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Still Happening, Yet Still Problematic: The 21st Century Du Bois and Washington Debate

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Abstract

The value of a liberal arts education is evident. Yet valuing a liberal arts education at the expense of a technical or specialized education is problematic. This theoretical article offers an argument for shifting the discourse of valuing a liberal arts education to valuing all forms of postsecondary education. In doing this, the authors highlight historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and community colleges (CCs) as "urban educators," stakeholders, partners, and beneficiaries of the proposed neo-educational argument. The article closes with practical recommendations for establishing partnerships between HBCUs and CCs.

Keywords: Booker T. Washington, community colleges, historically Black colleges and universities, liberal arts, W.E.B. Du Bois

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The tension between a liberals arts and a technical or specialized education is a social justice issue. Levin (2007) explained that the 21st century tension within U.S. higher education is driven by economic competition: "The 'have' institutions and the 'have' programs are those with wealth, prestige and impact" (p. 1). Institutions that are often at the other end of the spectrum, such as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and community colleges (CCs), are the "have-nots." Further, Levin argued that colleges and universities reward students who are from traditional

backgrounds (i.e., those who enroll directly from high school, are high-income, have acceptable standardized test scores and grades) and further marginalize students who are nontraditional. Levin's definition of nontraditional included adult students, as well as students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., underrepresented racial/ethnic minority groups, low-income, first-generation college). In sum, Levin argued that the current state of higher education in the U.S. fosters a conflict between social justice and neoliberalism. Social justice defined as the extent to which higher education institutions provide opportunities for all students to equally further their goals; neoliberalism defined as maximizing profit for select institutions.

While Levin (2007) described the climate of 21st century higher education in general, the specific tension between liberal arts and technical or specialized degrees is noteworthy. Within the present neoliberal climate, Levin explained, higher education and society place more value on liberal arts degrees than technical or specialized degrees. For example, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU, n.d.) places emphasis on a liberal arts education through its Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative. The initiative promotes liberal arts education as important "for individuals and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality" and states that liberal arts "responds to the changing demands of the twenty-first century—demands for more college-educated workers and more engaged and informed citizens" (AACU, n.d., para. 1-2). One could argue that the AACU's LEAP initiative covertly devalues specialized or technical degrees, which are often gained at CCs. This is problematic because students who pursue technical or specialized degrees or attend CCs are more likely to be from disad-

vantaged backgrounds; they are more likely to be first-generation, low-income, racial/ethnic minority, and women (Levin, 2007; Nevarez & Wood, 2010).

HBCUs often educate the same historically underrepresented populations CCs serve (Gasman, 2010). Yet, many HBCUs actively promote the values of a liberal arts education. For instance, the Historically Black Colleges and Universities General Education Alliance (HBCU-GEA, n.d.) exists, in part, "to assist the academy and community in developing an effective general education as a foundation for quality *liberal arts* [emphasis added] learning in the 21st Century" (para. 1). While the HBCU-GEA places value on the liberal arts without comparison to other forms of education, its aims reinforce a liberal arts education as normative.

In the present article, we describe the valuing of a liberal arts education at the expense of a technical or specialized education as the 21st century version of the original Du Bois-Washington debate. We assert that this debate is just as problematic in the 21st century as it was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Ultimately, our intent within the present article is to present our theoretical argument, closing with recommendations that may help promote partnerships between HBCUs and CCs as the United States' "urban educators."

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (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), the year 1964 is used as a historical marker because it was the year that the *Civil Rights Act* was passed. Prior to the American Civil War, White slaveholders resisted efforts by Blacks to educate themselves

(Swygert, 2004). Even in the North, where slavery was almost non-existent, White inaction toward the education of Blacks had much the same practical outcome (Freeman, 2005). As a result, the first few of many HBCUs were founded in the years before the Civil War. Cheyney University (then the Institute for Colored Youth) was founded in 1837, followed by Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and Wilberforce University in Ohio.

These educational institutions were specifically created to provide for the educational needs of Blacks (Brown, 2001; Fleming, 1976; Williams & Ashley, 2004). The Freedman's Bureau, which was established in 1865 by the federal government to improve the plight of former slaves, refugees, and poor Whites, was involved in the creation of many of these institutions (Fleming, Gill, & Swinton, 1978). In addition, private Black churches, Northern missionaries, and private philanthropic organizations and individuals also played major roles in the founding of many HBCUs (Brown, Donahoo, & Bertrando, 2001). The number of HBCUs expanded substantially after the Civil War, with more than 200 being founded in the South in the five years immediately following 1865 (Brown, 2001).

