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Exploring the Perceptions of HBCU Student Affairs Practitioners Toward the Racial Diversification of Black Colleges

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While research has shown that the racial diversity of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) is increasing, literature suggests that some stakeholders at HBCUs feel the diversification of Black colleges could change their culture, which some see as vital for promoting the success of Black students. Given this, the following study discusses findings from 1 set of stakeholders at an HBCU—student affairs practitioners—in order to understand their perspective toward the racial diversification of Black colleges. This instrumental case study not only examined perceptions of HBCU student affairs professionals toward the racial diversification of Black colleges, but also their efforts to foster a more inclusive campus climate for non-Black students. This article is important because it provides salient context for HBCUs as they further seek to increase the racial diversification of their student bodies.

**Keywords:** racial diversity, student affairs, multiculturalism, HBCUs

Four unique elements define historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). First, HBCUs are well-known for fostering a supportive, nurturing, family oriented climate that helps to facilitate the psychosocial development of Black students (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Gasman, Lundy-Wagner, Ransom, & Bowman, 2010). Second, while HBCUs are not monolithic (Brown, 2002; Brown & Davis, 2001), many of these institutions are noted for admitting students who are academically underprepared and graduating them with the skills to access some of the nation’s most prestigious colleges and universities for graduate or professional school (Gasman, Baez, Drezner, Sedgwick, & Tudico, 2007). Third, though chronically underfunded (Palmer & Griffin, 2009), HBCUs have garnered a reputation for being equally, if not more, effective at promoting the success of Black students (Allen, Jewell, Griffin, & Wolf, 2007; Arroyo & Gasman, 2014). Finally, although HBCUs emerged out of an era of segregation (Allen et al., 2007), they have always been open to racially and ethnically diverse populations (Gasman, 2013).

In fact, scholars have posited that HBCUs will continue to become increasingly racially and ethnically diverse (Brown, 2002; Gasman, 2009; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009). Palmer and Maramba (2015a, 2015b) argued that because _Adams v. Richardson_ (1972) and _United States v. Fordice_ (1992) compel public HBCUs to increase the racial diversity of their student bodies, the enrollment of non-Black students may continue to increase. Furthermore, research has suggested that because more Black students are choosing to attend predominantly White insti-

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1. This term is used to describe students who identify themselves as African or Black descent (inclusive of Caribbean).
tutions (PWIs) and for-profit institutions (Patton, 2012), many HBCUs must be more intentional on attracting and retaining a diverse student body to remain competitive and economically healthy (Gasman, 2009; Lee, 2013; Lynch, 2013; Stuart, 2013).

Indeed, according to a report from the Center for Minority Serving Institutions at the University of Pennsylvania (Gasman, 2013), in the 1950s HBCUs were nearly 100% Black, but in 2013 students\(^2\) from this demographic made up roughly 76% of the population at HBCUs,\(^3\) with the remainder comprised of other racial and ethnic groups (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013). For example, Native Hawaiians, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Latino/as, and Whites comprise 0.08%, 0.3%, 1.5%, 3.7%, and 11% of the students enrolled in HBCUs, respectively (NCES, 2013). This stands in contrast to the racial demography of HBCUs in 2003 where the student population was 79% Black and the population of other racial and ethnic groups such as Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latino/a, and White was 0.2%, 0.9%, 2.3% and 13%, respectively (NCES, 2003).\(^4\) Interestingly, while the enrollment of White students at HBCUs has decreased by 2% from 2003–2013, Gasman (2013) explained that the White enrollment of HBCUs has ranged between 10%–13% in the last 20 years. Despite the fact that the majority of HBCUs remain predominantly Black (Lee, 2012), noticeable aggregate diversification has been occurring for some time.

**Purpose and Overview**

Given the aforementioned factors, scholars should be more intentional about exploring how stakeholders at HBCUs feel about the increased racial diversification of Black colleges. To this end, the purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions that one set of stakeholders at HBCUs—student affairs practitioners—has toward the increased enrollment of non-Black students. We focused on student affairs practitioners because they often have a close relationship with students as they work with them outside of the classroom to help facilitate the development of their psychosocial skills and abilities (Hirt, Bennett, Strayhorn, & Amelink, 2006). This study makes an important contribution to the literature because, although limited

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\(^2\) This includes undergraduate as well as graduate student enrolled in HBCUs.

\(^3\) While there are 105 HBCUs, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) only has data on 100 HBCUs because three are unaccredited, and IPEDS does not consider two as HBCUs (Gasman, Samayoa, Nguyen, Commodore, & Boland, 2014).

\(^4\) The numbers do not total 100 because populations classified as nonresident alien, two or more races, and race/ethnicity unknown were not included.
students’ experiences at HBCUs, and potential barriers to entry and inclusion for non-Black students.

