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African-American Enrollment and Retention in Higher Education: An Application of Game Theory

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This study is a qualitative analysis of perceptions of institutional commitment to the enrollment and retention of African-American students at one institution. The study, which was funded by the Spencer Foundation, was conducted at Oberlin College and is based on 31 interviews of students, faculty, administrators, and staff.[1] At many predominantly white campuses, low enrollment and poor retention of African-American students is a present and escalating problem. However, Oberlin College has unusually high enrollment and retention rates for African-American students. We wanted to explore the possible reasons for this uniqueness. We relate our findings to the process of constructing theories that explain some of the characteristics of Oberlin's organizational culture.

Oberlin College

Oberlin College is located in Oberlin, Ohio (population 8,600), 35 miles southwest of Cleveland. The College was founded in 1833 by the Reverend John J. Shipherd and Philo P. Stewart with the support of Charles Grandison Finney. In 1835, the Oberlin Board of Trustees stated "the education of the people of color is a matter of great interest and should be encouraged and sustained in this institution."[2] By 1900, one out of every two African-Americans who had graduated from a predominantly white institution had earned their degree from Oberlin College.[3] Carter G. Woodson, the African-American historian, said of Oberlin: "[it] did so much for the education of Negroes before the Civil War that it was often spoken of as an institution for the education of the people of color."[4]

By the late 1960s and early 1970s African-American students started to enroll in many other colleges and universities. This unprecedented competition created problems for Oberlin, but did not deter the school. In 1972, Oberlin's faculty voted to *admit* 100 African-American students each year. In 1976, they revised their vote to say that they would *enroll* 100 African-American students each year. Since the late 1960s Oberlin has furthermore offered an impressive array of support services for African-American students. These include support for the Black Studies Department and The Afrikan Heritage House, Oberlin's African-American student dorm which also serves as the cultural center for the African-American community, both on and off of the campus; Abusua, the college's African-American student association; and Student Support Services, which though a campus-wide service, provides focused support for African-American students.

As a result of this approach, as well as its commitment to high intellectual standards, a liberal education, excellence in teaching and a social and moral understanding of one's responsibilities, for the past twenty years, African-American students have represented approximately 12% of each year's entering class. In 1983 it was reported that for students who enrolled at Oberlin between 1968 and 1977, the overall combined retention and graduation rate was 70 percent. The combined retention and graduation rate after six years for African-Americans who enrolled at Oberlin in 1977 was 77 percent. As of 1986, the combined retention and graduation rate for other classes at Oberlin were as follows:

Year of Enrollment	Combined Retention and Graduation Rate
1978	53% (after eight years)
1979	74% (after seven years)
1980	51% (after six years)
1981	47% (after five years)

The Study

Three premises undergird this research. First, Oberlin has an historical commitment to African-American students. A cursory reading of literature pertaining to the college uncovers clear evidence of this long-standing commitment. Second, Oberlin's history as it regards African-American students is unique. The fact that at the turn of the present century half of all African-American students who had graduated from predominantly white colleges and universities did so from Oberlin attests to this observation. Third, Oberlin has enrollment and retention rates for African-Americans that place it far above the crowd. Its enrollment rate is more than double the national average and the same is true for its retention rate.

Three questions guided the data collection: 1) To what extent do people at Oberlin College perceive an organizational commitment to the enrollment and retention of African-American students? 2) To what extent is Oberlin's organizational commitment a part of the ethos of the college? And, 3) To what extent do people at Oberlin College relate the organizational commitment to the college's history, or to pressure from advocates or to both?

The sample was composed of eight students, eleven faculty, six staff and six administrators. The six staff people interviewed were from Student Support Services, Afrikan Heritage House, and Admissions. Eight African-American students were interviewed—two randomly selected from each class (i.e., first-year, sophomore, junior and senior). We interviewed all of the African-

American faculty, for a total of seven; five of these were in Black Studies. We randomly selected and interviewed an additional four faculty members from the college. Finally, we interviewed six administrators in financial aid, student services, and enrollment planning.

We developed separate interview instruments with open-ended questions for students, staff, faculty, and administrators. Generally, the questions fit into seven categories: campus climate, Black Studies, support services, admissions, retention, financial aid, and the larger community. Each category of respondents was asked to respond to a different, though similar, set of questions. The instruments were piloted with students, staff, faculty, and administrators at a university in western New York and appropriate changes were made prior to conducting the actual study.

