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African American Student Access To and Completion Of Higher Education, 1960-1992: A Correspondence Theory Analysis

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“This presentation utilizes correspondence theory to analyze African American undergraduate student access to and completion of higher education in the United States. Findings from this research are presented and policy recommendations affecting Black student enrollment and graduation are discussed.”

This paper uses correspondence theory to analyze African American undergraduate student access to and completion of higher education in the United States from 1960 to 1992. Specifically, this exploratory research examines public institutions (four-year colleges and universities). These national data are collected for each year during the 1960 to 1992 time period and a secondary analysis of the already collected descriptive data is undertaken. The major sources of information are the U.S. Bureau of the Census and the National Center for Education Statistics.

Correspondence theory states that the mode of production of a society has a concomitant impact upon the superstructure of that society. Thus, the national economy and its labor needs influence the economy of higher education which in turn affects the ability of black students to gain access to and complete higher education. The paper examines these relationships in order to establish this correspondence.

Two relationships are specifically examined. The first relationship is between access (measured by enrollment) and completion (measured by bachelor's degrees conferred) and the economy of higher education (measured by tuition and required fee amounts and federal sources of financial aid). The second relationship is between the economy of higher education and the state of the national economy (measured by unemployment rates, poverty rates, labor force participation rates and the gross domestic product).

The findings of this research indicate that fluctuations in the national economy have a corresponding relationship to the economy of higher education. During the economic expansion, i.e., approximately 1960 through 1974-76, African American student enrollment and bachelor's degrees earned increased due to policies that facilitated this occurrence, e.g., the provision of federal grants and relatively low tuition and required fee amounts.

As the corporate, high technology, global economy evolved from the middle 1970s through the 1990s, educational policies which encouraged enrollment and graduation began to change. The funds provided for federal student loans rapidly outgrew the amount provided in grants during the 1980s. This was in spite of research which has concluded that African American students, in particular, have more difficulty earning their bachelor's degrees when they are burdened by student loans. In addition, tuition

increases of the 1980s imposed serious barriers to student enrollment and graduation. These occurrences created a marked slow down in African American student progress in higher education. However, it is concluded that the perceived economic benefits of higher education diminished the likelihood of a sharp and steady decline in African American student enrollment and bachelor's degrees conferred.

This study concludes with policy recommendations. Several policies had a positive impact on black student enrollment and graduation from 1960 through the middle 1970s. Certainly the provision of financial aid in the form of grants as opposed to loans facilitated enrollment and graduation for black students. Affordable tuition and required fee amounts also promoted enrollment and graduation. Further, affirmative action policies are key. These policies encouraged institutions of higher education to recruit black students more fervently and made a noticeable difference in black student success.

PRESENTER:

Paula Snyder is a sociology instructor in the Social and Behavioral Sciences Department at Columbus State Community College in Columbus Ohio. She received her doctorate in Sociology from Howard University in August of 1998. She received her master's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies (clinical sociology) from California State University, and her bachelor's degree in Political Science from the University of California, Riverside.