Today, HBCUs remain an integral part of the United States' educational history. For Blacks, HBCUs have been gateways to higher education and socioeconomic advancement. They have a tradition of providing access to African Americans who otherwise might not have had the opportunity to pursue a postsecondary education (Swygert, 2004). In addition, across history, HBCUs have opened their doors to other historically underserved populations (Gasman, 2010). But despite history documenting the influence of HBCUs on the higher education landscape in the United States, funding inequities continue to exist

between HBCUs and predominantly White institutions (PWIs; Minor, 2008). Perhaps because of these inequities, the number of HBCUs has declined and 105 HBCUs constitute less than 3% of U.S. colleges and universities today (White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, n.d.). In spite of this, HBCUs continue to provide access and affordable options for underserved populations to pursue a postsecondary education.

In 2010, student enrollment at four-year HBCUs included the following: 302,666 African American/Black; 50,803 White; 12,205 Hispanic/Latino/a; 4,425 Asian American/Pacific Islander; and 942 American Indian/Native American. The 2010 student enrollments for African Americans at two-year HBCUs were 59,869 at public CCs and 157 at private CCs for a combined total of 60,026 students (Lee, n.d.). Using a historical perspective, in 1950, 100% of the HBCU student body was African American (Gasman, n.d.). Yet, in the last 30 years, Latino/a enrollment has continued to increase, especially in states with increasing Latino/a populations such as Texas. In addition, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Asian American students showed a 60% increase in enrollment at HBCUs from 2001 to 2011 (as cited in Gasman, n.d.). Meanwhile, White enrollments have remained steady at 10% to 13% of total enrollment (NCES, 2011, as cited in Gasman, n.d.). HBCUs also educate a high number of low-income students, as approximately 50% of HBCU students qualify for Federal Pell Grants (Jawando, 2010). CCs share a similar historical narrative of serving underrepresented populations.

Community Colleges

Community colleges are distinctive U.S.

institutions that made higher education instruction possible for the larger community. Joliet Junior College, established as an extension to a Joliet, Illinois, high school in 1901, has the distinction of being the first CC (Baker, 1994). The name community college—changed from junior college—was adopted because the students attending the institutions were generally from the local community and because the local community provided support to the colleges through property taxes (Frye, 1992). During the 1920s and 1930s, CCs served as the basis for workforce development by providing vocational training (Dougherty, 1994). By the 1960s, more than 450 CCs existed across the United States. In addition to increased numbers, CCs saw an increase in enrollment as a result of individuals returning from World War II or trying to escape the draft for the Vietnam War (Baker, 1994; Nevarez & Wood, 2010). By the 1980s, CCs began partnering with high schools to help get students ready for postsecondary educational programs (Frye, 1992). Today, CCs primarily offer courses leading to certificates and associate's degrees (Nevarez & Wood, 2010).

In recent history, scholars have found that CCs provide the hope of college to those who might not have been afforded the opportunity to attend college (Levin, 2007; McPhail, 2005; Nevarez & Wood, 2010). In addition, CCs offer students the opportunity to attend school while living at home; offer schedules that work around family issues and jobs; and generally operate with a focus on workforce-related curricula (McPhail, 2005; Nevarez & Wood, 2010). Today, there are nearly 1,200 CCs that assist in influencing communities to become change agents by educating students who then provide for the employment needs of society (Baker, 1994; Nevarez & Wood, 2010).

Noren (2012) reported that in 2011, the overall CC enrollment was 7.7 million students. The racial/ethnic representation statistics were as follows: 54% White; 16% Hispanic/Latino/a; 14% African American; 6% Asian American/Pacific Islander; and 11% [*sic*] other/unknown. Since 1986, the representation of racial-ethnic minorities attending CCs has increased: 3% for African Americans, 8% for Hispanic/Latino/as, and 3% for Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders (Nevarez & Woods, 2010). In addition, Hispanic/Latino/a students are more likely to attend CCs, as just over half of all Latino undergraduates are enrolled at CCs (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). Collectively, given the overlap in the students that HBCUs and CCs serve, we argue the devaluing of a technical or specialized education is problematic for both HBCUs and CCs, particularly if HBCUs actively promote a pro-liberal arts narrative to the detriment of CCs. We have crafted our argument using a blend of three conceptual frameworks: (a) the Du Bois and Washington debate, (b) critical race theory, and what we call a (c) "critical liberal arts" lens.

