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## **The Relevance of Historically Black Colleges and Universities: An Exploration of the Affect of Campus Climate on Student Success**

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*The birth of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in America was a milestone in American history, signaling a challenge to Black exclusion to education; however, the relevance of these institutions in today's society has been challenged. Arguments have been leveled that HBCUs are not successful and that their needs which spawned their existence no longer call for their continuation. As such, this manuscript examined the significance and relevance of HBCUs in today's society. Specifically, the authors explored the environmental dynamics of HBCUs focusing on campus climate and its role in facilitating the success of Black students. To address this topic, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 Black HBCU graduates representative of 12 institutions in five States and the District of Columbia. Participants' reflections on their postsecondary experience revealed their perceptions that a positive and affirming campus climate facilitated their success in these institutions.*

In the years prior to the Civil War, White slaveholders resisted efforts by Blacks<sup>†</sup> to educate themselves. Even in the North, where slavery was almost non-existent, White inaction toward the education of Blacks had much the same result. Pre Civil War Blacks were allowed to enroll in only a few White universities in the North, such as Harvard University, Amherst College, Bowdoin College, Dartmouth College, and Oberlin University, but strict limits were placed on their enrollment and their campus living arrangements were severely restricted (Fleming, 1984; Slater, 1994; Wright, 1987). The first Black college graduate was Alexander Lucius Twilight, from Middlebury College in Vermont, in August of 1823. This same institution awarded an honorary degree

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† This manuscript uses the terms Blacks and African Americans interchangeably.

to Lemuel Haynes in 1804, an African American who had attended Dartmouth but did not complete his degree (Slater, 1994). According to Gurin and Epps (1975) a total of "about 28 Blacks graduated from American colleges before the Civil War" (pg. 19), with nearly forty in all accomplishing this feat by the war's end (Slater, 1994). Despite obstacles to postsecondary education, Black Americans maintained a strong desire for education (Allen & Jewel, 2002; Freedman, 2005; Lovett, 1990; Neufeldt & McGee, 1990; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; White & Cones, 1999).

One of the important milestones in the history of higher education in the U.S. was the creation of Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) (Brown, 2001). MSI "a term used to describe the groups of institutions that enroll a high proportion of African American, Hispanic, and American Indian students" (O'Brien & Zudak, 1998, p.5). These schools consist of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions, tribal colleges and universities as well as Asian American and Pacific Islander serving institutions. These institutions represent the country's commitment to providing educational opportunities for underrepresented populations (Brown, Donahoo & Bertrand, 2001; Gasman, Baez, & Turner, 2008).

Though all MSIs maintain an important role in the education of underserved racial/ethnic communities, this manuscript addresses the historical and contemporary relevance of HBCUs. Specifically, the authors explore the environmental dynamics of HBCUs focusing on campus climate and its role in facilitating the success of Black students. Understanding and analyzing campus climate is an important part of examining college access, persistence, graduation, and transfer to and matriculation through graduate and professional education for underrepresented minority students (Allen, 1992, 1987; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002). Next, we examine the humble origins of HBCUs and the challenges they endure.

### **Humble Origins: Continued Challenges**

The first of many HBCUs were born in the years before the Civil War. Cheyney University of Pennsylvania was founded in 1837, followed by Lincoln University of Pennsylvania, Avery College of Pennsylvania, and Wilberforce University of Ohio, specifically to provide for the educational needs of Blacks (Brown, 2001; Fleming, 1976; Roebucks & Murty, 1993; Williams & Ashley, 2004). The number of HBCU's grew exponentially after the Civil War, with more than 200 being founded in the South in the five years immediately following 1865. The Freedman's Bureau, established in 1865 by the Federal Government to improve the plight of former slaves, refugees and poor Whites, (Fleming, 1976; Fleming, Gill, & Swinton, 1978; Roebuck & Murty, 1993) along with private Black churches, Northern missionaries, and private philanthropic organizations and individuals, played a major role in the birth and development of the institutions (Brown, Donahoo & Bertrand, 2001; Fleming, Gill, & Swinton, 1978; Williams & Ashley, 2004).

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While many Black postsecondary institutions held the designation of colleges and universities, they functioned more like multilevel schools, providing instruction from the secondary to the collegiate level (Sowell, 1981; Wilson, 1994). Exceptions to these practices were Howard University, Fisk University, and the Meharry Medical School whose offerings were restricted to the college and university level. According to Allen and Jewell (2002), and Roebuck and Murty (1993), HBCUs also maintained diverse educational service functions, including the education of Black youth, agricultural development, training teachers, and the preparation of missionaries.

