Extending a Legacy of Excellence and Opportunity

The Higher Education Act of 1965 defines historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as “any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary [of Education]” (U.S. Dept. of Ed., n.d.). HBCUs have a rich legacy of providing academic excellence and educational opportunity to African Americans, and over time they have come to serve a more diverse array of students. However, to ensure their long-term institutional survival, HBCUs will need to continue to adapt to evolving landscapes. This issue brief will provide an overview of the origins and present character of HBCUs, as well as a survey of the challenges these vital institutions presently face.

HBCU Origins

The first black colleges in the United States were established largely through the efforts of black churches, with the support of the American Missionary Association and the Freedmen’s Bureau (NMAAHC), as well as wealthy benefactors who believed in education for all. For example, John Rockefeller founded Spelman College in Atlanta—named after his wife—to provide education to black students during an era influenced by Jim Crow laws (Lynch, 2016). A few examples of early HBCUs include (Gallardo, 2013):

- **Cheyney University of Pennsylvania** (1764), the oldest HBCU—originally named the Institute for Colored Youth—was founded by Richard Humphreys, a Quaker philanthropist, as a trade school.
- **Lincoln University of Pennsylvania** (1854), located north of the Mason-Dixon line, was the first degree-granting HBCU.
- **Wilberforce University of Ohio** (1856), the first HBCU administered by African Americans, was founded by black members of a local Methodist Episcopal Church.

More than 100 institutions of higher learning were established after ratification of the second Morrill Act of 1890, which required states—
particularly former Confederate states—to provide land grants for black institutions, if black students were not sanctioned admission elsewhere. The purpose of early HBCUs was either to train blacks in a trade or to equip them to serve the community as teachers or ministers. HBCUs did not offer scholarships and degrees to African Americans until the 20th century (NMAAHC).

**Present Character**

Today, the U.S. government recognizes 105 viable HBCUs (Lee & Keys, 2013). The Department of Education provides a complete directory of HBCUs that includes links to each institution’s website, as do many college search sites. Taken as a whole, these colleges and universities weave a rich tapestry of educational opportunity, student diversity, academic excellence, institutional care, and successful outcomes.

**Many options.** HBCUs have certainly changed over time, from further diversification of their enrollment to a strengthening of their scholarship. However, in one particular aspect, HBCUs are indistinguishable from predominantly white institutions (PWIs), namely that they come in wide variety of forms, including:

- Two-year schools offering associate degrees, such as Lawson State Community College
- Small private colleges, such as Tougaloo College
- Large public institutions that offer doctoral programs, such as North Carolina A&T State University
- Faith-based colleges and universities, such as Xavier University of Louisiana

**Diversity.** HBCU enrollments today are as diverse as the students who attend them. Although HBCUs were originally founded to educate black students, they enroll students of other races as well. This diversity has increased over time (Hill, n.d.). In 2017, non-black students made up 24 percent of enrollment at HBCUs, compared with 15 percent in 1976 (NCES, 2018). Though most HBCUs have large African American enrollments, there are also those with white student majority populations, such as Bluefield State College and West Virginia State University (10 Most Diverse, 2015).

Today’s global society has elevated the importance of diversity in enrollment, and HBCUs have some of the most diverse campus populations. According to a report by the Center for Minority Serving Institutions, “black students constitute approximately 76 percent of students attending HBCUs. Students from other racial and ethnic groups, on the other hand, comprise the remaining 24 percent. The enrollment at HBCUs is further divided into 13 percent white students, 5 percent students whose race or ethnicity is unknown, 3 percent Latino and Latina students, 1 percent Asian-American students, 1 percent of students who identify as biracial or multiracial, and 1 percent of students classified as undocumented students” (Palmer, 2015).

