International Journal of Education and Social Science; Vol. 7 No. 2; March 2020
ISSN 2410-5171 (Online), 2415-1246 (Print)
Published by Research Institute for Progression of Knowledge

Barriers That Affect HBCU Students' Help-Seeking Behavior

Obyung Kwun
Southern University at New Orleans
College of Business and Public Administration Room #204
Southern University at New Orleans
6801 Press Drive, New Orleans, LA 70126 USA

Ghasem S. Alijani
Southern University at New Orleans
College of Business and Public Administration Room #110
Southern University at New Orleans
6801 Press Drive, New Orleans, LA 70126 USA

Robin Johnson
Southern University at New Orleans
College of Business and Public Administration Room #204
Southern University at New Orleans
7145 Downman Rd, New Orleans, LA 70126 USA

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine barriers that prevent HBCU students from seeking help. Barriers to Help Seeking Scale (BHSS) was adopted to collect data to examine factors that affect help-seeking behavior of HBCU students. A partial least square analysis shows that student's need for self-control is the only significant barrier that prevents HBCU students from seeking help. Other variables in the research model failed to be significant barriers. However, the results show that the adopted instrument has a weak validity in the current research context.

Keywords: Help-Seeking, HBCU, Self-Control Learning

Introduction

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) have been often regarded as low performing in terms of retention and graduation rates, especially compared to non-HBCUs (Richards & Awokoya, 2012). A featured report in the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (Anonymous, 2005/2006) shows much lower graduation rates among HBCU students (42%) than among African American students in the nation's top colleges and universities, although some academically selective HBCUs reported graduation rates above the average. Nearly one half of surveyed HBCUs reported two-thirds or more students drop out of school without earning the degree. These trends remain same in recent years (Atlantic Journal-Constitution, 2018). While the report ascribes the low graduation rates to various reasons such as low family income, lack of family support, and inadequate financial resources at HBCUs in general. However,-inadequate academic preparation and poor study habits are considered the most important reason.

Help-seeking in education is a self-regulatory problem-solving strategy that contributes to learning and it is highly correlated to student academic achievement (Karabenick, 2006; Kitsantas & Chow, 2007). The process of seeking help within an educational event can be a valuable and strategic resource for learners (Karabenick, 1998).

For example, Kitsantas and Chow (2007) shows that students who seek help frequently accomplish higher academic achievement. Student achievement is especially high for those students who seek help from formal help sources, such as instructors.

We believe that understanding HBCU students' help-seeking behaviors can help universities formulate programs to improve the retention and graduation rate and may better prepare instructors to deal with low performing students. However, there is a lack of research specifically on HBCU students' help-seeking behaviors. While there is a wider and more in-depth study on help-seeking behaviors in universities, there is a need for study on HBCU students, due to the unusual characteristics among HBCU students, such as age, income, job, commuting, etc.

As mentioned above, seeking help may improve student performance. Therefore, the current study attempts to investigate factors that affect student's help-seeking behaviors. We are especially interested in barriers that prevent students from seeking help. It has been known that students hesitate to seek help due to various reasons (Karabenick, 2006).

Literature Review

Help seeking studies have focused on attitudes, intention, goals, or preferred sources of help, especially on the inverse relationship between threats to self-esteem and help seeking (Karabenick, 2006). For example, Ryan and Pintrich (1997) indicates that the comfort of help seeking relationships depends on the source of that help. The more intensely a student felt threatened, the less likely he or she is to approach the teacher for help. Students' help-seeking may be motivated or discouraged by internal and external factors. Huet, Moták, and Sakdavong (2016) also shows that students' motivation to seek help is controlled by a combination of his/her perceptions and the instructor's influence.

Similarly, Mansfield and Courtenay (2005) examined internal and external factors that affect help-seeking behaviors. However, their focus is on the extent to which gender-role conflict and the social psychological processes contribute to barriers to male students' help-seeking in health consulting. For example, masculine gender roles and norms, in addition to external factors such as types of problem and types of help that might be sought, tend to promote the need for self-control and self-reliance and may prevent male students from seeking help. The study developed Barriers to Help Seeking Scale (BHSS) instrument and demonstrated its validity and reliability. The results show that five barriers were found to discourage male students to seek professional help for mental and physical health problems. These barriers include:

- Need for Self-Control and Self-Reliance: e.g., I don't want others to tell me what to do.
- Minimizing Problem and Resignation: e.g., problem is not worth seeking help.
- Distrust of Caregiver: e.g., People might want something in return.
- Privacy: e.g., I don't want other people to know that I need.
- Emotional Control: e.g., I don't want to talk about my feeling.