Despite the successes of HBCUs in the education of Black students, and to some degree, the rise of the Black middle class, imbalances remained between these institutions and their White counterparts. For instance, the issue of disparate funding between many HBCUs and Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) has been the subject of litigation in America's courtrooms for years [e.g.: *Adams v. Richardson* (1972) and *United States v. Fordice* (1992)]. Challenges to discriminatory practices have resulted in many enhancements for HBCUs, leading to more equitable treatment (especially in the areas of funding and federal support). This is not to suggest that HBCUs are free from inequity. Concerns remain about perpetual funding gaps, facility disparities, and capacity building (Davis, 1995; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Despite apparent discrimination against these institutions, HBCUs have provided African Americans with a comparable education that parallels or supersedes that of PWIs (Drewry & Doermann, 2004; Kim, & Conrad, 2006).

In general, HBCUs are defined as, "Black academic institutions established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and still is, the education of Black Americans" (Roebuck & Murty, 1993, p. 3). Still, the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education has also designated some institutions that were established after 1964 as HBCUs (e.g., Medgar Evers in New York, Southern University at Shreveport) (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). The year 1964 represents a historical marker as it was the year that the *Civil Rights Act* was passed.

HBCUs have opened and closed over the years, largely this is as a result of the challenging environment under which they, almost universally, exist. These challenges include a lack of adequate funding, general lack of support from state legislatures in the case of public HBCUs, and an overall lack of respect for their unique mission on the landscape of higher education in America (Sink, 1995). In response to these challenges, a handful of HBCUs transitioned their service population from predominantly Black to predominantly White students (e.g., Lincoln University, Bluefield State, West Virginia State) (Redd, 1998). However, the lion's-share of these institutions continue to maintain their commitment to serving Black communities. Whether out of the spirit of philanthropy, necessity, or fairness, the reason HBCUs were created in America and have survived for, in many cases, more than 140 years, is that they filled a void in this country (Swygert, 2004). Historically, minorities were denied

access to White institutions because of segregation laws that were prevalent at the time most HBCUs (and other MSJs) were created (*Sweatt v Painter*, 1950; *Hawkins v. Board of Control*, 1950).

HBCUs are an integral part of America's educational history. For Blacks, these institutions have served to open 'the door' to higher education and to middle class America. HBCUs have a tradition of providing access to African Americans who otherwise might not have been given the opportunity for a college degree (Swygert, 2004). With this in mind, Hale (2006) wrote "Black institutions of higher education have assumed the burden of responsibility for those students who have hungered for knowledge and [have provided] the opportunity to gain it" (p. xvii).

There are varying counts of exactly how many HBCUs are in existence. Garibaldi (1991) counted 104 HBCUs in 1990 while Wengjinsky (1996) indicated that there are 105 HBCUs in 19 states and the District of Columbia, and Roebuck and Murty (1993) report that there are 109. Partly, the confusion is because of institutions founded after the 1964 marker as well as predominantly Black institutions (PBIs) that mostly serve Blacks but do not have that particularly designated mission. Despite differing numbers in the institutions included, it is clear that the number of HBCUs has declined significantly from the 200 HBCUs operating just after the Civil War (Brown, 2001). In all, these institutions still constitute less than four percent of American colleges and universities (McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997). Still, HBCUs are home to almost 400,000 of the nation's college and university population and account for nearly 25 percent of degrees conferred to African Americans (Hoffman, Snyder, & Sonnenberg, 1996).

In addition, 50 percent of African American faculty in predominantly White research universities received their bachelor's degrees from HBCUs (Hale, 2006). These are significant percentages given the relatively small number of Black colleges and universities in the country. Despite their survival in a challenging and often contentious environments, HBCUs have been able to impact the lives of Black students in a positive way by providing access to educational opportunities in an affirming campus environment (Allen, 1992; Berger & Milern, 2000; Kim, 2002).

