

The Challenge to HBCUs in the 21st Century by Mickey Burnim

Today's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) face the challenge of remaining true to their historic mission of providing access to higher educational opportunity for African Americans and simultaneously positioning themselves as resources which enjoy broad-based support for their continued growth and vitality. HBCUs were founded largely between 1837 and 1920, principally to provide educational services to recently freed slaves and their progeny. Many of these institutions began as grammar or primary schools and later evolved into Normal schools preparing African American teachers to teach African American students. Now a number of them serve as comprehensive universities that offer a broad range of baccalaureate, master's degree and some doctoral programs to diverse student populations. Except for a handful of them, these institutions are located south of the Mason Dixon Line.

In the antebellum South, there was virtually no provision for the systematic education of African Americans—slave or free. In fact, teaching such people was actually against the law in many places. Hence, schools founded by individuals, churches, Quaker Societies, etc. began to spring up to provide rudimentary education so that the recently freed slaves and their children might become better prepared to fend for themselves in a post-slavery world. Many of these grammar schools later became Normal schools, which focused on the preparation of teachers to teach African American students. The developmental path that became typical led to the offering of four-year degrees, first in teacher education and administration and later in many of the traditional arts and sciences. Throughout this evolution, the student bodies of these institutions remained predominantly African American, though whites and Native Americans could be found sprinkled throughout many of them. From their inception through the early 1960s, their mission remained one of providing accessible education to African Americans that had been denied through de jure and/or de facto racism.

The success of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s had a significant impact on the American higher education landscape, including the HBCUs. As the moral consciousness of the nation was raised regarding the evils of racial segregation, previously segregated white southern institutions began to lower their barriers to African American students. African American students from the best high schools and with the best grades and most sought-after talents were heavily recruited and lured with scholarships and the promise of greater success. Herein lies the root cause of the challenge faced by HBCUs today.

Today only about 14 percent of African American students enrolled at institutions of higher education are at the approximately 105 HBCUs. This has resulted from the lowering of racial barriers, aggressive recruitment by predominantly white colleges and universities, and the belief held by some that predominantly white institutions are inherently superior. In spite of enrollment challenges, HBCUs have a disproportionate impact on positive educational outcomes for African Americans. These institutions award 24 percent of the baccalaureate degrees to African American students and a disproportionate share of the degrees in the science and mathematics disciplines, as well as professional degrees in law and medicine.

The reality today is that many HBCUs are struggling to boost their enrollments. The competitive pressures are extreme. Today's students demand first-rate facilities, educational equipment, and degree programs. In addition, the better prepared and more highly motivated students have many institutional options and tend to make their decisions on the basis of where they get the best scholarship offer. HBCUs, because of historic under-funding (from public and private sources) and, in a few cases, managerial shortcomings, tend to have larger percentages of poorly constructed and maintained buildings, fewer degree program options, and fewer scholarship dollars. Declining enrollment means fewer revenue dollars, diminished capacity to serve students, and threats to the long-term survival of these institutions.

The challenge for HBCUs in the 21st century, therefore, is the following: how do HBCUs remain true to the historic mission of providing access for African Americans while doing whatever is necessary to insure the long-term viability of the institution? My view is that as president of a public HBCU, I must take steps to assure that this institution continues to remain true to its founding and historic mission of access. This is done by recognizing and serving the higher educational needs of African American students while simultaneously serving as a publicly-assisted institution appealing to a broader ethnic, socioeconomic and geographic mix of students so as to ensure broad public support and the long-term viability of the university. I see these strategies as complementary and appropriate, particularly for public universities in the 21st century.

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