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The Historically Black College and University: A Question of Relevance for the African American Millennial College Student?

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One of the most important developments of the past 25 years has been the rise of what has been termed the “millennial” generation. This generation, born between 1982 and the present, has characteristics that differentiate it in numerous ways from previous generations. African American students from this millennial generation have enrolled in predominately White institutions (PWIs) in ever-increasing numbers. This article focuses on African American millennial students and the question of the HBCUs’ relevance among this generation. Recommendations are provided that highlight the historical legacy and mission of the HBCU while emphasizing its role in attracting significant numbers of African American millennial college students.

A recounting of American higher education history would be incomplete without the recognition of a unique institutional type: the Historically Black College and University (HBCU). According to Lucas (1994), “The first black colleges to come into existence were founded in the North. An Institute for Colored Youth was first created by Quakers in Philadelphia in 1842, ancestor to the institution later called Cheyney

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thrive in ways that had far-reaching effects on the educational history and development of the African American community (Watkins, 2001).

African American participation in higher education has been characterized as one of both struggle and triumph. From the earliest days of the HBCU, to the unique and complex institutions we see today, the Black college has left an indelible mark on the higher education landscape. In keeping with the goal of educating young African American collegians—many that would not otherwise be afforded the opportunity to obtain a higher education—the HBCU continues to make monumental strides. From 1850 to 2003, the number of African Americans attending higher education rose from less than 5% to currently more than 25% of the total African American population (Freeman, 1999; Walker 2006). Students who attend HBCUs, as compared to those attending PWIs, are more likely to have received less college preparation, more likely to have lower high school GPAs and ACT/SAT scores, more likely to have parents who lack formal higher education training, and are more likely to be first generation college students (Freeman, 1999; Kim, 2002). Additionally, Williams and Ashley (2004) report that, "While black colleges and universities make up just 4% of U.S. institutions of higher learning, they graduate 28% of all students who earn their undergraduate degrees" (p. 301). If we take a look at the influence that these institutions have on African Americans who obtain terminal or professional degrees, the numbers become even more significant. Even more pointed are Brown, Donahoo, and Bertrand’s (2001) work that states, "More than any other set of institutions, HBCUs have discarded the notion that higher education is an advantage open only to the rich or socially prestigious. Surrounded by hostile forces, these college and universities have established and maintained a tradition of academic excellence" (p. 568). Knowledge of the aforementioned characteristics of the HBCU and its student population is not new, however it does provide a social context that addresses the lingering effects of slavery and segregation faced by the millennial generation of African American students.

The Contemporary Mission of the HBCU

During the 1950s and 1960s, many African Americans viewed the HBCU as a place of emancipation. This emancipation represented a specific figurative notion that African Americans possessed regarding HBCUs—viewing these institutions as fertile grounds for future educational opportunities. LeMelle (2002) noted that African Americans "looked to the HBCU with high expectations for the education that would prepare them for what they perceived to be a new era of employment opportunities in a rapidly changing world" (p. 195). Yet despite a legacy of continued successes, the mission of the HBCU in contemporary society continues to come under fire. Age-old arguments centered on
student clearly stated that he “was better” than students who attended HBCUs, despite sharing a similar profile with many of the students who attend Black colleges. The young men used words like “civilized” and “sophisticated” when describing Black students who attend PWIs, while they referred to those attending HBCUs as “vulgar,” “ghetto” and “disrespectful.” These perceived differences on the part of the young men brought to mind the “house slave versus field slave” mentality. And despite parental encouragement to attend HBCUs, the young men perished the thought. Furthermore, they insisted they “put in more work than the average student at an HBCU.” (pp. 2-3)

Dancy’s (2005) work captures one of the core issues that guides the perception of these African American millennials; namely, the belief that the quality of these institutions, and the students who attend them, is sub-par. Williams and Ashley (2004) highlight the tremendous struggle HBCUs encounter today in their efforts to attract academically accomplished African American students—mainly due to amenities and resource that PWIs are able to provide to their student populations. According to these researchers, “The struggle for revenue has been problematic to HBCUs on more than one front. Decreased and flat revenues have made it difficult for all but the wealthiest HBCUs to consistently develop new curriculums, upgrade their education and administrative technology, and expand campus facilities” (p. 303).