### **Towards Positive and Affirming Campus Climates**

At many PWI, students of color, particularly African Americans, continue to face various issues. Some of these issues involve feelings of social isolation, discrimination, aggression, and/or general dissatisfaction (Bristow, 2002; Flowers, 2002; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Extant research has indicated Blacks at PWIs experience alienation, adjustment issues, academic difficulty, and a lack of faculty relationships (Allen, 1992, 1987; Davis, 1994). Furthermore, research has indicated that HBCUs foster an environment that provides a positive experience for African Americans (Allen, 1992, 1991, 1987; De Sousa

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& Kuh, 1996; Fleming, 1984). Although most HBCUs have fewer resources than PWIs, they create an environment that facilitates positive psychosocial adjustments, stronger cultural awareness, and higher attainment aspirations for Black students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Allen & Haniff, 1991). At the same time, HBCUs continue to thrive at matriculating and graduating African American students at remarkable percentages (Gasman, Wagner, Ransom, & Bowman, 2010; Perna, Wagner-Lundy, Drezner, Gasman, Yoon, Bose, & Gary, 2009).

It is important for key stakeholders, such as government officials, educators, and society in general to realize the important contribution HBCUs are making in the production of high quality African American graduates. HBCU graduates have gone on to become some of the nation's most prominent leaders. Many Black political leaders and icons are HBCU graduates, including: Oprah Winfrey, Nikki Giovanni, Leontyne Price, Jesse Jackson, Martin Luther King Jr., Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Dubois, and Thurgood Marshall. These well known personalities are just a few of the many HBCU graduates who have gone on to impact America and the world. Nevertheless, many of these institutions are suffering fiscally and need more financial support in order to ensure much needed survival (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). If the government and philanthropists are made aware or reminded of the positive contributions these institutions are making, they may be more willing to allocate additional funds to assist in the continuance of their missions. The survival of HBCUs depends increasingly on showing that they provide education benefits not otherwise available (Wenglinsky, 1996).

Roebuck and Murty (1993) argued that "HBCUs, unlike other colleges, are united in a mission to meet the educational and emotional needs of black students. They remain the significant academic home for black faculty members and many black students" (p. 10). Students who attend HBCUs display greater gains in academic achievement, higher rates of bachelor's degrees attainment, and higher occupational aspirations than Black students who attend PWIs (Allen, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Results of several other studies suggest that when African American students attend institutions with inclusive campus climates, they experience better adjustment and greater satisfaction with college and are more likely to persist to graduation (Schwitzer, Griffin, Kancois, & Thomas, 1999).

African American students at HBCUs, which make up 90 percent of African American students, are found to be more confident, more involved in campus activities, and more interactive with faculty than Blacks attending other universities (Cokley, 2000). Willie (1995) asserts that HBCUs offer students the chance to learn about the range of fellow African Americans; an opportunity to be part of something larger than oneself; and the chance to spend time in a place where one might see greater possibilities of what one could become through faculty, administrator, and graduate student role models. Previous research also indicates that students who attend HBCUs developed greater

self-reliance and autonomy and are able to broaden their interests in political, social, and cultural affairs (Bristow, 2002).

The notion of environmental dynamics speaks to the circumstances or conditions that surround the social, intellectual, or moral forces that produce activity and change in a given place. The presence and analysis of these forces on the campuses of HBCUs is extremely important in documenting that HBCUs continue to serve an important purpose. Campus climate is a central determinant of college access and achievement for underrepresented students (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999). The environmental dynamics of HBCUs may be the answer to why and how these institutions continue to produce successful graduates. As aforementioned, these students are surpassing their counterparts who attend PWIs by high percentages. Despite the obvious achievements of students who attend HBCUs, these institutions are many times overlooked and underestimated. Some have even argued that they have endured, fulfilled their function and are now retrogressive by nature.

Recently, high profile news commentaries in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *Wall Street Journal* have given this argument a national platform. For example, Riley (2010) wrote an article titled, "Black Colleges Need A Mission" in the *Wall Street Journal*. In this article, he acknowledges that HBCUs once filled an important void in the education of Blacks by providing access to education during a time of extreme racism. However, he also proffers the notion that the institutions are "academically inferior," deserving of intense scrutiny from the federal government. He stated that "even the best Black colleges and universities do not approach the standards of quality of respectable institutions" (para. 4). His comments are reaffirmed by Vedder (2010) in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* who suggests that the most elite Black colleges such as Spelman and Morehouse are good but not great educational institutions. Vedder states that HBCUs have low graduation rates with only 1/3 of students graduating in a six year time frame. He also notes that HBCUs comprise the majority of schools with the lowest graduation rates in the country. He closes by suggesting that special funding privileges enjoyed by HBCUs should be eliminated. In contrast to Riley and Vedder, scholars (via the blogosphere) have argued that HBCUs are an integral part of African American tradition and to have them merge with White institutions or simply close would be a loss too large to contemplate (Hilton & Palmer, 2011; Gasman, 2010). In the next section, the authors describe the methods used in an empirical study which examined the climate of HBCU campuses in relationship to student success.