Conceptual Framework

The Du Bois and Washington Debate

The late 19th and early 20th century brought about major changes for African American communities. With these changes, which included access to education for African Americans, came a debate between two of the most prominent African American leaders: W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington (WGBH Educational Foundation, n.d.). They philosophically disagreed on how to advance African Americans. On one hand, Du Bois believed in "developing the small group of college-educated blacks, [which] he called 'the Talented

Tenth'" (WGBH Educational Foundation, n.d., para. 3). We consider Du Bois' argument the present-day liberal arts side of the debate. On the other hand, Washington promoted "education in the crafts, [and] industrial and farming skills" (WGBH Educational Foundation, n.d., para. 2)—what we consider to be present-day technical or specialized skills advocacy. And because of Du Bois and Washington's own race, we also used a critical race lens.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) emerged in 1970s because minority lawyers thought they were being overlooked in critical legal studies (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2002). Tenants of CRT include: racism exists and is normal in the United States, and it challenges racial oppression by bringing race to the forefront of analyses rather than using colorblind lens (Delgato & Stefancic, 2013; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Furthermore, CRT acknowledges the ways structural inequities disadvantage races/ethnicities in comparison to Whites (Treviño, Harris, & Wallace, 2008). CRT within education "offers insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogies that guide our efforts to identify, analyze, and transform the structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom" (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 63). Collectively, these tenets of CRT shaped the present article. Challenging the notion of liberals arts as normative also shaped the present article.

Critical Liberal Arts

As mentioned previously, a liberal arts education is viewed as normative within the current higher education landscape. Perhaps, Levin (2007) would explain, the liberal arts normalization is a result of neoliberalism within U.S. higher education. In addition, organizations such as the AACU (n.d.) and HBCU-GEA (n.d.) normalize a liberal arts education in their published aims and missions. A "critical liberal arts" framework challenges the normalization of liberal arts as standard education, and questions how a liberal arts emphasis or appreciation marginalizes other forms of education (e.g., online, technical, mechanical, agricultural). Through this conceptual framework, we propose that valuing a liberal arts degree at the expense of an associate's degree is an issue of social justice.

Liberal Arts as an Issue of Social Justice

When Harvard University was founded in 1636, White, Christian men attended Harvard to debate, study religion, classics and philosophy, and become better citizens (Thelin & Gasman, 2011). Men attended Harvard for intangible skills, or current-day liberal arts skills. Furthermore, many of the men left college without a degree because college completion was not as important as becoming better, well-rounded citizens (Thelin & Gasman, 2011). Subsequently, the measures U.S. higher education institutions—and more broadly U.S. citizens—use to value education today are similar to those of the 1636 Harvard education. That education did not include the diversity of students studying at today's U.S. institutions, and it did not include the myriad of reasons students now attend college.

Historically, CCs have served a diverse set of students: veterans, underrepresented racial/ethnic minorities, first-generation college, low-income, first-generation Americans, and nontraditional students (Levin, 2007; Nevarez & Woods, 2010). While some of these students may be attending two-year colleges because of educational inequities that exist and persist, we posit that other students *do*

attend two-year colleges by choice. Perhaps these students choose CCs because they want to be trained in a specialized field (e.g., automotive engineering, welding, culinary arts). They might also choose CCs because they are more affordable when compared to public four-year or private institutions. Given that the U.S. has nearly 5,000 higher education institutions, which serve a diversity of students seeking a diverse set of skills, the argument that skills sought can be gained at both two-year and four-year institutions—even at institutions that do not prescribe to the values of a liberal arts education—is warranted.

As access increased in higher education through the establishment of HBCUs and CCs, the diversity of citizens pursuing postsecondary credentials increased as well. But along with the diversity of institutions came a caste system of higher education institutions—a system of "haves" and "havenots" (Levin, 2007; Nevarez & Wood, 2010). Consequently, this caste system, immersed in what we call the 21st century equivalent of the Du Bois and Washington debate, emerged. In actuality, neither scholar was right or wrong, as African Americans were successful following both paths. Du Bois and Washington just supported different sectors of African Americans and different sets of skills. We propose that some of today's HBCUs could be viewed through the Du Boisian lens, given their pursuit of prestige and the value that they ascribe to a liberal arts education. Still, we believe the HBCU community is vital in shifting to a narrative that recognizes and appreciates all forms of education.

While HBCUs are overwhelmingly four-year, liberal arts institutions, they often serve a similar student demographic as CCs; in addition, 12 HBCUs *are* CCs. Consequently, we argue, while HBCUs *can* value a liberal arts education, the narratives set by HBCUs *can-*

not value a liberal arts education at the expense of a technical or specialized education. HBCUs are "distant cousins" of CCs. Thus, if an HBCU were to use a liberal arts narrative that devalued technical or specialized training, that HBCU would be devaluing and marginalizing the very students they were established to serve.