Our research employed a grounded game theory approach to the analysis of the data as described by Anselm L. Strauss in 1987.[5] Our strategy began with open coding which reduced the data by identifying all statements regarding perceptions of Oberlin's commitment to African-American students (Premise 1). We used axial coding to classify *patterns of perceived institutional commitment* and *strategies for enrollment and retention* of African-American students. The next level of coding was selective coding which enabled us to do more in-depth analysis to determine if Oberlin's commitment was perceived as an attribution of the college's history, the pressure of advocates, or both. This final level of analysis was employed to determine the degree to which the perceptions of organizational commitment were shared across roles (i.e., by students, administrators, faculty and/or staff) and the extent to which the organizational commitment was a part of the ethos of the college.

Game Theory

Game theory is helpful in attempting to understand the behavior of rational beings involved in a conflict situation. It can, at times, be used to explain how they maneuver to protect their interests.[6] Game theory can be summarized as the collection of games that are played by groups or coalitions within organizations for different reasons and the loose linkages between those separate games. Organizational policy, therefore, is the by-product of game interaction and the residual relationships that result from this process. Organizational policy is not a unified rational, and goal driven system.

No single group is responsible for the organizational ethos or operational policies that result from the interactions of "interests" within an environment. Ultimately the policies and organizational ethos reflect a compromise that is optimal for all groups involved in the competition for scarce resources. The perspective of the players involved is short and no one group sees the whole picture, therefore the ecology of games includes components of specialization, cooperation, and interdependence. There are usually several games being played within an organization each possessing its own structured competition, with its own rules, winners and losers that relate to distinct audiences.[7]

Applications of game theory can be found in educational policy development and the research linked to it and in determining what research is validated by the academic community. It would benefit all researchers who examine coalition formation and policy generation processes to understand the purpose, focus, and audience with regard to game theory application.

Preliminary Findings Using Game Theory: Agitators and Gatekeepers

Preliminary analysis of the data suggests two key constituencies on the Oberlin campus to whom we refer as "agitators" and "gatekeepers." Agitators are those individuals—faculty, students, staff or administrators—who go beyond supporting the increased enrollment of African-American students. They advocate increased enrollment and *retention* of African-American students. An African-American administrator reported:

> From the admissions end, I would say some of the measures are unlike many other institutions. We don't begin by looking at those quantitative data, for example, like test scores. We start with other kinds of things....Has the student anything in his or her profile that demonstrates that he or she grappled with some problems and stuck with it? Is there a sense of the student knowing self and sort of having that upward mobility? We look at all of those things first and then try to determine can this student survive in an academic environment like this. Then we will look at the test scores. Using those kinds of measurements, we are not holding something like a test score...over their heads and we aren't using that as a bias before looking at the whole profile.

There is a clear commitment to the enrollment of African-American students here. But the agitation strategy includes a commitment to retention also. Here an African-American staff person describes her perceptions:

> More Black students, in my opinion, are holding Oberlin accountable in terms of what they have said historically—that they are into retaining and matriculating students. And students say fine, if that's what you are saying then I see the numbers coming in but I don't see you doing anything for us. This is what we want done. I see them being more vocal.

This reflects a perceived commitment, beyond enrollment, to include retention. It reflects the agitation role of students.

The gatekeepers on the other hand, mostly administrators and faculty, are committed primarily to the enrollment of African-American students. Describing her perceptions, an African-American staff person said:

"Historically, Oberlin appears to be active in *recruiting* Afro-American students." A white administrator described the behavior of the college's board of trustees: "I think at the last board meeting there were three or four board members who raised questions about how were we doing in regard to Black *admissions*, with a very clear voice of mandate that that's something we mustn't ever let up on."

More to the point, a white faculty member reported, "there is a lot of emphasis on increased recruitment. I am not really sure that the retention issue has been paid as much attention to in part because I guess it gets swallowed up in the larger issue of enrollment which is a problem across the board here."

In each instance, the sole focus is on enrollment with no mention of retention.

