

The Honorable Past and Uncertain Future of the Nation's HBCUs

by *M. Christopher Brown II and Ronyelle Bertrand Ricard*

Prior to the Civil War, the combination of slavery and segregation restricted educational access and opportunity for Black Americans. While there were a few exceptions, such as Oberlin College in Ohio and Bowdoin College in Maine, African American students were by and large denied entry to institutions of higher learning. Abolitionists, missionaries, and progressive citizens worked to resolve this established pattern of discrimination. Some worked quietly in their given areas, while others ventured into territories captured by Union armies during the war. Their aim was to establish churches and schools that would indoctrinate and educate the former slaves and their progeny. This aim was the motivation for the creation of the first cohort of institutions defined as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).¹ Many of these institutions (particularly private Black colleges) emerged from the schools and training institutions founded the missionaries and funded by liberal philanthropic entities.

In the early years, rather than follow the trend of elite institutions that limited access to only a small segment of society, HBCUs opened their doors to anyone who was interested. Indeed, the first schools that opened to educate African Americans during the Civil War were used by people of all races and ages who felt that freedom would not be complete until they learned to read and write. In many

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communities, the new Black colleges also housed elementary and secondary components. This caused some to criticize these institutions for not providing a truly collegial program.² But by providing education to people at all levels, HBCUs helped increase their chances for survival by solidifying relationships with their local communities.

Over the years, HBCUs have been mistakenly perceived as a homogeneous entity that only serves Black students. While HBCUs were created primarily for the education of African Americans, they did not prohibit participation from other groups of people. Rather, these institutions were inclusive to all that sought

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higher education. In efforts to increase access, HBCUs practically invented the open door policy that welcomed all that applied. Hedgepeth, Edmonds, and Craig suggest that:

The heterogeneous student body of the Black college gives them unique status among institutions of higher education. The policy of open admissions goes beyond the acceptance of students with varying preparation for college work. It includes the acceptance of African, Asian, Caribbean, European, Latin American, and White American students.³

Kannerstein calls attention to the fact that the open enrollment of Black institutions of higher education suggests that these institutions embrace all individuals irrespective of race, gender, national origin, and other identifiable attributes.⁴ Xavier University of Louisiana, for example, is the only historically Black Catholic institution in the country and many of its students are non-Catholic and white. Lincoln University, Dillard University, Fisk University, and Paine College promote the importance of having diverse campus environments by articulating this philosophy throughout their official school publications. The idea of diversification at Black colleges is not limited to the student body, but also includes faculty, staff, and administration.⁵

Despite their commitment to universal access, Black colleges still suffer from the impression that they are race exclusive. I hope to dispel this myth in this article. After a brief overview of HBCUs and their historical development, I discuss how these colleges and universities were at the vanguard in terms of both access to higher education and diversity, long before these ideas were embraced by the academic mainstream.

Three institutions lay hold to the claim of the nation's first HBCU: Cheyney State, Lincoln, and Wilberforce Universities. Cheyney State University uses 1837 as

its date of inception. However, in 1837, Cheyney was primarily a preparatory school rather than a college, and did not begin offering collegiate level instruction until the early 1900s. Lincoln did not open its doors until 1866. Wilberforce, on the other hand, was incorporated in 1856 and opened its doors in the same year. Additionally, Wilberforce is the oldest Black-controlled HBCU in the nation during a time when many Black institutions (including Lincoln and Cheyney State) had white presidents, administrators, faculty, and boards of trustees.

The aftermath of the Civil War led to a proliferation of Black colleges and universities, with more than 200 being founded prior to 1890. In addition to the

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philanthropic associations, churches, local communities, missionaries, and private donors, the end of the Civil War brought a new founder and funder of HBCUs: state governments. The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments compelled states to provide public education for former slaves and other Black Americans. Supplementary public support came with the passage of the Second Morrill Act of 1890. While the first Morrill Act of 1862 provided federal support for state education, particularly in agriculture, education, and military sciences, the second Morrill Act of 1890 mandated that those funds be extended to institutions that enrolled Black Americans. Because of the stronghold of segregation in the South, many states established separate public HBCUs for the sole purpose of having a legal beneficiary for the federal support. These institutions are often referred to as the 1890 schools. Unintentionally, the Second Morrill Act of 1890 cemented the prevailing doctrine of segregation. Decades later, the amended Higher Education Act of 1965 defined Historically Black Colleges and Universities as any accredited institution of higher education founded prior to 1964 whose primary mission was, and continues to be, the education of Black Americans.⁶

Although the development of public universities increased the number of institutions and made it easier for students to attend college, this in no way universalized education. Indeed, at the close of the Civil War, the South did not have a public education system at any level for people of any race.⁷ Out of all of the southern states, only Kentucky and North Carolina had anything that even resembled a public education system before 1860.⁸ As such, when the former slaves began demanding and working to establish formal public schooling open to people of all ages, they were actually asking the South and the rest of the nation to embrace a relatively new philosophy of education. Not only were they asking White southerners to pay for the education of people they once held as property,

they were also effectively demanding rights that had not been generally available to the majority of Whites in the region.