Based on its strong validity and reliability, we propose that BHSS can also be used to examine barriers that discourage help-seeking of HBCU students where the majority tend to be nontraditional, mature, and independent.

Methodology

Participants

Survey was developed and administered to students from a HBCU located in a metropolitan area. Data from 201 students were usable for the study. Students were approached through the campus facilities that include libraries, classrooms, college cafes, university court yards, and hallways. The purpose of the survey was clearly explained to each participant and asked to answer each question in relation to their own help-seeking behaviors.

Survey

The survey consists of two sections. Section I is designed to collect demographic information, such as the participants' gender, age, employment status, class rank, and Major. It also asks questions to identify help-seeking behaviors such as students' preferences in types of help and frequencies. Lastly, the independent variable for this study, intention to seek help, was included in this section. A 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from Most Unlikely to Most Likely, was adopted to collect the responses.

Section II consists of questions that measure barriers that are known to discourage students from seeking help. These questions were selected from BHSS by Mansfield and Courtenay (2005) and reworded to fit the study context. Also, the barriers were modified for simplicity. These are Need for Self-Control, Minimizing Problem, Distrust of Caregiver, and Privacy. Emotional Control barrier in BHSS was excluded, because it was deemed inappropriate to the educational help context. The responses were based on a 5-point Likert-type scale to rate each item with the lower numbers indicating that the item is less of a barrier to help-seeking, from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). These responses were later reversed for analysis to show the relationships with positive numbers.

Analysis

Partial Least Squares (PLS) was used to test the relationships between student intention to seek help and barriers to seek help. PLS has been used to assess various types of construct models (Wetzels, et al., 2009). As a structural equation modeling technique, PLS consists of a two-part testing of a predictive model: measurement model and structural model testing. The measurement model was tested to evaluate the validity of the questionnaire items; and the structural model was examined to test the hypotheses in the research model (Barclay et al., 1995). In this study, the model assessments were conducted using the PLS software, Smart PLS2.0.

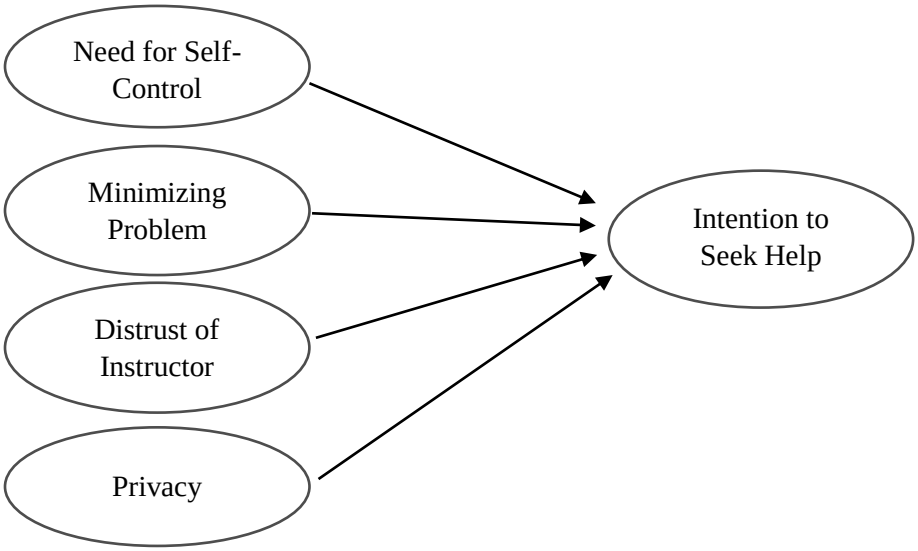
According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), the relationship between constructs in a research model and items used to measure them can be specified as either formative or reflective in order to test the validity of the items for each construct. Lohmoller (1981) suggests that exogenous constructs (independent variables) should be modeled with formative items (multiple items form a construct) and endogenous constructs (dependent variables) should be modeled with reflective items (a construct is reflected in multiple items) when theoretical knowledge about the construct does not exist. For the proposed model shown in Figure 1, the items measuring all exogenous constructs were considered formative, whereas the items measuring all endogenous constructs were considered reflective (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Measurement Model

