HBCUs: Higher Education Institutions in Transition

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"As the primary depository of the history and culture of peoples of African descent in the U.S., the HBCU plays a critical role in filling the gap in U.S. higher education and in moving the nation closer to its pluralistic ideal. In true sense, the successful future of the HBCU is critical to the future of the U.S. if the nation is to finally fulfill its unique pluralistic mission and become truly American." (LeMelle 2002)

Abstract

Historically Black Colleges and Universities have many organizational characteristics and challenges similar to those of all urban and metropolitan institutions: to serve increasing proportions of first-generation, multicultural students from diverse, often disadvantaged backgrounds while also contributing to economic and community development. However, HBCUs must reassess their missions and strategies. The authors outline the current challenges facing HBCUs in the twenty-first century, especially shrinking enrollments and constrained financial support, and suggest opportunities for new educational approaches that build on successful HBCU traditions of responsiveness to students and communities.

The majority of Historically Black Colleges and Universities were established before 1964, with a primary mission of providing a quality education to African Americans. Today, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are facing a changed environment in higher education. Along with this changed environment have come many of the opportunities and challenges faced by traditionally White institutions. The nature of these opportunities and challenges include many variables, including demographic changes and changing delivery mechanisms, globalization, new accreditation standards, assessment, participatory governance, changing expenditure patterns, and changing faculty workload, to name a few.

Urban colleges and universities play a key role in higher education by serving economically, educationally, and ethnically disadvantaged and diverse student populations. Some of the characteristics of students in urban HBCUs include income below the poverty line, immigrant status, first generation college student, or member of an ethnic minority group. These student populations may be in need of remediation or English language instruction (Hirose-Wong 1999). Forecasts of the demographic environments in urban settings predict that colleges and universities located in these

settings will continue to face unique obstacles that challenge their efforts to provide services to their constituents.

The accomplishments of Historically Black Colleges and Universities are impressive by any standard. HBCUs continue to liberate and empower Black aspirations for the American dream (Berger and Milem 2000; Chenoweth 1997). According to Allen and Jewell (2002), in order to prosper in this new millennium as academic institutions of the first order and not as some uninformed observers view them, as relics of America's less enlightened racial past, HBCUs must continue to evolve and change to reflect America's new reality. At the same time, HBCUs must maintain and solidify the world view and traditions that have anchored them and kept them viable for more than a century.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities are affected by the general transformation sweeping other U.S. higher education institutions. Similarly, they will be required to respond to a variety of questions as they reassess their missions and decide how best to serve their constituencies. These questions include:

- What changes will be required to recruit and serve increasing numbers of multiracial and multicultural student bodies?
- How viable is distance education?
- What are the information and technology needs of the future?
- What are essential elements for the twenty-first century curriculum?
- What will be the role of faculty governance?
- How to do more with limited resources?
- What are effective strategies for upgrading institutional budgets, records, and facilities infrastructures?
- How should capital campaigns be managed?
- What are pressing faculty needs? (Allen and Jewell 2002)

Current Trends and Challenges

Higher education in the twenty-first century has been transformed by many new trends and challenges (King 2000) which include, but are not limited to, information technology, changing demographics, changing faculty roles and rewards, paradigm shift from teaching to learning, new accreditation standards, globalization, a changing economy and privatization. In an effort to address these new challenges and trends, many universities are reviewing their policies and procedures, updating their strategic plans, and assessing institutional effectiveness. It is clear that higher education's survival is dependent upon strategic decisions that are guided by a shared vision and mission.

As recently as 2003, Morrison (2003) identified signals indicating that higher education was moving toward a major transformation. Examples are (1) more and more educational courses and programs were being designed, produced, and distributed by corporations; (2) the distance-learning market for total online degree

programs was growing at an annual rate of forty percent; (3) cable and phone companies were consolidating to provide more efficient forms of interactive multimedia programming; (4) the National Institute of Standards and Technology estimated that by 2004, the U.S. e-learning market would grow to $46 billion; the International Data Corporation projected that it would expand more than thirty-five percent of the total training market by 2004, up from ten percent in 1999, and (5) Army online (eArmyU.Com) had been established and is expected to have 85,000 online students by 2005 (Morrison 2003; Gallagher and Newman 2002; Stern 2002; Morton and Mendenhall 2001; and Lorenzo 2002).

In 2003, Massachusetts Governor Romney considered restructuring the higher education system. This restructuring plan would involve removal of the president's office, changing the Amherst campus to an independent institution, privatizing three public colleges and merging several other colleges. The proposed changes would amount to $150 million in savings. According to Governor Romney, "the elimination of the president's office in the University of Massachusetts system would save at least $14 million." There were many who were concerned about this proposal, how it would work and who would lead these institutions. Some lawmakers even criticized the plan, particularly in terms of the proposed elimination of the office of the president (Selingo 2003).