Still another pervasive issue facing the HBCU is how to maintain their mission and status while engaging a student culture that has become increasingly consumer-oriented. The loyalty and sense of allegiance that prior generations seemed to have for HBCUs appears to be lacking among current African American millennial cohorts (Walker, 2006). Certain amenities and services are not only expected but are also demanded by these students. Again, it is important to recognize that students’ expectations are very strongly influenced by the consumer-oriented culture that is so pervasive in contemporary society. Frank (2006), in an article published for EDUCASE, states that “Colleges and universities are spending more not just to attract good students but to keep them happy once they arrive. As the material living standards of affluent Americans have escalated in recent years, universities have felt increasing pressure to upgrade campus amenities” (p. 51). For the HBCU, keeping up with this trend of enhanced college amenities maintains what Frank (2006) refers to as the “arms race” among higher education institutions. He also elaborates on this idea by stating:

In sum, universities face increased pressure to pay higher salaries to star faculty; to spend more on marketing, student services, and amenities; and to offer ever-more generous financial aid to top-ranked students from high-income families. It is little wonder, then, that their financial situations have grown more precarious. (p. 51)
With the continued desegregation of higher education and the increasing mandate of PWIs to increase the recruitment and retention of minority students, HBCUs are losing opportunities to enroll talented African American students. A recent report from the Associated Press highlighted this challenge when it stated, “Experts say aging campuses are one reason. But other reasons cited include increasing competition from predominantly white schools that are trying to become more diverse; changes in black students’ desires; and the greater opportunities available to them in a society more integrated than that of their parents” (Walker, 2006). Unlike their parents, African American millennials do not necessarily have the sense of obligation and or the feelings of nostalgia that would lead them to matriculate at an HBCU. As a result, both HBCUs and PWIs have been pushed to spend more time and money in bolstering specific student service offerings that appeal to African American millennial college students.

HBCUs in the New Millennium: Confronting the Needs of the Millennial Generation

Many HBCUs find themselves at a crossroads trying to preserve their historical mission while concomitantly being responsive to the needs of student generation closely linked to the advent of the 21st century. As HBCUs work to maintain this balance, it is critically important that these institutions begin to address both external and internal challenges that have the potential to threaten their very existence. With recent court rulings such as the United States v. Fordice (1992) and Hopwood v. Texas (1996), HBCUs find that they must respond to ongoing efforts to eliminate the vestiges of legal segregation while increasing non-black enrollment and simultaneously preserving the historical mission, culture, climate, and context of their institutions (Outcat & Skewes-Cox, 2002). Additionally, HBCUs are also challenged with meeting the needs of an undergraduate student population whose reasons for attending an HBCU and whose expectations of college life are markedly different from prior generations of African American college students. The cumulative effect of these phenomena has accelerated the shifting role of HBCUs as these institutions look to meet the needs of African American millennials. It is critical to recognize that a major force in this shift involves how HBCUs strike a balance that will preserve their historical legacy while also allowing them to remain competitive and attractive to a new generation of college students.

Hence, remaining competitive and attractive to millennial cohorts must become one of the prevailing missions for each of the 103 HBCUs operating in the United States (Brown II, 2002). Until the last quarter of the 20th century, each of the 89 four-year and 14 two-year HBCUs (Kim, 2002), educated the majority of African American students in the nation (Freeman, 1999). However, during the 1980s, a shift occurred in the college participation (or attendance) patterns of African American students at both HBCUs and PWIs (Freeman, 1999). In 1986, 20% of African American students were attending HBCUs. By 1997, approximately 16% of African American undergraduates nationwide were enrolled in HBCUs (Freeman, 1999; Outcat & Skewes-Cox, 2002). Despite these declines, the number of students graduating from HBCUs (relative to their PWI counterparts) reveals the significant and vital role that these institutions continue to play. This data should serve as fodder for discussions involving how HBCUs can remain competitive and attractive to millennial cohorts. It is important for HBCUs and their advocates to remember that although these statistics are promising, it must be understood that “the strength of the HBCU is its unique cultural context” (Brown II, 2002).