In sum, educators cannot continue to marginalize the marginalized by arguing for liberal arts at the expense of technical or specialized training. It adds another form of discrimination and oppression to historically underrepresented populations because these students tend to be overrepresented at CCs. To interrupt cycles of inequities within historically underrepresented groups in higher education, U.S. citizens and higher education constituents must appreciate and advocate for CCs and technical or specialized education as valuable options. Technical or specialized forms of postsecondary education *are* important for the economic, social, and educational advancement of historically underrepresented groups and, more broadly, the United States. Furthermore, demographic shifts simply call for the re-evaluation of the value frameworks within the U.S. higher education landscape.

Changing Demographics

The U.S. has undergone a significant demographic transformation during the last two decades alone. According to the U.S. Bureau of Census Data, the number of children in the U.S. will likely continue to grow over the next three decades. It is projected that the 0-17 year-old population will increase from 63 million in 1982 to 73 million in 2020, a 16 percentage point increase (as cited in Treadwell, 1992). Furthermore, in 1990 the foreign-born population was less than 20 million; by

2007, it had nearly doubled to 38 million (Perez, 2010). According to Mahaffy and Pantoja (2012), Latino/a people are the fastest growing racial/ethnic minority group in the U.S. and the population is expected to triple in size by 2050. Still, Latino/as continue to be underrepresented in postsecondary education, and the retention of Latino/a students in higher education remains low.

Torres Campos et al. (2009) revealed that 35% of 18-24 year-old Latinos pursue higher education compared to 46% of their White peers, and only 11% (18-24 years of age) of Latinos possess a bachelor's degree as compared to 34% of their White counterparts. In addition, Arana, Castañeda-Sound, Blanchard, and Aguilar (2011) suggested that Latino/a first-generation students are 35% less likely to persist than White first-generation students. Furthermore, 46% of Latino students who enroll in higher education institutions actually attain a bachelor's degree (Oseguera, Denson, & Hurtado, 2008). Studies also show that more than half of Latino/as enroll in two-year institutions, many of whom intend to transfer to four-year institutions, however, nearly 90% fail to transfer, ultimately getting lost in the educational pipeline (Stern, 1995).

Demographic changes within the African American community are also expected. In 2010, approximately 8.5 million Blacks attended secondary and postsecondary schools, and the Black school-age population is expected to increase to 12 million by 2020 (NCES, 2010; Treadwell, 1992). Still, Blacks also continue to be marginalized in U.S. postsecondary education. Stern (2008) indicated that the six-year graduation rate for Blacks is 46% as compared to 67% for Whites. Harris (2011) added that among adults over the age of 25, twice as many Blacks dropped out of high school than Whites; in addition, only

19% of Black adults hold bachelor's degrees as compared to 33% of their White counterparts.

These demographic shifts, coupled with the achievement gaps, should cause concern for educators and U.S. citizens alike. To best serve *all* student populations, institutions of higher education, and more specifically HBCUs and CCs, must prepare for these changes. Educators must be aware of losing students in the pipeline and the current narrative must change.

HBCUs and CCs have been, and continue to be, instrumental in educating historically underrepresented student populations. U.S. President Barack Obama affirmed his commitment to HBCUs by announcing plans to increase spending on HBCUs by $850 million over the next decade alone (Toldson, 2013). In addition, President Obama's *Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act* included $2 billion for CCs (The White House, n.d.a). Thus, both HBCUs and CCs will continue to play integral roles in 21st century U.S. higher education.

President Obama's 2020 Goal

A postsecondary education is critical in today's knowledge-based economy. As students graduate from high school and seek the next level of opportunity, they must keep in mind the needs and demands of the employment sector. More than ever before, today's jobs require some type of education beyond a high school diploma. Yet, when compared to nations across the world, the United States lags behind in its attainment of postsecondary degrees (The White House, n.d.b). The U.S. currently ranks 16th in the world in its share of postsecondary certificates and degrees awarded to adults aged 25-34, which places us beneath countries such as Canada, Japan,

and Korea (The White House, n.d.b). Furthermore, the attainment gap for historically underrepresented and underserved student populations continues to present a challenge. In the early stages of President Obama's administration, he addressed the aforementioned matters and introduced his educational goal for the United States.

