

# CONNECTIONS, ENAGEMENT, & MENTORSHIP IN THE BLACK COLLEGE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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Imagine being a student attending college for the first time. Many students face loneliness, while some may have [difficulties making new connections or managing friendships](#). Being away from home for the first time can be alarming and scary for any student; however, Black students typically have a tougher time.

Black students attending Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) feel isolated when they leave their home to reside in an environment with [little to no representation or support from people who look like them](#). Many Black students also report experiencing a limited sense of belonging [on PWI campuses](#). Educators far and wide explain [how important it is that Black students have a support system](#) while attending college and many acknowledge a pattern of students becoming disconnected due to faltering support. As we live in a difficult time, full of racial injustice and social unrest, a positive and welcoming campus environment is vital to the success of Black students.

[Research has shown](#) that many Black students fail to complete college after their first year and, thus, have fewer career opportunities following their college experience. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), founded to provide opportunities for African Americans, are examples of institutions created to make all students feel welcomed and empowered. HBCUs actively combat low graduation and retention rates for Black students by putting an emphasis on mentorship and support.

[A recently released nationwide collegiate list](#) included top HBCUs with more than 30% of first-year students graduating within four years, and crediting their [success](#) to caring professors, advisors, and support staff. These institutions are Spelman College, ranked as the number one HBCU by graduation rate according to *U.S. News and World Report*, with a [rate of 68%](#), followed by Howard University ([52% rate](#)) and Fisk University ([50% rate](#)). Each of these institutions serve as the model institutions that are referred to throughout this piece.

[Survey results](#) show students who attend HBCUs identify safe classroom environments and attentive faculty and staff as a major contribution to their success. It is important that all institutional types learn from HBCUs and adopt a similar support structure for helping students succeed, particularly Black students.

Gaining access to working models that higher education institutions can adopt to better engage Black students is an essential stride that educators and administrators alike must begin to consider. It has been noted that [being more intentional about social connections](#) and making sure that Black students are introduced to other students who share similar interests and backgrounds enriches student success. Making connections that give students opportunities for engagement both inside and outside of the classroom is key to development beyond the first-year experience.

Further, social engagements such as clubs, organizations, and mentorship are [major contributors to connections and support for students](#). For instance, [Black Greek-lettered organizations](#) are responsible for enhancing scholarship, leadership, social activism, and civic engagement—especially when a large amount of faculty and staff members are knowledgeable and supportive of Greek life, offering an even deeper connection with students.

As an alumnus of an HBCU, I experienced high levels of support from faculty and staff during my college experience. Without the overwhelming amount of support I received, I know that I would not have made it past my first year of college.

In addition to general support, it is vital to have a mentor help with advising, career goals, and keeping students on track for graduation during the first-year college experience. The mentorship experience can also provide diverse opportunities that [students can relate to and feel comfortable learning around](#).

HBCUs have proven much success with their mission in assisting students after their first year of college by providing a clear blueprint for improving the educational experience for their students. Other institutions must do the same. Faculty and staff support is undoubtedly the reason that I became involved in extracurricular activities and was able to declare a major during my first year of college. The support and mentorship I received shaped my trajectory as a student leader and led me down a path to become an educator with the purpose of mentoring and advising college students. The first step in improving the gap in the education system is acknowledging that there is a problem with the support structure for Black students. Only then can we discover innovative ways to keep the focus on retention and success.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Phillip G. Gatling Jr. is a Director of Fraternity & Sorority Life in the Office of Student Engagement within the Division of Student Affairs at Widener University. He earned a B.S. in Secondary Education at Fayetteville State University and a M.S. in Business Management from Cambridge College. Currently, he is pursuing a Doctor of Education with a line of research focused on the student engagement experience of African American students.

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