Constructs	Model	Relationship
Need for Self-Control	Exogenous	Formative
Minimizing Problem	Exogenous	Formative
Distrust of Instructor	Exogenous	Formative
Privacy	Exogenous	Formative
Intention	Endogenous	Reflective

The test of the structural model is to investigate the significance of the hypotheses in the research model. The results show the strengths (coefficients) of relationships specified in the model and the significance level of the relationship between the constructs in the research model. In addition, the test shows R^2 value of the dependent variables, which indicates the amount of variance explained by the model.

Figure 1. Research Model



Results

Profiles of the Participant

As shown in Table 2, the average age of the participants surveyed is 31 years old. The participants consist of 42% males and 58% females. The majority have either full time or part time jobs. This result agrees with the annual reports from the university systems in which the HBCU is a member. This also confirms that students in HBCUs located in a metropolitan area tend to be more populated by nontraditional students who carry extra load along with their schoolwork.

Additionally, students tend to get help from various sources, with the internet being the most favored source (28%). Only 17% say instructor is a preferred help source. The majority of students prefer help to improve their knowledge (Instrumental Help) and they get this type of help, rather than simply to get better grades (Expedient Help). This may be because the participants are mature and highly motivated students who take their education very seriously.

Table 2. Demographic Variables

Variables	**N = 201(%)**
Average Age	31
Gender	Count (%)
Male	84(42%)
Female	115(58%)
Employment	
Unemployed	50(25%)
Full Time	43(22%)
Part Time	99(49%)
Class Rank	
Freshman	31(16%)
Sophomore	21(11%)
Junior	32(17%)
Senior	51(26%)
Graduate	41(21%)
Other	17(8%)
Help Source	
Friends	20(11%)
Internet	52(28%)
Classmates	31(17%)
Textbooks or other Supporting Materials	49(26%)
Instructor	32(17%)
Library, Writing Center, etc	1(0.5%)
Help Frequency	
Never	2(1%)
Rarely	42(21%)
Sometimes	101(51%)
Often	38(19%)
Always	16(8%)
Type of Help Student Prefer	
Instrument Help	129(66%)
Expedient Help	65(34%)
Types of Help Student Actually Get	
Instrument Help	125(68%)
Expedient Help	59(32%)

Measurement Model

The measurement model addresses the relationship between the constructs and the items used to measure them. The test of the measurement model consists of the estimation of the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement instrument. However, reflective and formative measures should be treated differently. Formative items are considered to form or cause the construct to measure. Thus, the items are not expected to be correlated or show internal consistency (Chin, 1998). For this reason, the item weights for formative measures have been used to test the relevance of the items to the constructs (Barclay et al., 1995; Wixom and Watson, 2001). Table 3 shows the items weights for each independent variable (Minimizing Problem, Need for Self-Control, Distrust of Instructor, and Privacy). The items are expected to have positive weights on the variable, since the items for each formative variable are assumed to form or cause the variable. However, all variables have items with negative weights. For example, Min2, Min4, and Min6 for Minimizing Problem variable show negative weights.

This means that the items do not contribute to form the variable. Therefore, these question items are not deemed appropriate questions to measure Minimizing Problem variable.

Table 3. Item Weights for Formative Measures (Independent Variables)

