examples of diverse learning needs and are considered non-apparent or hidden disabilities (Bradshaw, 2020; Schelley et al., 2011Despite the amount of research and data that exists concerning disability services and accommodations for students with disabilities, research is scarce on REM students with diverse learning needs or disabilities perceptions on the process of transitioning from high to college and obtaining and

sustaining reasonable academic accommodations during college (Banks, 2014; Brendi et al., 2021).

The Value of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have a significant historical underpinning of navigating factors contributing to societal woes, including a historical account of serving underserved or unprivileged populations. Researchers confirmed that illustrations of increased access to underprivileged people, such as first-generation college students or those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, have long been a practice at HBCUs (Price & Viceisza, 2023). The experiences of HBCUs and their students have experienced an abundance of oppressive and marginalized concerns, primarily through challenges laced with institutional and systemic issues to overcome throughout history and for REM with disabilities. Historically, all community colleges and traditional colleges and universities have experienced problematic systemic issues related to student retention, persistence, and degree attainment (Bradshaw, 2020). On the contrary and based on research conducted by Gordon et al. (2021), HBCUs encounter unique challenges associated with graduation rates, and studies have indicated that approximately 32% of Black students graduate in comparison to the graduation rate of approximately 44% for Black students at other institutions is slightly higher. Nonetheless,

HBCUs have a distinctive strength and ability to captivate, encourage, and uplift students who are deemed challenging. Embedded in the culture of the HBCU foundation, creating a community culture where students feel a heightened sense of belonging, increased social capital, and familiarity on campus helps students become trusting and engaging individuals, especially REM-SWD. HBCUs serve a unique population of students with diverse challenges that students in other institutions may not have been privy to experience (Price & Viceisza, 2023), which may enhance and foster trust as they seek support as they navigate college life and experiences.

To meet graduation goals established, students with diverse learning needs, such as those with learning disabilities and ADHD, must overcome obstacles that hinder their abilities to adapt to obtaining and using reasonable accommodations in college (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Gotlieb & Gotlieb, 2009; Izzo & Lamb, 2003; Roper, 2023; Stodden & Conway, 2002; Walker & Test, 2011; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). In addition, challenges such as inadequate and exploitative work experiences, societal stigmas, misguided healthcare policies, inept educational support, and scarce resources all contribute to the marginalization of individuals with disabilities (Sloan et al.,

2018). To mitigate some adversities some students' experiences, the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA) suggested revisions by removing financial constraints to eligibility factors by highlighting students with disabilities, such as those with intellectual and developmental disorders (IDD), may apply for federal financial aid as long as they are enrolled in an authorized Comprehensive Post-secondary Transition Program (CPTP) (Smith Hill et al., 2024). These systems are designed to aid in the challenges faced by students with diverse learning needs.

Cultural Relevant Pedagogy on HBCU Campus

Unlike other universities, HBCUs have a unique perspective and opportunity to cultivate a positive and lifelong experience for REMs with diverse learning needs. Students with an identified culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse (CELD) background account for a disproportionate amount of SWD (DeMatthews et al., 2014; Hosp, 2008; U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2018; Suk et al., 2019).To operationalize critical thinking skills, one must comprehend the profound political, social, and economic implications of the information under consideration, which necessitates analytical investigation, evaluation, integration, and synthesis (Sloan et al., 2018). Hence, understanding cultural relevance and responsiveness on HBCU campuses is crucial. Historically, studies have shown that culturally responsive or relevant practices addressed REM students in special education by identifying unequable practices and promoting equitable access to high-quality education in inclusive environments (Fallon et al., 2021; Klingner et al., 2005). CRP enhances connectivity and is described as a prominent collection of characteristics, perceptions, group affiliations, and technological practices within an academic setting (Chao et al., 2010; Shmulsky et al., 2021). Careful consideration of cultures and self-analysis of ideas and presumptions can effectively incorporate cultural responsiveness, especially within transition planning (Baumgartner et al., 2015; Suk et al., 2019).