Oberlin's Game: Rules, Winners, Losers, and Audiences

We perceive the agitators and the gatekeepers as being on the same team for the enrollment of African-American students. In each instance, the group's objective is to win the game. Winning the game for each of these constituencies is defined as having an unusually high enrollment rate for African-American students. Yet the agitators and the gatekeepers part company in the area of Oberlin's retention rate for African-American students. Agitators employ numerous strategies to ensure that they win in the area of retention and matriculation. An African-American administrator made this remark:

> I met with [first-year students] twice during the year....After we had the meeting, we all went out together. We went to Cleveland to see a movie. This was just to let them know that yes, someone does care that you are here and...I want you to stay here.

A clear commitment to African-American retention is displayed by this strategy. Winning for the agitators includes having students connect in a personal way with Oberlin officials and graduate with positive feelings about their experience at the college.

The winning for the gatekeepers, on the other hand, is to control the process. A staff person noted: "I still think they have a ceiling, an unspoken ceiling, okay 25% overall minority is enough." This statement reflects the gatekeeper strategy of maintaining control. In fact, the 1976 decision to annually enroll 100 African-American students is also reflective of the strategy which includes a desire to control. A white administrator recounted:

> I think it was in the '60s when Oberlin faced the situation of minority enrollments, specifically Blacks, and it was the general faculty legislation that mandated enrollment of 100 Blacks and 10 Latinos and set aside 38% of the financial aid budget for minority students.

Again the emphasis is on controlling the situation while the prize remains constant—increased enrollment. While the two constituencies are on the same team and share the goal of winning— defined as having an unusually high enrollment rate for African-American students—they each are motivated to win for different reasons.

Winning — For the Agitators

The agitators want to win so that they can have a critical mass of students on the campus. A white administrator described the importance of a *critical mass* of African-American students:

> I have a theory also that has to deal with a certain number of a minority being enrolled on campus being sufficient, a critical mass if you will, and when you start slipping and not enrolling as many, and you are also losing them through withdrawal, the numbers of Blacks on campus are not sufficient to support themselves. The support structures begin to slip away and that becomes a problem. We need to have sufficient numbers which Oberlin has....I think what they have is sufficient to maintain a presence that also attracts other students and then makes Oberlin true to its commitment.

This notion of a critical mass is key in the strategy that we define as agitation and its goal of recruiting and retaining African-American students. Research shows that African-American students are more likely to persist when there is a critical mass of African-American students on the campus. In such a situation, African-American students provide support for each other. Moreover, the situation encourages the continuation of support services that are provided for these students.

Winning — For the Gatekeepers

The gatekeepers seek to win because it enables them to help maintain Oberlin's liberal image. Winning to them offers a selling point for the college in terms of African-American as well as overall student enrollment. An African-American staff person said: "There is a commitment because of Oberlin's reputation that Oberlin is known for having a significant minority population on its campus."

One African-American administrator was very straightforward: "I think Oberlin's history forces an obligation on modern administrators....We have a tradition to live up to. As a matter of fact, it would be suicidal for anyone in the administration to buck that tradition." Another administrator commented on the impact that Oberlin's historical image has on people at Oberlin today: "I think people are mindful of the history and its impact is probably subtle, but nevertheless there is a kind of legacy, a set of important principles, that got established early that people really feel as part of the fabric of the place."

Concurring, a staff person shared the following

comment: "Oberlin is very proud of that historical commitment, and I think that investment and personal pride in that commitment translates into continued support." A white faculty member described the importance of Oberlin's history in the following way: "It is almost an assumption that everybody has—that Oberlin should be educating Blacks, women, and other minorities. Institutions, whatever they are, have a culture and this is part of Oberlin's culture." Each of the above perceptions clearly illustrates a strategy that stresses that commitment is important because of its role in helping to maintain the college's liberal tradition. This notion is embodied in the gatekeeping strategy. They are in the same game with the agitators, and they're on the same team for recruitment and enrollment, but the motivation to win is different.

The following specific findings are organized in relation to the three initials guiding questions.