The education of African Americans remained a thoroughly contested issue even as HBCUs were being established throughout the South. The social and economic instability of the South following the Civil War helped perpetuate the fear that educating freedmen would lead to racial upheaval.¹⁰ Although they did not generally support the idea of schooling for African Americans, some Whites did recognize the social, political, and economic advantages these education efforts afforded them.¹¹ As Spivey suggests, maintaining control over Black education helped Southern Whites institute a “new slavery” during the Reconstruction Era. Despite the narrow scope of their intended function, HBCUs grew into significant institutions in the production of research, particularly on the African diaspora.¹² Black colleges became the primary teachers of the previously under and uneducated populace, central repositories of cultural heritage, and stalwart beacons for community uplift.¹³

The multiple levels of education available at historically Black colleges made it easier for communities to teach their citizens without having to construct and operate other educational facilities at a time when many Southern states were reluctant and slow to fund African American schools.¹⁴ In addition, offering academic programs to students who possessed minimal skills or who were underprepared for college presented Black colleges with a way of manufacturing a niche for their advanced curricula. Rather than expect students to come to school already prepared to learn higher order material, HBCUs accepted them as they were and taught them as much as they could before letting them depart.

As with other American postsecondary institutions, HBCUs vary in size, curriculum specializations, and other characteristics. One commonality across HBCUs is their historic responsibility as the primary providers of postsecondary education for Black Americans in a social environment of racial discrimination. Walters identified six specific goals particular to HBCUs: (1) maintaining the Black historical and cultural tradition; (2) providing leadership for the Black community through the important social role of college administrators, scholars, and students; (3) providing an economic center in the Black community; (4) encouraging Black role models; (5) providing college graduates with a unique competence to address issues and concerns across minority and majority populations; and (6) producing Black graduates for specialized research, institutional training, and information dissemination for Black and other minority communities.¹⁵

The design of HBCUs differed from most of the colleges and universities that came before them in two respects: they promoted universal access and provided a curriculum designed to meet the needs of both the institution and the community. Although it is often characterized as a weakness, HBCUs have a unique tradition of providing their students with a culturally, socially, economically, and politically relevant education. This history also shows that a well-structured institution can serve the needs of both exceptional and traditional students by providing intel-

lectual and pragmatic programs. In fact, the functions and goals of historically Black institutions were the subject of a debate between W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. Washington believed that the HBCUs' primary function was to provide vocational training for the masses in conjunction with liberal learning.¹⁶ DuBois, on the other hand, espoused scholastic development of an elite group who would in turn influence the African American community: the Talented Tenth.¹⁷ Over time, Black colleges have merged these ideals into a dual mission of intellectual information coupled with practical application. Charles Willie writes, "the synthesis of liberal arts and vocationally oriented courses in the

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curriculum of Black colleges and universities . . . has placed [HBCUs] in the vanguard of higher education."¹⁸

Since their inception, HBCUs have been committed to the preservation of Black history, racial pride, ethnic traditions, and Black consciousness.¹⁹ Many African American students are drawn to these institutions because they desire a learning environment in which their identity is both appreciated and celebrated. Black colleges' commitment to this endeavor contributes to the educational experience and ultimately the resiliency of Black students. The success of Black colleges is often credited to the distinct campus culture that molds the academic environment and these institutions continue to produce a significant percentage of all African American baccalaureate degree recipients.