In Virginia, the General Assembly's Joint Subcommittee Studying Higher Education Funding Policies, indicated there was a $240 million shortfall in public higher education operating funds for fiscal year 2001. A review of course enrollments revealed the funding shortfall grew to $342 million in fiscal year 2002. In addition there were budget cuts of more that twenty-two percent in fiscal year 2003. As a result of fewer resources and greater demands, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV 2002) has worked closely with leaders in higher education, public schools, business and industry, and members of legislative and executive branches to develop a system-wide Strategic Plan for Higher Education. This plan served as a guide for the development of individual strategic plans at all colleges and universities in the state.

Kezar (1999) has reviewed the literature on policy and governance trends in higher education. He suggests that recent emphasis on policy and governance is due to higher education's response to the changing campus environment and the questioning of traditional missions and processes.

Other assumptions being questioned include: Are tenure and affirmative action still necessary? Should a faculty member spend so much time on research and, if so, what type of research? Can we maintain traditional institutions with shrinking resources? How can we accredit and maintain "traditional" standards with the advent of new learning processes and environments, such as distance education and prior experience? Can HBCUs prove that they actually increase student outcomes?

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in Transition

There are over one hundred HBCUs in the United States. Historically, these institutions have suffered from limited financial resources, poor physical plants and inadequate teaching facilities (Roebuck and Murty 1993). However, while Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) comprise only three percent of the nation's two- and four-year institutions, they produce twenty-eight percent of all bachelor's degrees, fifteen percent of all master's degrees, and seventeen percent of all first professional degrees earned by African Americans (Dervarirs 2001). The impact and contribution of HBCUs in the history of American higher education is clear and profound despite the fact that the role and function has always been and will continue to be under scrutiny and debate. Throughout the history of HBCUs there have been threats such as financial difficulties and accreditation issues that resulted in a re-examination of their role and function (LeMelle 2002).

In general, enrollments at HBCUs are down, making funding one of the major challenges facing most HBCUs. However, these colleges and universities continue to survive and thrive as intellectual training grounds. It is reassuring to note that for 150 years HBCUs have struggled with under-funding, limited resources and public disdain; nevertheless, they have played a major role in helping to produce the largest U.S. Black middle class of all times (LeBlanc 2001).

Roebuck and Murty (1993, 204-205) suggest that the current and future success of HBCUs is related to the mission of educating Black youth, providing a unique student-teacher relationship, specialized teaching methodology, providing a rich archival source for Black scholarship, and becoming centers for Black cultural studies. These writers, however, go on to identify the primary challenges facing HBCUs as follows:

- More non-Black students must be enrolled, while simultaneously maintaining a Black identity and the central function of educating Black youth. This will require an ingenious balancing act.
- HBCUs need to reach further out to the local, off-campus Black community and to provide a multitude of services to them. Currently the chasm between town and gown is too great.
- Faculty research and publications must be expected, required and rewarded without impairing the current emphasis on teaching and counseling. HBCU professors do not publish frequently enough, and those who do are insufficiently rewarded.
- Inadequate availability of Black faculty.
- HBCU administrators are perceived by some as too authoritarian.

LeMelle (2002) notes that, historically, the issues that tend to constantly be addressed by HBCUs can be condensed into three questions: Should HBCUs exist? What kind of education should they provide? And, how should the HBCU relate to the dominant political, economic and social environment that prevails in U.S. society today? These

questions continue to surface periodically and many have made attempts to respond to them in both philosophical and practical ways.

Major issues such as inadequate funding and/or operating with large deficits threaten the existence of HBCUs. Such underfunding has grave implications for other areas such as technology innovation and accreditation. As a result, many HBCUs have had to close due to lack of adequate funding. Other strategies have included reducing faculty and staff in order to survive (Redd 1998).

Accreditation Issues

Accreditation is a critical process designed to foster continuous improvement and the development of exemplary programs. All colleges and universities have the goal of achieving and maintaining accreditation for all of their academic units. This is especially true for Historically Black Colleges and Universities simply because a school's accreditation status has a definite effect on recruitment. There are many HBCUs, public and private, which have exemplary academic programs and have excellent budgetary and fiscal management practices. However, when one HBCU has difficulty or loses its accreditation, all HBCUs are concerned and feel the pain of such a devastating turn of events in their history and struggle for survival.

Many of the accrediting problems of HBCUs, however, do go back and/or are related to financial problems. In 1996, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) did not renew the accreditation of Selma University and Texas College. Both of these schools are historically Black institutions and budget problems were among the reasons for losing their accreditation. Texas College's president, Billy C. Hawkins, stated that the college lost it accreditation as a result of financial problems and waning enrollment. It was reported that Selma was three million dollars in debt, with several lawsuits pending from unpaid vendors. During this same year SACS placed Barber-Scotia College, another historically Black institution in North Carolina on probation due to financial difficulties (Nicklin 1996). More recently, it was announced that Barber-Scotia lost its SACS accreditation. The school was considering appealing this decision, however, Dr. Gloria Bromell-Tinubu, President of Barber-Scotia, stated that the college would not appeal (*Black Issues in Higher Education* 2004).

Within seven years, Texas College regained its accreditation and was reinstated as a United Negro College Fund (UNCF) member. Their enrollment has almost tripled and they have since launched a very aggressive fund-raising effort with support from Hank Aaron, an alumnus of the university, and his wife (Rooney 2003). Mary Holmes College lost its accreditation in December 2002 and has since considered a plan to merge with another college. Merger is considered by some an option that could prevent struggling HBCUs from disappearing altogether.