**Scholarship.** It is a false claim that HBCUs offer an inferior education. Many HBCUs not only have outstanding academic reputations, but also excel preparing students for careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). For example, ‘65 percent of all black physicians and half of all black engineers graduated from HBCUs’ (Lynch, 2016).
According to Lynch (2016), the impressive track record of HBCUs in the area of STEM education includes:

- **Spelman College**, the second largest institution in the nation to send black undergraduates on to medical school.
- **Jackson State University**, which receives the highest amount of HBCU federal research funding every year—$68 million—and is known for its research-intensive programs.
- **The Tuskegee University College of Engineering and Alabama A&M University of College Engineering, Technology and Physical Sciences**, which are not just top engineering schools among HBCUs—they rank among the best in the nation.

**Attentive Faculty and Staff.** HBCUs are especially known for their caring faculty and staff. Since many students who attend HBCUs are first-generation college students (Hill, n.d.), it is important to have faculty who take the time to address personal concerns during extended office hours and staff who take an interest in acclimating students to college life. This brings up another reason HBCUs are special—extracurricular activities. Student services personnel at HBCUs welcome students to ask questions and get involved, because they know that student involvement on campus is a key factor in their college success and eventual graduation. Not only do HBCUs provide a wide range of on-campus clubs, organizations, and activities for student participation, but their staff members strive to encourage and include all students.

**Famous Alumni.** Another testament to the credibility of HBCUs are the many famous African Americans, in a variety of careers, who proudly tout the HBCUs from which they graduated. *HBCU Lifestyle* (n.d.) recently highlighted a number of impressive HBCU alumni, noting that “without these colleges, voices of these talented men and women may have been lost” (para. 7):

- Marian Wright Edelman (*Spelman College*), recipient of the MacArthur Prize and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, founder of the Children's Defense Fund, and the first African American woman to be admitted to practice law by the Mississippi Bar
- Langston Hughes (*Lincoln University*), leader of the Harlem Renaissance, who has served as the inspiration for many of today’s greatest African American poets
- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (*Morehouse College*), recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for his “I Have A Dream Speech” and symbol of American civil rights
- Spike Lee (*Morehouse College*), renowned filmmaker and winner of the Academy, Peabody, and Emmy Awards
- Toni Morrison (*Howard University*), a Pulitzer Prize- and Nobel Prize-winning author, having written books like *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*
- Alice Walker (*Spelman College*), Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Color Purple*
- Oprah Winfrey (*Tennessee State University*), famous talk show host and billionaire

**Current Challenges**

HBCUs, like PWIs, face multiple challenges in today’s higher education environment. Higher education is a competitive affair, with institutions all vying for students’ “business,” as stark as that may sound. Some of these challenges include falling enrollment, low retention rates, flexible college delivery options, inadequate or outdated facilities, and diminished student financial resources. Two of these challenges warrant additional discussion.
The first is the expansion of flexible college delivery options. The prevalence of online college programs is a significant factor in falling enrollment for both HBCUs and PWIs, as all student demographics have been enticed by the convenience and flexibility of this technology. In a 2015 report, Hope Kentnor states that “as of fall 2012, of 20.6 million higher education students, 6.7 million (32.5 percent) enrolled in online courses” (Allen & Seaman, 2013; United States Department of Education, 2013). The online population represents a staggering one-third of all college students. With enrollments in online courses still growing and online technologies playing a greater role in a post-COVID-19 world, educational institutions are challenged to meet the demand while continuing to provide quality education. Indeed, more than two-thirds (69.1 percent) of chief academic leaders indicate that online learning is critical to an academic institution’s long-term strategy” (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

The second is diminished student financial resources. In October of 2011, the U.S. Department of Education adjusted its lending policies for federally funded PLUS school loans to align more closely with what a traditional bank would require in the way of income and credit worthiness. This hit HBCU students in particular, because many of their parents do not have the means to fund a college education, even though “[they] want to contribute financially” (Lynch, 2016). While many HBCUs have been able to offer affordable means, such as scholarships and grants, for students to meet their financial needs, the long-term ability for HBCU students to pay for college remains a top concern.

Future Outlook

This issue brief has established the importance of HBCUs in the American higher education system, not only for students of color, first-generation, and low-income students, but also as all-inclusive institutions of learning for all races, genders, and nationalities. Though HBCU’s face a number of current challenges, these are not insurmountable. However, the cooperation of all institutional actors and a willingness to embrace bold and visionary leadership will be necessary for HBCUs to secure their future.