1. To what extent do people at Oberlin College perceive an organizational commitment to the enrollment and retention of African-American students? Our research indicates that there is a shared perception that an organizational commitment exists at Oberlin College with regard to African-American students. However, this perception is not as widely shared when commitment is defined in terms of retention, rather than enrollment. With this in mind and with an eye to obtaining more meaningful information, we shifted the emphasis in this question to *how* people at Oberlin perceived the college's organizational commitment to the enrollment of African-American students. The data suggested the presence of at least two groups whose memberships cut across the original four constituencies. Some of the respondents described what we have called a gatekeeping strategy. Those who shared this strategy appeared to view the college's commitment as a barometer of the college's success and as a selling point for the college in terms of future enrollment opportunities. In fact, a recent survey of students admitted to Oberlin in 1990 indicated that over 90 percent of these individuals chose Oberlin because of its liberal tradition.[8] It would make sense, then, that those who are fulfilling a gatekeeping role would want to continue doing things that reflect a liberal image in order to maintain a large applicant pool.

Gatekeepers also appear to be concerned with basic economic issues like, 1) what kind of goods and services should our resources provide, 2) which recipients should receive priority, 3) how can we encourage the efficient use and allocation of scarce resources, and finally, 4) how can the correct allocation for public and private usage be determined. This focus on economic externalities involves private costs/gains and societal costs/gains. The gatekeepers may place emphasis on African-American enrollment due to the private or individual institutional gains that Oberlin can accrue. Retention and matriculation rates, on the other hand, can be thought of as societal gains. The externalities argument states that benefits that accrue to society instead of the individual persons or entities will not be pursued with the same vigor as those benefits that are captured privately.

The agitators see Oberlin's commitment to African-Americans in terms of private benefits to them—leverage within the establishment. But they also are conscious and motivated by the societal gains involved with achieving more African-American college graduates. This agitation strategy was described in terms of the importance it attributed to the provision of a critical mass of African-American students and its ability to provide a climate conducive for increased enrollment and retention.

2. To what extent is Oberlin's organizational commitment a part of the ethos of the college? As mentioned in the response to question one, the organizational commitment was perceived to be related to the enrollment of African-American students. This commitment to enrollment was a part of the ethos of the college. That is, a commitment to the presence of African-American students was prominent in the attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics of individuals in each of the constituencies of the college community. According to one administrator, "the whole ethos on campus is an openness to everyone regardless of race."

Not only was this campus ethos perceived within the constituencies interviewed, it was also perceived to be present in African-American alumni. The perceptions of our respondents suggested that African-American alumni were a significant part of this campus ethos. As one African-American administrator put it:

> We got a lot of referrals from Black alumni this year, which was very good, very helpful...and they also participated in calling students to find out if students had questions about the college. Many of them participated in interviews and this year I really saw the support and enthusiasm.

A white administrator described his perceptions of Oberlin's historical commitment to the enrollment of African-American students:

> If you go way, way back, needless to say, we admitted Blacks early and there were very few institutions who did at this time. I think that was the beginning of a long-term commitment to including persons other than whites.

3. To what extent do people at Oberlin College relate the organizational commitment to the college's history, pressure from advocates, or both? Those who employed the gatekeeping strategy attributed the college's commitment to the enrollment of African-American students primarily to Oberlin's historical image. There have been times when the respondents indicated that gatekeepers have seen the need to intervene when the numbers of African-American students have gone down making them active participants in the recruitment and enrollment process. However, it is unclear if these gatekeepers were afraid that the historical image would be damaged or if

there were other reasons behind their intervention. A white administrator spoke about the 1960's:

> Black enrollment was down to about one percent...and it made everybody unhappy and everyone aware that we just hadn't been paying attention to what was going on. We went to work and wrote three grants; the Rockefeller Foundation got funds for two, or was it three. One was to expand enormously the scholarship program; one was to establish what became a prototype to Upward Bound.

Agitators, on the other hand, were perceived as attributing the college's commitment primarily to vigilance and advocacy on their part. In describing these agitators, one African-American faculty member said: "it [the agitation]...included a lot of agitation by students themselves and by a few Black faculty and staff." A white administrator, discussing the period in the late 1970's when the enrollment of African-American students began to dip again, told us:

> [Barry King] and people like that who were still on campus raised people's consciousness again about not reaching the goal of 100 and what are we doing about it and then the admissions office and the administration began to respond to that.

