

## Culture Shock among College Freshmen: Implications for Retention

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For the past two decades I have taught at a small, predominately African American university, aka: an HBCU (Historically Black College or University), and have observed a phenomenon that I've labeled Freshman Depression, cause in part by the culture shock of being away from home for the first time.

Over 90% of the student body is African American; many of our students are the first members of their respective families to go to college. Scholarships and student loans notwithstanding, students usually go to colleges that they can afford and that are relatively close to their homes. Most of our students come from non-urban communities in the South where the majority of the population is also African American; they come to college and expect everything to be like it is at home because at first glance, the people look the same as they did at home and the culture is similar. Arguably, such racial and cultural homogeneity may not prepare them for the competitive nature of an increasingly globalized world. In many public schools in such communities, students are pushed from one grade to the next without having to do too much and mistakenly think that college will be as easy as high school. Some are in for a rude awakening.

While the other students are Black, the professors may come from a variety of American states and many countries, some of whom will place demands on their students that originated in a variety of cultures and educational backgrounds. Many students find themselves away from home for the first time, having to adjust to the rigors of college work that high school might not have prepared them for. They have to adjust to the potentially competing and conflicting demands of their new peer group, their professors, their extra-curricular activities,

and possibly their sports teams, as well. Some find that they lack the skills that college life requires, such as: study skills, time management skills, and conflict resolution skills.

At the beginning of every semester I ask my freshman the following question, "How many of you believe that these four years of college will be the best years of your life?" Every time, almost everyone raises his/her hand, to which I respond, "So what does that say for the rest of your life?" Many students come to college expecting to have a great time and to make friends and memories that will last a lifetime, and many eventually do so. But the reality for many freshmen is that the first year of college is not all fun and games; many are grappling with the usual insecurities that plague young adults and they worry that everyone else is having fun and they are not. As an aside, I am the host of a weekly, live, call-in radio talk show that addresses issues of sexuality and relationships. I receive a lot of questions from student that begin with, "Is there something wrong with me if -" "I don't have a boyfriend/girlfriend, I have been here almost two months and haven't made friends yet", among other similar concerns. Impressions count, and for impressionable freshman students, it often feels like they are on the outside looking in, although such feelings of alienation usually dissipate by the second year of college [1] with the formation of peer groups [2].

It is not difficult to understand how some college freshmen develop depression that is often overlooked or misdiagnosed. The possible symptoms of depression can vary from person to person. Faced with a bewildering array of choices for courses, activities, and possible friendships, some students withdraw rather than assert themselves or risk rejection. While such a student may seem shy, some are anhedonic. Some students choose to become involved in activities in order to fill the time or to meet people, but may find the activities to be unfulfilling. While filling every waking moment with some kind of activity might seem like a desire to become involved in college life, it can actually be an ineffective way to avoid confronting one's feelings of loneliness or dissatisfaction. Changes in appetite are common symptoms of depression, which are easy to pass off as dislike of cafeteria food because it just isn't like Mom's home cooking. Some students avoid going to the cafeteria for meals because the place often affords an opportunity to see and to be seen; everyone sees who is eating with whom and who is eating

alone. Changes in sleep can be symptomatic of depression, but that's also understandable. Students have to adjust to sleeping away from home in a bed that's not theirs, in a room with insufficient space for all their possessions that they have to share with total strangers. Some dormitories are not quiet, restful places; some roommates have bizarre sleeping habits.

There are organizations on campus that help students adjust, such as: the counseling center, the caring group of people whose job it is to help freshmen succeed, and a number of concerned professors. As I alluded to, most of these feelings of alienation wear off by the sophomore year, by which time students will have figured out how to negotiate college life, made friends, and become involved in courses and activities that are appropriate for them. College is supposed to be a time of personal and professional growth and for most students it is, but until they get acclimated to the realities of college life the first year can be a time of bewilderment that may lead to depression.

The ability to make friends and to feel part of one's new environment doesn't just make the college experience more enjoyable or more enjoyable; it has implications for the retention of students. Retention rate refers to the percentage of freshman students who return for their second year, and it's a problem for many colleges [3]. In the United States the overall freshman rate for all 4-year institutions is approximately 75%; expressed another way, 25% of all first-year students drop out before the beginning of their second year. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), retention rates at colleges with selective or very selective admission policies are much lower than retention rates at colleges with non-selective admission policies, also referred to as open enrollment policies. The University with which I am affiliated accepts 95% of all who apply for four-year degrees, and has a retention rate of 57%, one of the worst rates in the country.

As an HBCU, a Historically Black College or University, South Carolina State University faces some issues that is unique to Black higher education. Many of our students are the first ones in their respective families to go to college, which could indicate that while families are supportive of their children's educational attainment, they might not understand the process or exactly how to offer support. Our students typically come from the public schools of the Southern part of the United States, which are notorious for their lack of funds, insufficient numbers of teachers, and questionable infrastructure. Many of our students come from families that cannot offer much financial assistance, and many are forced to drop out because of monetary concerns. The average student loan is approximately \$29,500/year, with a high default rate ([www.collegefactual.com](http://www.collegefactual.com), 2018).

Over 90% of the students at South Carolina State University are Black and the vast majority of professors and staff are, as well. One would think that with the relative homogeneity of the campus those students would find it less problematic to form friendships and develop a 'sense of belonging' [2] that can encourage positive relations with peers [4]. Forming relationships with their fellow students can have a positive

effect on students' ability to adjust to the rigors of college life [5], and can help to alleviate the stress of trying to adjust to a new environment [6].

Attachment theory posits that people who have secure and positive attachments to others, such as parents, significant others, siblings, often find it easier to adjust to new environments [5]. While relationships with family members and significant others may change when a student goes to college [7], this is where satisfying and trusting relationships with other members of the university community can be of great importance. A salient factor in the rate of retention was the degree to which students reported satisfying interactions with faculty and staff [8]; Gohn, Schwartz, & Donnelly [9] found that 'student satisfaction with instructors within their respective majors' has an impact on retention. Another factor related to retention is enrollment in freshman orientation courses [10], sometimes called University 101 or Introduction to the University, where first-year students are given the knowledge and skills to function in their new academic environment [3].

There is no one factor that can be single out as responsible for student retention; like most lives, the lives of college freshmen are subject to a variety of influences, but creating a caring, supportive environment where new students feel like they belong can go a long way to reducing the dropout rate of college freshmen.

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