Items	Minimizing Problem	Self-Control	Privacy	Distrust
Min1: The problem wouldn't seem worth getting help for	0.79			
Min2: The problem wouldn't be a big deal; it would go away in time	-0.42			
Min3: I wouldn't want to overreact to a problem that wasn't serious	0.16			
Min4: Problems like these are part of life now; they're just something I have to deal with	-0.36			
Min5: I'd prefer just to suck it up rather than dwell on my problems	0.60			
Min6: I would prefer to wait until I'm sure the problem is a serious one	-0.21			
SC1: I would think less of myself for needing help		0.29		
SC2: I don't like other people telling me what to do		0.41		
SC3: Nobody knows more about my problems than I do		-0.37		
SC4: I'd feel better about myself knowing I didn't need help from others		0.51		
SC5: I don't like feeling controlled by other people		0.05		
SC6: It would seem weak to ask for help		0.03		
SC7: I like to make my own decisions and not be too influenced by others		-0.70		
SC8: I like to be in charge of everything in my life		0.82		
SC9: Asking for help is like surrendering authority over my life		0.18		
SC10: I do not want to appear weaker than my peers		-0.48		
Priv1: Privacy is important to me, and I don't want other people to know about my problems			0.73	
Priv2: This is embarrassing for people to know I need help			-0.24	
Priv3: I don't want some stranger in my personal space in ways I'm not comfortable with			0.53	
Priv4: I don't like being vulnerable to someone			-0.19	
Priv5: I wouldn't want someone to touch my personal possession			0.24	
Dtru1: People typically expect something in return when they provide help				-0.62
Dtru2: I would have real difficulty finding transportation to a place where I can get help				-0.38
Dtru3: I wouldn't know what sort of help was available				0.38
Dtru4: My work would be an obstacle to getting help				-0.49
Dtru5: I don't really trust instructors and others on campus				1.12

On the other hand, convergent validity was tested on Intention, which is the only reflective variable (dependent variable). Convergent validity refers to the extent to which alternative measures of the same construct are related to each other. The composite reliability was assessed using the criteria (.70) suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Average variance extracted (AVE) of 0.50 or above has also been used to support the convergent validity of the constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table 4, both composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha, display high reliability, with 0.88 and 0.74 respectively. Table 4 also shows the average variance extracted (AVE) for Intention to Seek Help is 0.79, which is higher than the cut-off value. This indicates acceptable convergent validity of Intention.

Table 4. Validity of Reflective Variable

	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbachs Alpha
Intention	0.79	0.88	0.74

Overall, there are some weaknesses in the validity of the question items. The results need to be interpreted with caution. Subsequently, the items with negative weights were removed to test the research model.

Structural Model

Figure 2 shows the significance and the strength of the relationships between the variables. It also shows R^2 which indicates the predictive power of the model. Need for Self-Control is the only independent variable that shows significant impact on Intention to Seek Help, with path coefficients of 0.30. In another words, Minimizing Problem, Privacy, and Distrust of Instructor are not significant predictors of Intention to Seek Help, with path coefficients of -0.02, 0.10, and 0.02 respectively. In other words, student's need for self-control is the only significant barrier to help-seeking in this study. Regarding the explanatory power of the research model, the dependent variable, Intention to Seek Help shows R^2 of 0.24. Table 5 shows a summary of the hypotheses testing along with the t-statistics.

Figure 2. Results

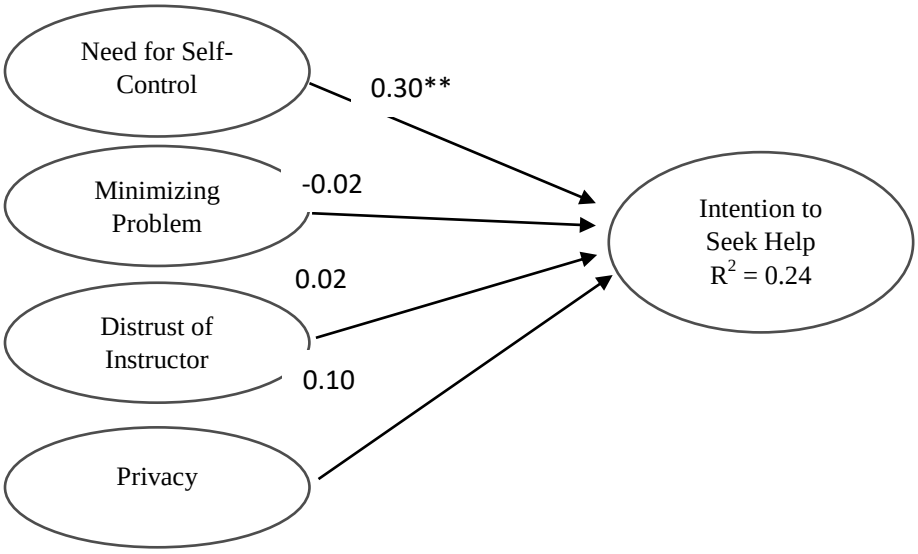


Table 5. Summary of Results

	Co-Efficient	T-Statistics	Results
Minimizing Problem -> Intention	-0.02	0.19	Not Supported
Need for Self-Control -> Intention	0.30	3.05	**Supported**
Privacy -> Intention	0.10	1.20	Not Supported
Distrust of Instructor -> Intention	0.02	0.17	Not Supported