As of June 2003, there were four HBCUs on probation or warning from SACS. And, as recently as December 2003, Morris Brown College, a private historically Black institution in Atlanta, Georgia, lost its accreditation due, in part, to $27 million worth

of debt and the lack of a satisfactory plan to pay back the funds. More specifically, it was stated that the college was unable to demonstrate that they had the financial resources to support current programs. Further, there was evidence to show they had not followed federal regulations with regard to student financial aid. Although Morris Brown College appealed the decision, an appeals committee voted to uphold the withdrawal of the college's accreditation. The appeals committee stated that its rationale was based on the college's apparent difficulty in maintaining sound financial and management practices (McMurtie 2003).

Finance

HBCU administrators, in an effort to ensure financial stability, should take a holistic view of their institutions' financial environments. This view should, at a minimum, include (1) an operational knowledge of their institution's financial functions – techniques, sources and uses of funds, and budget formation and strategies; (2) knowledge of the economic conditions that could affect traditional revenue sources, such as federal and state appropriations, family disposable incomes, the cost of capital, and job market forces; and (3) the elasticity of demand and the financial impact in planning revenue from tuition increases. Each of these conditions should be measured against knowledge of competitive forces that affect new and existing academic programs (Brown and Allen 2002). More specifically, HBCUs must and are beginning to develop strategic planning initiatives and long-range plans that address these and related internal and external factors. In addition, more and more today, state legislatures are holding higher education institutions accountable for both establishing and meeting specific annual goals such as enrollments, graduation rates, program development and diversity.

According to Mora and Nugent (1998) and Williams (1998), many HBCUs are also re-examining their educational missions and seeking new funding alternatives. Alternative methods of revenue generation currently being considered and explored to a greater extent perhaps than in years past include (1) federal grants and contracts for university-community partnerships and (2) university-agency collaborations and resource-sharing to address pressing regional and statewide issues such as child welfare, juvenile justice or the placement of new correctional facilities, mental health treatment, workforce quality and development, health care delivery, environmental quality, school-college collaboration, city-university partnerships for local and regional community development, public-private partnerships to support local business development, mixed income housing projects and transportation, and joint fundraising efforts that link university purposes to the goals of local not-for-profit organizations with related activities or constituencies (Ramaley and Withers 1997).

According to Kezar (1999), funding sources have proved favorable toward universities committed to transformation in terms of their own vision and mission statements, particularly in terms of addressing community problems and under-girding workforce development.

Technology

Humphries (2000), a former president of historically Black Florida A&M University, identifies the contemporary challenge faced by HBCUs as that of preparing students for a more competitive, global, and technological marketplace. At the same time, technological innovation is changing the way higher education operates. Examples include opportunities to enhance teaching in the classroom, to offer courses over long distances, and to conduct research across continents. Use of technology has also been shown to have many positive outcomes including increased student enrollment and retention and enhanced institutional reputations. Students have also been shown to benefit more directly through the use of technology in terms of quality academic performance and better academic advising and counseling.

As such, HBCUs must commit to continued technological innovation. Technological innovations, particularly global connectivity, must be a prime target. But, such innovation is expensive. Instruction offered through non-traditional means, such as distance learning technologies, cost more to offer, at least initially, due to the need for specialized equipment, additional technical support in the classroom, special training of faculty and staff, greater course development costs at the front end, and a greater time requirement for faculty, at least initially, in offering such courses (Layzell and Caruthers 2002). Despite these costs, however, the relationship between HBCUs and technology must continue to be examined and incorporated into the HBCU strategic planning process.

Future Visions in Higher Education Institutions in Transition

Higher education is a more valuable commodity than ever before in history. It is an engine of technological change and economic development, a laboratory for workplace training, and a repository of general knowledge (Losco and Fife 2000). Currently, we are involved in a transformation of ALL higher education, including the Historically Black College and University campus. Urban HBCUs must continue to contribute to the economic growth of urban areas, nationally and internationally. Industries and businesses that could be affected include biomedicine, international commerce, finance, tourism, sports, telecommunications and information technology (Padron and Levitt 1999). Urban HBCUs are challenged to take on the role of being a political change agent for their urban communities while also serving as an educational change agent.

Irrespective of this transformation, however, HBCUs will continue to provide a lifetime of learning and knowledge exploration through creative people, innovative ideas and programs, and a spirit of entrepreneurialship. Turner (2002, 30) perhaps stated it best when he noted that, "Clearly, HBCUs are at a crossroads... but they [will] continue to play a crucial role in our nation's educational system even now facing increasing costs, legislative oversight, accreditation pressures, part-time faculty as well as competition from Traditionally White Institutions."

What must be ever present on every leader's mind who has the best interest for the future of HBCUs in mind is that these opportunities and challenges have the potential of either enriching or closing down HBCUs in the new millennium. Urban HBCUs will continue to help shape the future of colleges and universities as well as the urban community.

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