In 2014, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) released a report outlining a strategic plan to ensure the future success of HBCUs. The report states, “These strategic issues overlap and connect. Leaders must understand that a delicate balance exists between how each issue influences the others,” urging college administrators to tackle these issues with optimism, viewing them as “opportunities.” The inset below outlines seven strategic opportunities the report identified.

Embracing many of these opportunities is the responsibility of the college governing board,

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**Strategic Opportunities for HBCUs:**

- **Rethink** the means of recruiting and reaching out to students
- **Reexamine** the types of academic programs they offer and how they deliver them
- **Reimagine** the idea of what student success looks like
- **Reengineer** the current business model
- **Repair** aging infrastructure and develop the physical plant and technological infrastructure to best support their missions
- **Reassert** themselves into national and state policy conversations to the benefit of the students they serve
- **Reinvest** in their approach to governance and leadership

administration, faculty, and staff, which together must ensure that these strategies are actively implemented, reviewed, and refined as appropriate. Key examples include reexamining the types of academic programs offered and taught, reengineering the current business model, and repairing aging infrastructure, physical plant, and technology. In addition, each institution should also have positions and resources dedicated to fundraising, grant writing, and researching federal and state funding opportunities, potential benefactors, and foundation support to help alleviate some of the institution’s financial burden.

Regarding governance, leadership, and speaking into national and state policy conversations, it is the responsibility of college governing board members and top administrators to get to know local government representatives and to actively promote the university. It is critical for government officials to know their local HBCUs, the constituents they serve, and the vital contribution they make to the state’s economy and its future educated workforce. Furthermore, institutional marketing and admissions staffs should be actively promoting HBCUs through positive public relations. This can be accomplished with the assistance of the student services staff, who can help raise institutional visibility by organizing student community service programs, and the college faculty, who can enthusiastically promote the institution’s academic programs to all local school principals and counselors. Nurturing these contacts will pay dividends through future funding opportunities and greater brand awareness.

Rethinking the means of recruiting and reaching out to students could include looking at all demographics of students (including all races and income levels, military, nontraditional, international, and LBGTQ+) and considering additional modes of delivering education to students (online, correspondence, satellite locations, etc.). While it is important to invest in the historic brick and mortar campus that represents the institution’s academic roots, today’s technology-driven society and need for convenience must also be accommodated. Online courses have become extremely popular and satellite locations offer flexible evening hours for nontraditional students; both options can support higher enrollment.

Reimagining the idea of student success may feel like an elusive concept. However, the key principle is that HBCUs must be willing to move beyond traditional understandings of student success, when warranted, to ensure positive college outcomes. While this conversation is relatively new in higher education, scholars of K-12 education have long explored learner-centered paradigms, competency-based approaches, and authentic learning opportunities (Belfore & Lash, 2017). Campus leaders should boldly reassess current notions of student success, drawing upon relevant, high-quality resources from all levels of education to construct forward-looking approaches to institutional practice.

**Conclusion**

HBCUs have evolved from their origins in the late 1700s to the present. Today, these institutions continue to provide safe havens for first-generation black students while also serving a more diverse campus population composed of white, Latino/a, Asian, mixed-race, and LBGTQ+ students.

Though the brick and mortar campuses are still a popular option, in order for HBCUs to be sustainable, other learning modalities must be adopted to attract an even wider demographic of students. HBCU board members, top administrators, faculty, and staff should continue to nurture the on-campus student experience, as this is a core HBCU strength, but they also need to promote the institution externally through public relations, community involvement, and aggressive outreach to local, state, and national government officials to maintain a high degree of visibility. Finally, HBCUs must maintain their institutional relevance to society by continually cultivating a forward-looking curriculum.

Ultimately, the growth and sustainability of HBCUs are the collective responsibility of all institutional participants. Collaborative action will ensure that HBCUs can continue to make a unique contribution to American higher education for years to come.
References