Conclusion

The study investigated barriers that may prevent HBCU students from seeking help. The only barrier that significantly affects Intention to Seek Help was Need for Self-Control. This agrees with the gender-role research, in which students are discouraged to seek help, when their need for self-control is high and their autonomy was threatened. The other variables, Minimizing Problem, Concrete Barrier, Distrust of Instructor, and Privacy are not significant barriers. It means that HBCU students do not care much about types of problems, instructors, and privacy, when they seek help. As shown in the demographic information of the participants table, these students are mature students who carry extra loads. Many have family to take care of, in addition to work and school. In order to manage their busy lives, they may have to be independent. They may be used to solving problems without any help from others. Nevertheless, HBCUs need to provide an environment where students can easily get help from various sources, while respecting their high need for self-control. As shown in the demographic data, students prefer peer students and the Internet as favored help sources. HBCUs may promote a strong student community if they enable students to easily communicate their problems, and provide adequate online materials and support for those students who do not have time to talk to peers or instructors.

However, the interpretation of the results requires some caution. The measurement test shows that there are some weaknesses in the question items to measure variables in the research model. Several items appear not to contribute to the variables that they are assumed to measure. Although the survey used in this study was modified to fit our research context, the original survey questions was developed and validated in a different context. Therefore, validity of the survey questionnaire was weak. As Mansfield and colleagues mentioned, the BHSS scale was developed as a context specific measurement for male students. The scale may not work for other research contexts or require careful adaptions.

References

Anonymous (2005/2006). Black Student College Graduation Rates Remain Low, But Modest Progress Begins..., The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 88

Atlantic Journal-Constitution (2018), 6-year graduation rates at many HBCUs lower than 20 percent

Barclay, D., Higgins, C., and Thompson, R. (1995). The Partial Least Squares (PLS) Approach to causal modeling, personal computer adoption and use as an illustration. *Technology Studies, 2*(2), 285-309.

Chin, W.W. (1998). The partial least squares approach to structural equation modeling. In G. A. Marcoulides (Ed.), *Modern methods for business research* (pp. 295-336). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Fornell, C., and Larcker, D.F. (1981). Evaluating Structural Equation Model with unobservable variables and measurement error. *Journal of Marketing Research, 18*, 39-50.

Huet, N., Moták, L., and Sakdavong, J. C. (2016). Motivation to seek help and help efficiency in students who failed in an initial task. *Computers in Human Behavior, 63*, 584-593

Karabenick, S. A. (Ed.). (1998). *Strategic help seeking: Implications for learning and teaching*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum

Karabenick, S. A. (2006). Introduction. In Karabenick, S. A., & Newman, R. S. (Eds.). *Help Seeking in Academic Settings: Goals, Groups, and Contexts* (pp. 1-13). Mahwah: NJ. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Kitsantas, A., & Chow, A. (2007). College students' perceived threat and preference for seeking help in traditional, distributed, and distance learning environments. *Computers and Education, 48*(3), 383-395

Lohmoller, J.B. (1981). LVPLS 1.6: Latent Variable Path Analysis with Partial Least Squares. University of the Federal Armed Forces, Munich.

Mansfield, A., & Courtenay, W. (2005). Measurement of men's help seeking: Development and evaluation of the barriers to help seeking scale, psychology of men & masculinity. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity, 6*(2), 95–108.

Richards, D. A. R., & Awokoya, J. T. (2012). Understanding HBCU retention and completion. Fairfax, VA: Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, UNCF.

Ryan, A. M., & Pintrich, P. R. (1997). "Should I ask for help?" The role of motivation and attitudes in adolescents' help seeking in math class. Journal of Educational Psychology, 89, 329–341.

Wetzels, M., Schroder, G., and Oppen, C.V. (2009). Using PLS path modeling for assessing hierarchical construct models: Guidelines and empirical illustration. *MIS Quarterly, 33*(1) 177-195.

Wixom, B. H. and Watson, H. J., (2001). An empirical investigation of the factors affecting data warehousing success. *MIS Quarterly, 25*(1), 17-4.