An African-American faculty member described his perceptions upon his initial arrival on the Oberlin campus:

> When I arrived, what I found was an institution that was making serious efforts to be hospitable, to make amends. More specifically, I found certain individuals who were working seriously in the biology department and many others...these were persons who were spearheading the efforts to attract minority students.

A white administrator's perceptions of the 1960's provides more insight:

> We had some very, very important faculty tied with that, involved in the process. It wasn't just administrators. Dean [Brown] was very committed to expanding the Black population and helping to educate persons who came from backgrounds that might not be as strong as other students'...his heart was in it in all ways. I think that is important. He pressed constantly that we not just talk about things but [that] we do things. There was another man, [Franklin], in [French], all who got involved in the early stages of planning either the summer program, upward bound, special opportunities as well as talking about the scholarship program.

Here we find that it is a *combination* of Oberlin's history and current active advocacy that maintains Oberlin's commitment to African-American students. Gatekeepers primarily uphold the ethos of the college but will join forces with the agitators during crisis periods of low enrollment and retention of African-American students.

Conclusion

Several tentative conclusions are derived from our results. First, Oberlin is committed, institutionally, to the enrollment of African-American students. It uses qualitative measures like proven persistence and diligence, current self-efficacy indicators, and the future potential for upward mobility to work in tandem with quantitative measures such as admission criteria. Additionally Oberlin solicits the involvement of African-American alumni to aid in the recruitment of students. Second, this organizational commitment to the enrollment of African-American students is a part of Oberlin's ethos. That is, it is a shared value reflected in the attitudes and behavior of the members of the college community. Third, this commitment is perceived differently by those we call the agitators and the gatekeepers. The agitators view this commitment as a result of their own advocacy and the advocacy of their predecessors over the years. The gatekeepers, on the other hand, view the commitment as being derived from the college's historical image of liberalism.

We offer some recommendations based upon these conclusions. We feel that they are important to institutions of higher education that are concerned with improving their enrollment and retention rates for African-American students. First, most institutions are committed to something. There needs to be an assessment of exactly what that something is. Many institutions are committed to the idea of increasing the enrollment of African-American students. Yet each institution must assess its own commitment as exemplified by the organizational *ethos*, then implement *policies* that support this commitment. It is only with this knowledge and practice that any institution can progress with regard to the enrollment of African-American students.

Next, what is needed for complete organizational commitment to African-American students is a strong retention focus. It is, of course, necessary to enroll students before they can be retained, but the efforts are for naught if there is no institutional commitment to keeping these students on campus and facilitating their graduation. Oberlin agitators have personal contact with African-American students in the classrooms and at informal social gatherings to ensure that students feel welcome on campus. It should be noted that alumni can be instrumental in communicating student concerns to campus administrators. This can only be accomplished if mentoring supportive relationships are fostered between students and prior graduates.

Institutions must assess what "games" are being played on its campus. As in any other situation, the energies of

allies must be corralled and incorporated into strategies for "winning." For each policy initiative implemented, a university must assess who are the winners and the losers and what audiences are affected by the policy. The university also should assess whether an equilibrium has been achieved among its groups. Because of their unique missions that can include both private and social objectives, universities must work hard to insure that the allocation of scarce resources result in an equitable output of private and societal gains. If an organization strays too far in either direction, it can become fragmented into various competitive special interest groups that promote institutional stagnation instead of growth.

Finally, it must be emphasized that, a critical mass of African-American students at predominantly white colleges and universities is important for several reasons. It provides role models and academic, social, and cultural support for these students—critical ingredients for a successful college experience. Self-empowerment, or African-Americans helping African-Americans, at Oberlin is only possible because of the existence of a critical mass of African-American students.

Notes

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[2]Oberlin College. 1997-98. *Oberlin College Course Catalog.*

[3]Oberlin College. 1987. *Oberlin College Course Catalog.*

[4]Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861* (Brooklyn NY: 1992), 276.

[5]Anselm L. Strauss, *Qualitative analysis for social scientists* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[6]William A. Firestone, "Educational policy as an ecology of games," *Educational Researcher* 18.7 (1989), 18-24.

[7]Ibid.

[8]T. C. Hayden. "Why Today's Students Choose Oberlin To Study The Liberal Arts." *Oberlin Alumni Magazine* 87.1 (1991), 16-17.

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