HBCUs have historically created pools of qualified individuals who traditionally have been underutilized in academia and corporate America. While it is true that HBCUs are of great value, they have not convinced some in society of their importance. As a result, questions are being raised about the need to continue their current configuration or existence. Thompson writes, "Black colleges constitute an indigenous, unique, most challenging aspect of higher education in this society, and as such are still badly needed [since] college enrollment is expected to continue to increase for at least another generation and Black colleges will be needed to participate in the education of more and more students."²⁰

It is ironic that HBCUs have been ignored when the discussion of diversity surfaces. The diversity of the student bodies at these institutions continues to grow. According to the last federal report on HBCUs, white students account for 16.5 percent of the HBCU enrollment nationally.²¹ Not only do HBCUs embrace people from different racial backgrounds, they also reach out to those students who have been con-

vinced that they are not college material because of their low academic performance. Predominantly White institutions can often be self-serving institutions. Some make admissions a cutthroat competition with their grade point average and standardized test score requirements. Freeman claims that HBCUs are able to successfully educate students in spite of the negative predictions of standardized test scores. The selection process of some predominantly White institutions possibly causes more harm than good because it detours a large number of potential students.²² The HBCU open-door policy, on the other hand, provides opportunity for more students. Notwithstanding, Black colleges have a negative image because of this policy.

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Black colleges literally reversed the tradition of social-class and academic exclusiveness that has always been characteristic of higher education. They invented the practice if not the concept of open enrollment. Their flexible admissions practices and academic standards have been without precedent in higher education. This is, no doubt, a fundamental reason why Black colleges have been so widely criticized by leaders in higher education and why they have been largely ignored by the most prestigious honor societies.²³

Because Black colleges formed outside of the traditional system of learning and catered to a population of people who were perpetually denied access to education, the early objectives of these institutions centered on uplifting the condition of the Black community.²⁴ The open enrollment philosophy is not new to Black colleges nor was this notion imposed upon them by legal authority. HBCUs were founded on the premise that everyone deserves an opportunity to pursue higher education. According to Kannerstein, "...the concern of Black colleges is not with who gets in but what happens to them afterward."²⁵ The focus is on helping students irrespective of their background and disadvantaged circumstances to become productive and successful citizens of the world.

Undeniably, HBCUs have readily accepted the challenge and continue to help students to succeed and beat the odds. Zinn contests:

What is overlooked is that the Negro colleges have one supreme advantage over the others: they are the nearest this country has to a racial microcosm of the world outside the United States, a world largely non-White, developing and filled with the tensions of bourgeois emulation and radical protest. And with more White students and foreign students entering, Negro universities might become our first massively integrated, truly international educational centers.²⁶

In *Black Colleges are not Just for Blacks Anymore*, Willie challenges the notion that Black colleges are only beneficial to Black people.²⁷ His argument draws upon his critical analysis and understanding of the academic literature on race, politics, sociology, and education, as well as his positionality as an African American man, a sociologist, and Morehouse College alumnus. Willie suggests that White students attending Black colleges could develop what W.E.B. DuBois identified as a double consciousness. This double consciousness would enable them to gain a better self-concept while simultaneously learning about how African Americans perceive them in a situation where they are now the minority. He recognizes that his

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position may not be popular among supporters of Black colleges and universities who fear that the infusion of a White student population will destroy the institutional culture of the schools. In response, Willie asserts:

If the proof of the pudding is in the eating of it, the beneficial contributions of predominantly Black colleges and universities to the higher education system of this nation can be truthfully attested to only by individuals who have experienced it. For those who are leery of the wisdom of this proposal, let me remind you of the words of wise in-laws in the family. They always say at the wedding ceremony that they are not losing a daughter but gaining a son, or vice-versa. Diversity is the source of our salvation. The addition of White students to predominantly Black colleges and universities will strengthen, not weaken, them. The institutions that pursue this policy will not lose students but will gain new allies and friends.²⁸

The study, *Good Intentions: Collegiate Desegregation and Transdemographic Enrollment*, also explores the implications of White students attending public historically Black institutions.²⁹ The author conducted an ethnographic case study at Bluefield State College in which artifact gathering, participant observation, document analysis, and informal interviews were used to collect data. Bluefield State is identified by federal regulation as an Historically Black University but maintains the lowest African American student enrollment and highest White student enrollment of the nation's Black institutions of higher education. Additionally, the faculty is 92 percent White and at the time that the study occurred, Bluefield State College was the only historically Black school to have a White president. In documenting and analyzing the significant changes that have taken place at this college, *Good Intentions: Collegiate Desegregation and Transdemographic Enrollment* coined the term *transdemography* to describe "shifts in the statistical composition of the student population within the corresponding institutions based solely on race."³⁰ The transdemographic shift poses a sur-

vival conflict for public Black colleges.³¹ This is important for public HBCUs because they are targets of desegregation initiatives. These institutions have to decide whether to fulfill desegregation mandates and endure the consequence of losing the cultural identity attributed to Black colleges or reject the desegregation initiatives and risk legal penalty.³² Bluefield State College is an example of collegiate desegregation gone awry.³³ The college intended to increase campus diversity by increasing White enrollment, but the Black population of students disappeared in the process.