African American Millennials: Key Considerations for HBCUs Regarding Racial Identity

Often overlooked in discussions of the current “millennial” generation of college students are discussions related to race. Much of the current literature on millennials focuses on this group’s diverse demographic profile while only vaguely examining the underlying complexities of this diversity (Howe & Strauss, 2003; Strauss & Howe, 2006). One of the primary characteristics attributed to millennials is that they minimize the importance of race in their own lives (Howe & Strauss, 2003; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Brodo, 2004) and instead seek to celebrate the commonalities that link people of different racial backgrounds (Howe & Strauss, 2000). In discussing the racial views of millennial students, Howe and Strauss (2003) assert that “millennials are less likely to regard themselves as either ‘white’ or ‘black’ than any generation” (p. 218). Howe and Strauss (2003) also note that “while millennials still see ethnic inequalities in America, they’re becoming inured to the constant discussion of black-white issues...” (p. 218). The final conclusion reached by Howe and Strauss (2000) asserts that Millennials shun “traditional” black/white dichotomies in favor of a more complex understanding of diversity that relies on an in-depth awareness of the growing ethnic and geographical identities that populate the United States (Howe & Strauss, 2000). In short, Howe and Strauss (2000) believe that African American millennial students (like other millennials) view race as a form of political nostalgia that is overshadowed by other factors such as ethnicity, culture, lifestyle, and economics.

The research on the racial attitudes of millennial students found in the seminal writings of Howe and Strauss (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Howe & Strauss, 2003; Strauss & Howe, 2006) is problematic on several levels. First, their research relies primarily on an interpretation of data collected through the Gallup Youth Poll as well as their own survey of high school students. Methodologically speaking, their survey relies on a relatively
small sample of students attending high schools in northern Virginia and from a small sample of teachers working in a single school district (also in northern Virginia). No information is provided regarding the selection of the sample group or how the survey instrument was designed or administered. Second, beyond these methodological shortcomings, is the assumption that millennial students in general (and African American millennials in particular) have attitudes about race that are fixed and relatively unchanging. Extensive research in several social science fields reveals this assumption to be problematic (Parham, 1989; Helms, 1990; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley & Chavous, 1998; Miller, 1999; McAllister & Irvine, 2000).

Research regarding the racial identity development of African American youth has been discussed in the literature at least since the work produced by DuBois (1903) during the early part of the twentieth century. Gaines and Reid (1994) classify the research on racial identity development among African Americans as being part of either a “mainstream” approach or part of an “underground” approach. The mainstream approach is characterized by its focus on the destructive effects of prejudice in studying African American identity development. The underground approach is characterized by the historical/cultural development of African Americans and the uniqueness of the prejudice and discrimination that they experience (Sellers et al., 1998). From these two approaches, a host of contemporary literature has emerged that discusses the development of racial attitudes among African American youth.

It is beyond the scope of this work to provide an in-depth examination regarding African American racial identity development. However, it is important to establish some sense of understanding of the most prevalent identity development model utilized in the study of African American identity development. This model, known as the Cross Model of Psychological Nigresence, was developed by William Cross in the early 1970s (Sellers et al., 1998). According to Cross, African American racial identity moves through several developmental stages: Pre-encounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment (Cross, 1991). The work of Beverly Daniel Tatum (1992/1999) discusses these stages at length, particularly as they relate to racial development of African American adolescents.