In addition, relationships matter, especially within the context of cultural identity and support. Researchers have confirmed through a recent study that fostering appropriate relationships with students and their families enhances closeness, safety, and a sense of belonging, which may enhance greater classroom participation and academic achievement (Braun et al., 2016; Fallon et al., 2022). Hence, fostering a positive classroom culture positively affects students' outcomes; therefore, appropriate, and relevant planning is key. Educators and stakeholders should become more aware and plan for culturally responsive practices, especially

during REM-SWD annual transition meetings, by creating meaningful goals aligned with postsecondary goals with cultural responsiveness in mind (Suk et al., 2019).

Proposed Solutions

Opportunities for HBCUs to prepare REM-SWD's diverse learning needs are vast and should be further explored. As students embark on an important life transition from high school to college, the transitional services and support can either catapult or relinquish momentum, especially if they desire to attend college after high school. During high school IEP team meetings and intervention planning, stakeholders should also consider REM-SWD as team members (Golson et al., 2022). Thus, transition support and services are vital to enhancing positive post-high school outcomes, and it is crucial to identify and cultivate the skills and characteristics of students who are more or less likely to receive adequate transition support (Mello et al., 2021). SWD, especially those identified as REM, should be actively involved in their transition process, and maintain the momentum once they are enrolled in college or post-secondary institutions.

HBCUs can play a vital role in establishing consistency and cultivating an atmosphere of welcoming students with diverse learning challenges, such as getting involved as stakeholders in the transition process during the high school years. ODS practitioners can enhance involvement by facilitating an active role during recruitment efforts, inquiring about students' subjective experiences with transition-based interventions employed by their high schools, and actively providing practice solutions to enhance the students' development and progress monitoring procedures in high school settings (Golson et al., 2022).

Social advocacy and activism had a long-standing imprint on the impact of HBCUs throughout the year, dating back several decades to the era of sanctioned segregation (Price & Viceisza, 2023). Enhancing self-advocacy skills can play a significant role in supporting REM with diverse learning needs and the ability to demonstrate persistence to meet and achieve their overarching goals. Learning about self-advocacy and activism broadens students' skill sets. It enhances their learning capabilities in the classroom, which may offer further opportunities to become well-adjusted while building a firm communal foundation following their college experiences (Price & Viceisza, 2023). As students are actively engaged in their educational processes, prior studies suggest that enhanced self-determination skills that include abilities to engage in proper goal setting, self-management, and understanding their abilities and limitations

and how they impact learning, affect their overall academic performance (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Slaughter et al., 2020). In addition, researchers confirmed that students who are aware, actively engaged, and prioritize critical post-secondary transitional components on their IEP are more likely to use disability support while attending college (Mello et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2016).

As SWD are likelier to encounter lower persistency and completion rates than peers without those learning challenges (Lee et al., 2015; Newman et al., 2011; Newman et al., 2021), it is vital to engage in intentional strategies that may include multifaceted collaboration among various stakeholders. Another proposed solution could include enhancing education for PSI faculty and staff on disability laws, students with disabilities, and accommodations, which may help to alleviate the high number of negative experiences and difficulties that students reported facing with classmates and instructors (Lyman et al., 2016; Straughter et al., 2020). In addition, the intentional incorporation of family and mentors into the transition process may enhance student engagement and should be considered by school counselors and ODS specialists (Clayton et al., 2023). HBCU ODS may support students transitioning to college by informing them of ways in which barriers are identified within the classroom and on campus while adjusting to college life and how they can remove them or at least lessen them (Lyman et al., 2016; Straugher et al., 2020) as they prepare to enter college.

Conclusion

Conceptualizing the importance of collaborative efforts for stakeholders to consider during the transitional processes for both secondary and PSI is vital, especially for REM-SWA wishing to further their academic pursuits at HBCUs. Traditionally, HBCUs have a long history of advocating equal and equitable rights for marginalized populations and communities, so continuing the fight is commendable and needed. Finally, HBCUs can maximize their impact on REM-SWA by enhancing CRP within multiple areas of academia to expand REM-SWD knowledge, skills, ability and to further meet their diverse learning needs.

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Author Biography

Christian Specks, LCSW-BACS, is an Assistant Professor of Social Work at the
University of Louisiana at Monroe and founder of Grace Restored Counseling & Consulting, LLC
with over 19 years of experience in the field. Professor Specks is a Ph.D. candidate in Education,
focusing on P-20 education for diverse learners.