The changes at Bluefield State highlight the fear that often accompanies discussions of diversity at Black colleges. Even so, some scholars continue to argue that

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these campuses inhibit the type of diversity they seek. S. J. Sims makes the argument that HBCU's must intensify their diversification efforts in *Diversifying Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A New Higher Education Paradigm*.³⁴

The problem with most of the literature on diversity at Historically Black Colleges and Universities is that it portrays these institutions as segregated institutions. While there is room for these institutions to increase diversity and the suggestions on how to do so are quite helpful, HBCUs do not get credit for the diversity they do have. Willie posits that one way diversity is present on Black college campuses is in the varying socioeconomic status of the student body. Historically Black Colleges and Universities attract students from both poor and privileged backgrounds.³⁵ The students are placed in an environment where they must coexist. According to Willie, "such diversity provides an inhospitable environment for the development of social class stereotypes."³⁶ This diversity serves as a valuable learning tool for students as they are able to confront some of the stereotypes of class and status. The Black college campus serves as a platform for interaction, engagement, learning, and ultimately growth in understanding and tolerance.

Despite a long history of underfunding and inadequate resources, HBCUs remain major contributors to higher education in the United States. They achieve success despite separate and unequal patterns of funding that persist even today.³⁷ Additionally, faculty salaries at HBCUs remain lower than their counterparts and expenditures at public HBCUs are lower than those at other public institutions. And, even though there have been increases in enrollments across both public and private HBCUs, they continue to be disproportionately worse off fiscally when compared with institutions that are predominantly White.³⁸

Nevertheless, HBCUs are an indispensable part of the national higher educa-

tion landscape. In spite of all of the positive evidence relating to their successes and achievements, negative misconceptions and erroneous information continue to impact their image. A clarion opportunity exists for higher education researchers to document, describe, and detail these unique institutions. HBCUs educate, employ, and empower a diverse population of students and citizens. Although Historically Black Colleges and Universities were created primarily for the education of African Americans, they have been successful in making collegiate participation more accessible for many others who might otherwise be denied.

The nation's higher education institutions might do well to emulate HBCUs by adopting principles and practices that meet students where they are, first, and then provide them with the spectrum of skills that will enable them to remain successful during and after college. As William H. Gray, III, former president of the United Negro College Fund, has noted, "Historically Black Colleges and Universities play a critical role in American higher education. They produce a disproportionate number of African American baccalaureate recipients, and are the undergraduate degree-of-origin for a disproportionate share of Ph.Ds to Blacks. These institutions perform miracles in elevating disadvantaged youth to productive citizenship. If they did not exist, we would have to invent them." 

APPENDIX: HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

There are 103 public, private, four-year, and two-year historically Black colleges and universities, clustered primarily in 19 southern and border states (Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia), with two exceptions—Michigan and the District of Columbia. The following is a list of historically Black colleges by state, character, type, and date of founding.

ALABAMA

1. Alabama A & M University (public, four-year, 1875)
2. Alabama State University (public, four-year, 1874)
3. Bishop State Community College (public, two-year, 1927)
4. C. A. Fredd State Technical College (public, two-year, 1965)
5. Concordia College (private, two-year, 1922)
6. J. F. Drake Technical College (public, two-year, 1961)
7. Lawson State Community College (public, two-year, 1965)
8. Miles College (private, four-year, 1905)
9. Oakwood College (private, four-year, 1896)
10. Selma University (private, four-year, 1878)
11. Stillman College (private, four-year, 1876)
12. Talladega College (private, four-year, 1867)
13. Trenholm State Technical College (public, two-year, 1963)
14. Tuskegee University (private, two-year, 1881)

ARKANSAS

15. Arkansas Baptist College (private, four-year, 1884)
16. Philander Smith College (private, four-year, 1877)

17. Shorter College (private, two-year, 1886)
18. University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff (public, four-year, 1873)

DELAWARE

19. Delaware State University (public, four-year, 1891)

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

20. Howard University (mixed, four-year, 1867)
21. University of the District of Columbia (private, four-year, 1851)

FLORIDA

22. Bethune-Cookman College (private, four-year, 1904)
23. Edward Waters College (private, four-year, 1866)
24. Florida A & M University (public, four-year, 1877)
25. Florida Memorial College (private, four-year, 1879)