With a commitment to HBCUs and CCs as part of his plan, President Obama has suggested that, by 2020, the United States needs to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world (as cited in Carey, 2009). His goal for educational attainment in the 21st century raises concerns about accessibility, quality, and affordability given shifting demographics and the current achievement gaps (Carey, 2009; Mitchell & Daniele, in press). Furthermore, President Obama has announced his plans to "overhaul the student loan system," while making Federal Pell Grants entitlements or mandatory federal appropriations (as cited in Carey, 2009, para. 1). Such reforms to awarding federal financial aid would assist undergraduate students, particularly low-income students who are disproportionately overrepresented at CCs or HBCUs (The Century Foundation, 2013).

Given President Obama's 2020 educational goals and demographic changes, HBCUs and CCs must play an integral part in the United States' quest for higher completion rates in postsecondary settings. In February 2010, President Obama signed an executive order to continue the White House Initiative on HBCUs, and later that year, President Obama acknowledged the role that HBCUs must play to achieve his 2020 goal (Toldson, 2013). In addition, five million of the projected new eight million degrees will come from CCs (The Century Foundation, 2013). Given the shifting demographics and the students that HBCUs and CCs have served, both

HBCUs and CCs will undoubtedly be instrumental in opportunities for higher education attainment in the 21st century; perhaps even greater opportunities lie in HBCU-CC partnerships.

Recommendations

HBCUs and CCs must establish collaborations and increase pipeline initiatives at their institutions. HBCU-CC partnerships between institutions within close proximity may be the most ideal option. These partnerships might include cooperative course sharing, similar to the Cooperating Raleigh Colleges (n.d.) partnerships, where students are allowed to enroll at any institution within the partnership to pursue courses that meet graduation requirements. HBCUs and CCs must also actively promote these partnerships. For example, Tidewater Community College (n.d.) in Virginia uses the slogan, "From Here, Go Anywhere," highlighting opportunities for students to find a job or transfer to a four-year institution. Thus, it is noteworthy that Tidewater Community College has formalized partnerships with Norfolk State University and Hampton University, among other HBCUs in Virginia.

In particular, HBCUs and CCs might consider the following: (a) develop articulation agreements, (b) establish reverse transfer arrangements, (c) offer and/or recognize more general courses for transfer students, and (d) use HBCU-CC partnerships as accreditation enhancement plans. The following is a brief explanation of each proposed recommendation.

Articulation Agreements

Articulation agreements are formal agreements between two institutions. HBCUs and CCs must actively pursue articulation agree-

ments for students who want to transfer from CCs to HBCUs, or vice versa. For example, 60% of Black males enter higher education through CCs (U.S. Department of Education, as cited in Wood & Hilton, 2012). HBCUs must attract these students, among others. Furthermore, articulation agreements must clearly define what will and will not transfer to the partnering institution.

Reverse Transfers

Reverse transfers allow students to transfer to a four-year institution and also allow them to complete the requirements for an associate's degree at their previous two-year institution. Grand Valley State University (GVSU) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is a national leader in this practice. GVSU (n.d.b) has nearly 30 reverse transfer agreements with CCs across the state of Michigan. GVSU advertises the value of an associate's degree while serving as a liberal arts institution, and highlights the benefit to the student (i.e., associate's degree) and the partnering CC (i.e., degree completion). In addition, given the fact that many four-year HBCUs offer certificates and associate's degrees, reverse transfers from HBCUs to CCs may be beneficial as well.

General Courses for Transfer Students

HBCU-CC partnerships that are established must clearly highlight what courses can be transferred. In addition, courses that cannot be used for major or minor requirements should be used as electives or general education requirements. For example, to help students interested in transferring to GVSU (n.d.a), they use an online course equivalency guide. The guide allows students to select their institution along with courses they completed there to see if the course would count toward graduation. Further, institutions must

do a good job of counting military service and other forms of experience toward degrees.

Accreditation Plans

Finally, we encourage HBCUs and CCs to include partnerships within accreditation plans. For instance, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS, 2011) requires their members to develop quality enhancement plans (QEP) as part of their accreditation reaffirmation process. Given the similarities in the students HBCUs and CCs serve, a unique approach would be partnership programs between HBCUs and CCs that assist in graduating underrepresented and underserved populations. Coppin State University (CSU) in Baltimore might be considered a leader in this approach. CSU recently released its plan to focus on transfer and returning students (Bishop, 2013).

Conclusion

We *do* value a liberal arts education, but not at the expense of a technical or specialized education. As the United States becomes more diverse and maintains aspirations for economic and educational prominence, the Du Bois and Washington debate is still happening, yet still problematic. For the United States to move closer toward President Obama's 2020 goal, the nation's educational values must change because all institutions will play a role. Perhaps HBCUs and CCs as "urban educators" might lead the change.

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