### **Methods**

This study explored the environmental dynamics of HBCUs focusing on campus climate in relationship to student success. To address the topic, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 Black HBCU students. A qualitative approach was employed to facilitate an equitable interchange

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between the researcher and subjects (Holloway, 1997) and to allow for unpredicted themes to emerge from the interchange (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Participants are representative of twelve institutions from five States (e.g., Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, and Louisiana) and the District of Columbia.

Participants were identified through convenience sampling, a technique which uses participants who are easily identified and recruited for participation (Gay, 1996). All participants were graduates or currently attending HBCUs when interviewed. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol, where pre-determined questions guided the interview allowing for responses and additional lines of questioning to emerge from the dialogue (D'icco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). All interviews lasted approximately an hour and a half in length and were transcribed. The researchers purposely avoided the use of a conceptual or theoretical framework in order to restrict the influence on assumptions on the collection and analysis processes.

Data was coded and analyzed for themes employing an ideas group approach as articulated by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). In this approach, researchers identify emergent phrases or ideas which are recurrent in the interview transcripts. These phrases and ideas are then grouped together and continuously compared additional passages during the analytic process. To ensure the credibility of findings, the coding process was conducted by the researchers separately on the first several transcripts and then compared to ensure a degree of congruency. After this process was completed, the researchers coded the remaining transcripts (Kurasaki, 2000). Findings from this analytic process are presented in the subsequent section.

### Findings

The vast majority of participants in this study remarked that HBCUs had positive campus climates that facilitated their success. However, this is not to suggest that participant perspectives were uniform. Although a great deal of positive comments existed, negative comments were made several times as well. For instance, students regularly complained about poor and substandard facilities, confusing and insufficient financial aid packages, and slow registration and student services request processing. However, most students focused their comments on the positive attributes of HBCUs. This resulted in four primary themes which revealed: (1) the presence of faculty and administration of color mirrors the student body; (2) the benefits of small student body populations and class sizes; (3) culturally-based extra-curricular activities and organizations; and (4) a historic and current appreciation for religious values encouraged and assisted HBCU students in being successful overall.

### **The Presence of Diverse Faculty**

First, many of the students noted that the visual presence of African Americans in positions of authority had a significant impact on their HBCU experience and success. One participant said:

Just being given the opportunity to have professors who look like you and come from where you come from and have been able to achieve and do what they aspire to was enough to give me the motivation to go that extra mile and work that much harder. There is truly nothing like having that kind of experience!

Statements like this were very common in the interviews. The opportunity for students to see faculty and administrators who "looked like them" created a platform for these students to see achieving their goals as attainable. This is not always the case on other campuses. For instance, in 2005 the African American undergraduate student body at a large, public, mid-western research university released a list of complaints, one being that only three percent of tenured faculty was African American, which was not representative of the seven percent of the current student body population which was African American. This complaint is not likely to be replicated at HBCUs given that they have a commitment to serving Black students and communities. Students also said having African Americans in faculty and leadership positions offered them a professional network of mentors that were sometimes lacking in their homes and communities. For example, one participant noted the following:

I was a first generation college student and I constantly doubted my academic abilities. I was ready to drop out but after a conversation with my advisor who also was the first in her family to go to college; I got the confidence that I needed to continue with my schooling. That meeting was life changing. I was not only able to finish undergrad, but I am now pursuing a Master's degree.

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### **Small Class Sizes**

The second environmental dynamic that was consistently mentioned as a major contributor to student success was the institution's size and class sizes. In general, most HBCUs are smaller in comparison to PWIs. They range in size from a few hundred to approximately thirteen thousand, with the average size being around two thousand. The small service population provides an opportunity for smaller class sizes. The presence of small class sizes can serve to create intimate settings where students can receive hands-on and, in some instances, one-on-one attention from professors. With this in mind, one participant commented:

The reason HBCUs do such a good job at producing high achievers is due to the small classroom sizes where professors are able to serve students on an individual basis. I had professors who knew my weaknesses and strengths and cared enough about me to challenge me in both areas.

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Some students even referenced the student body as a family unit. This feeling of belonging to a homogenous group attributed to the students' feeling of well-being and being supported. The small, family-unit type atmosphere also helped students to feel as if they were an integral part of the larger student body.