GEORGIA

26. Albany State College (public, four-year, 1903)
27. Clark Atlanta University (private, four-year, 1989)
28. Fort Valley State College (public, four-year, 1895)
29. Interdenominational Theological Center (private, four-year, 1958)
30. Morehouse College (private, four-year, 1867)
31. Morehouse School of Medicine (private, four-year, 1975)
32. Morris Brown College (private, four-year, 1881)
33. Paine College (private, four-year, 1882)
34. Savannah State College (public, four-year, 1890)
35. Spelman College (private, four-year, 1881)

KENTUCKY

36. Kentucky State University (public, four-year, 1886)

LOUISIANA

37. Dillard University (private, four-year, 1869)
38. Grambling State University (public, four-year, 1901)
39. Southern University A & M College - Baton Rouge (public, four-year, 1880)
40. Southern University at New Orleans (public, four-year, 1959)
41. Southern University at Shreveport - Bossier City (public, two-year, 1964)
42. Xavier University (private, four-year, 1915)

MARYLAND

43. Bowie State University (public, four-year, 1865)
44. Coppin State College (public, four-year, 1900)
45. Morgan State University (public, four-year, 1867)
46. University of Maryland - Eastern Shore (public, four-year, 1886)

MICHIGAN

47. Lewis College of Business (private, two-year, 1874)

MISSISSIPPI

48. Alcorn State University (public, four-year, 1871)
49. Coahoma Community College (public, two-year, 1949)
50. Hinds Community College (public, two-year, 1954)
51. Jackson State University (public, four-year, 1877)
52. Mary Holmes College (private, two-year, 1892)
53. Mississippi Valley State University (public, four-year, 1946)
54. Rust College (private, four-year, 1866)
55. Tougaloo College (private, four-year, 1869)

MISSOURI

56. Harris-Stowe State College (public, four-year, 1857)
57. Lincoln University (public, four-year, 1866)

NORTH CAROLINA

58. Barber-Scotia College (private, four-year, 1867)
59. Bennett College (private, four-year, 1873)
60. Elizabeth City State University (public, four-year, 1891)
61. Fayetteville State University (public, four-year, 1877)
62. Johnson C. Smith University (private, four-year, 1867)
63. Livingstone College (private, four-year, 1879)
64. North Carolina A & T State University (public, four-year, 1891)
65. North Carolina Central University (public, four-year, 1910)
66. St. Augustine's College (private, four-year, 1867)
67. Shaw University (private, four-year, 1865)
68. Winston-Salem State University (public, four-year, 1862)

OHIO

69. Central State University (public, four-year, 1887)
70. Wilberforce University (private, four-year, 1856)

OKLAHOMA

71. Langston University (public, four-year, 1897)

PENNSYLVANIA

72. Cheyney State University (public, four-year, 1837)
73. Lincoln University (public, four-year, 1854)

SOUTH CAROLINA

74. Allen University (private, four-year, 1870)
75. Benedict College (private, four-year, 1870)
76. Claflin College (private, four-year, 1869)
77. Clinton Junior College (private, two-year, 1894)
78. Denmark Technical College (public, two-year, 1948)
79. Morris College (private, four-year, 1908)
80. South Carolina State University (public, four-year, 1896)
81. Voorhees College (private, four-year, 1897)

TENNESSEE

82. Fisk University (private, four-year, 1867)
83. Knoxville College (private, four-year, 1875)
84. Lane College (private, four-year, 1882)
85. LeMoyne-Owen College (private, four-year, 1862)
86. Meharry Medical College (private, four-year, 1876)
87. Tennessee State University (public, four-year, 1912)

TEXAS

88. Huston-Tillotson College (private, four-year, 1876)
89. Jarvis Christian College (private, four-year, 1912)
90. Paul Quinn College (private, four-year, 1872)
91. Prairie View A & M University (public, four-year, 1876)
92. Saint Phillip's College (public, two-year, 1927)
93. Southwestern Christian College (private, four-year, 1949)
94. Texas College (private, four-year, 1894)
95. Texas Southern University (public, four-year, 1947)
96. Wiley College (private, four-year, 1873)

VIRGINIA

97. Hampton University (private, four-year, 1868)
98. Norfolk State University (public, four-year, 1935)
99. Saint Paul's College (private, four-year, 1888)
100. Virginia State University (public, four-year, 1882)

101. Virginia Union University (private, four-year, 1865)

WEST VIRGINIA

102. Bluefield State College (public, four-year, 1895)

103. West Virginia State University (public, four-year, 1891)

ENDNOTES

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