The pre-encounter stage is characterized by acceptance of the values of the dominant white society and by a lack of awareness regarding issues of race and their importance in the life of the individual. The encounter stage involves a growing awareness of race due to an event, or series of events, that cause the individual to acknowledge the existence of racism. The immersion/emersion stage is highlighted by a desire to surround oneself with symbols of one’s own culture while simultaneously shunning symbols associated with whiteness. The internalization stage represents a secure acceptance of one’s racial identity and is often characterized by a willingness to establish meaningful relationships across racial lines with those who are sympathetic to their quest for self-definition. The final stage, internalization-commitment, seems to differ very little from the internalization stage. This stage finds individuals “anchored in a positive sense of racial identity” (Tatum, 1992, p. 12) that allows them to move past race as they explore other aspects of their identities.

In making their assertions about the role of race in the perceptions of millennial students, Howe and Strauss (2000) have failed to examine the specific views of African American millennials and how their evolving racial identity may have affected their views on race in American society. Current research on racial identity development clearly reveals the important role that it plays in the lives of African American youth (Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001; Tatum, 1997), particularly in regards to their academic achievement (Lundy, 2003) and the maintenance of their mental health (Parham & Helms, 1985). With racial identity playing such an important role in the lives of African American millennials, it is necessary that any research regarding their attitudes about race take this concept into account.

Conclusions

HBCUs have a rich and varied history that has enriched the growth of higher education in the United States. However, the new generation of African American millennial students has presented a special challenge for HBCUs. Although HBCUs have undergone several generations of growth and change, the demands of the millennial generation are pushing these institutions to seek new strategies that help to strengthen their position. Marketing campaigns, improved campus facilities, revisions to certain academic areas, and the increased recruitment of non-Black students are all examples of the strategies utilized by many HBCUs. In treading this new path, HBCUs are challenged to maintain their historically and culturally defined context while embracing a new contemporary mission and a new generation of students. In an effort to better connect with the millennial generation of African American students, HBCUs can utilize several key strategies:

1) Capitalize on the unique cultural mission of HBCUs.

HBCUs have traditionally embodied an historical mission that seeks to uplift society as a whole and the African American community in particular. HBCUs played a role in several social movements that shaped U.S. history including: the Civil Rights movement; the anti-war movement of the 1960s and 70s; and the push to divest financial interest in South Africa during the height of the now defunct apartheid regime.
2) Use existing strengths to avoid an “arms race.”

HBCUs tend to have smaller endowments and operating funds in comparison to PWIs. Because of this, HBCUs generally have less capital available to offer intangibles that would match those of most PWIs. However, the traditional strength of HBCUs: small classes; multicultural environments; caring and committed faculty; and an orientation towards teaching excellence can be highlighted as hallmarks that enhance student life and academic success. These hallmarks should advance the findings of researchers like Williams and Ashley (2004) who report that “Seventy-five percent of African Americans with Ph.D.s earn them from HBCUs, as do 46 percent of black business executives, 50 percent of black engineers, 80 percent of black liberal arts judges, and 85 percent of black doctors” (p. 301).

3) Benefit from the successes of HBCU graduates.

There is a long history that chronicles the success of HBCU graduates both within and outside of the African American community. The accomplishment of these graduates should be highlighted. Additionally, students should come into frequent and meaningful contact with graduates through special programmatic initiatives. A prime example would be to host special alumni recognition ceremonies and events that would provide students with an opportunity to engage with these individuals on a more intimate level.

4) Incorporate the best of millennial culture into the framework of how HBCUs operate.

The existing limited data related to millennials college students points to a set of core traits that seem common to the millennial generation (Howe and Strauss, 2003). Among these traits are a push to achieve at high levels and a team oriented spirit that serves to boost their confidence; thus promoting the perception among this cohort that they are important—not only to their parents but also to the larger national and world communities. HBCUs can capitalize on these student attributes and traits by continuing to advance their historical “best practices” mission and by emphasizing an “in loco parentis” philosophy toward student life—signed by promoting unique practices such as intrusive advising and an “everybody is somebody” approach to learning. Academically, millennials are on track to be “the smartest, best-educated generation in U.S. history” (Howe & Strauss, 2003, p. 52). With that in mind, HBCUs must strongly consider strengthening their existing academic and student affairs offerings in an effort to target students who desire to take advantage of all these institutions have to offer.