### **Culturally-Based Activities and Organizations**

Data have shown that students are more likely to achieve academically when they are engaged in activities outside of the classroom, often referred to as social integration (Tinto, 1975; 1987; 1988; 1993). Therefore, it stands to reason that the more students are active in extra-curricular activities, the more successful they will be in a collegiate setting. Not surprisingly, many of the interviewees talked about their many organizational affiliations and how these added to their overall college experiences. For example, one current HBCU student said:

While pledging my fraternity, I was able to hone my leadership skills and to develop as a person. The frat required me to step up and show what I could do—in the classroom and outside the classroom. I had to learn to balance social and academic responsibilities and that lesson will serve me well in the future.

While this comment may be true of participation in fraternal life in any institutional setting, the affirming campus climate of HBCUs may serve to bolster the Greek experience. Some participants noted that the campus environment at an HBCU afforded them a higher level of participation in school activities than they would have had at PWIs. For instance, an HBCU graduate stated:

I can't imagine being as involved at a white school for undergrad as I was at my school (an HBCU). Seeing one (a PWI) up close and personal now as a grad student makes me wonder how black students in undergrad make it here and have any leadership opportunities at all. I just do not believe it (attending a PWI for undergraduate school) would have been a good fit for me.

### **Religious Affiliations and Support**

Finally, the last environmental dynamic that was regularly mentioned in this qualitative study were HBCUs appreciation for students' religious or spiritual values. All of those interviewed identified themselves as "religious." Some stated that their religious values developed as children while others stated that it was only during college that they truly developed a set of religious values of their own. All participants noted that HBCUs embraced and celebrated such values.

A large number of HBCUs have historically or currently had affiliations with Christian churches or denominations. The notion of separation of church and state is not necessarily found on HBCU campuses. This phenomenon is

likely a result of the fact that a large number of these institutions are private. For example, participants noted that it is common for prayer to take place before convocations, meetings, and even sporting events. This type of religious presence adds an important part of the African American community. Many African Americans come from religious backgrounds and the Black Church has played a major role in providing a strong foundation to its parishioners (Mattis, 2000; 2004; Lincoln & Mamiya, 2003; Newlin, Kraft & Melkus, 2002). HBCU incorporation of religious influences in everyday college life has attributed to many students' overall experiences and success.

Some students noted that the religious benefits of their HBCU participation were not recognized until after they had graduated. For example, one former HBCU student said, "When I was in school (at an HBCU) I hated going to chapel, but now (3 years later) I appreciate everything that we were taught there." In contrast, other students noted their recognition of the importance of a religious-oriented environment during their HBCU experience. For instance, one graduate stated, "It was good to know that others shared my beliefs and when I encountered hard times, it was comforting to know that others were praying for my success . . . it was just good not to have to be ashamed of what I believed." These students' comments suggest that being able to openly share and practice their faith aided them in being successful as students and as people.

### **Conclusion**

HBCUs have marked their place in the history of this country, continuing to serve Black communities by educating tomorrow's Black leaders. Despite their successful history in the production of Black graduates and their contribution to the rise of the Black middle class, a sense of ambivalence remains between HBCUs and their PWI counterparts (e.g., resources, funding, and political support) (Swygert, 2004). Of these disparities, the most notably is the issue of disparate funding between HBCUs and PWIs, which has been the subject of litigation in America's courtrooms for years. Although, numerically, more African Americans are attending PWIs at this present moment, HBCUs still serve a vital purpose since they continue to produce a disproportionate share of African American college graduates (Allen, 1992). Despite constant fiscal challenges and questions regarding current usefulness and dwindling public and private support, HBCUs are indeed adding value to educational academic and social arenas.

As illustrated in this study, the environment at HBCUs is conducive to the success of Black students for a number of reasons, including the presence of faculty and administrators of color, small campus and class sizes, culturally relevant extra-curricular activities and the celebration of religious values. These factors aid in recruiting, matriculating and graduating Black students in a nurturing setting and have contributed to the success of HBCUs since their inception in the early nineteenth century. From the literature analyzed

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and the information gathered, it is evident that HBCUs have been successful in effectively providing quality education for African American students. With many of today's PWIs choosing to be more selective in their admission practices, access to higher education for underserved communities will continue to affect Black communities. As in the past, HBCUs will continue to fill this void because of their unique mission of serving Black communities.

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