HBCU faculty have been cited as having positive influence on students (Arroyo, Kidd, Burns, Cruz, & Lawrence-Lamb, 2015; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002), although the literature is unclear how receptive or prepared they are for diversification (Arroyo, Palmer, & Maramba, 2015; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009). Recent research on White, Asian American, and Latino/a students has shown that while these groups perceive HBCU faculty to be supportive (Palmer & Maramba, 2015a; Strayhorn, 2010), some feel faculty do not promote an inclusive classroom environment and are not well informed about the cultures of other groups (Palmer & Maramba, 2015b; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009). Many of these students also recalled instances of being singled out in the classroom and are often asked by faculty to be the voice for their race (Peterson & Hamrick, 2009).

In addition, studies have suggested that some Black students at HBCUs may not be entirely comfortable with the presence of non-Black students on campus (Arroyo, Palmer, & Maramba, 2015; Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Closson & Henry, 2008; Palmer & Maramba, 2015b). For example, research indicates that some Black students at HBCUs have called non-Black students racial epithets, marginalized them with unpleasant stares or glances, and viewed them through a stereotypical lens (e.g., model minority myth; Arroyo, Palmer, & Maramba, 2015; Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Closson & Henry, 2008). Although non-Black students have suggested that these experiences have been isolated and are not pervasive throughout the campus community, they may indicate some underlying tensions between some Black students at HBCUs and their non-Black counterparts. Perhaps contributing to this tension is that some stakeholders at HBCUs feel that as the diversification of these institutions increasingly changes, it could radically change the institutional culture, climate, and mission, thereby threatening the historic mission and environment of Black colleges (Brown, 2002; Drummond, 2000; Palmer & Maramba, 2015a; Stuart, 2013). In fact, some feel that the preservation of the climate of HBCUs is critical because it has been a salient facilitator of Black student success (Brown, 2002; Gasman et al., 2007).

**Methodology**

Our approach to understanding the perceptions of student affairs practitioners toward the increased enrollment of non-Black students at HBCUs is anchored in qualitative methodology and guided by an interpretivist perspective. Using interviews and observations, interpretivism is premised on understanding participants’ lived experiences from their own perspectives (Schwandt, 1994). Data for this current study emerged from an instrumental case study. According to Stake (1994), an instrumental case study is concerned with providing insight into an issue or refining a theory. “The case is of secondary interest; it plays a supportive role, facilitating our understanding of something else” (Stake, 1994, p. 237). Using an instrumental case study approach, guided by an interpretivist perspective, allowed us to shed light on the broader issue of perceptions related to diversification among student affairs professionals at HBCUs.

**Researchers’ Positionality**

In qualitative studies, it is important to discuss how the position of the researcher influences data collection, analysis, and interpretations (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). One White male, one Black male, and one Filipina American conducted this study. Specifically, the White male and Filipina American conducted all of the interviews while the Black male took notes during all of the interviews. Professionally, all of us have backgrounds working in student support services in either an HBCU or PWI and through our research, we have a commitment to studying ways colleges could better facilitate the success of underrepresented minority students. Moreover, we have similar scholarly interests that focus on HBCUs, including factors supporting the success of all students who attend these institutions. Some of

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5 According to Museus, Palmer, Davis, and Maramba (2011), underrepresented minority students include Black, Hispanic, Native American, and Southeast Asian American students (i.e., Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong, and Vietnamese).
our recent work has studied the experiences of non-Black students at HBCUs. Findings from these projects, coupled with the extant literature on non-Black students at HBCUs, has served as the inspiration for this study. Although the White male was employed with an HBCU when data were collected, he and the Filipina American researcher attended PWIs for their educational training. The Black male not only attended an HBCU for his graduate education, but he also worked in student support services at an HBCU. As researchers, we frequently advocate for HBCUs’ continued relevancy to the higher education community and society.

Collectively, we believe our identities and experiences in higher education, particularly as researchers who attended, were affiliated with, and/or conducted research on HBCUs, may have biased how we structured the questions. Moreover, the fact that we have common interests and have worked in tandem on several research projects previously, may have helped us to bring the same viewpoints to the data analysis process. Due to our experiences and potential biases, we utilized member checking and peer debriefers to help ensure the findings accurately reflected the participants’ voices.

Geographic Location

This study was conducted at one public HBCU located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Lake View University (LVU, a pseudonym) is a public urban institution enrolling over 6,000 students when the data were collected. Of these students, 82.8% were Black, with the remainder comprising the following: White (5.6%), Latino/a (2.6%), Asian/Pacific Islander (0.7%), Native American (0.2%), multiple races (2.8%), and unknown (4.4%). According to accounts from the student affairs professionals in our study, employees in their units of student affairs were predominantly Black and female. Participants were not able to cite a non-Black employee in their offices. Their observations were substantiated by data from the institution’s Institutional Research Office.

Participants

To recruit participants, we utilized a purposeful sampling approach, which allows qualitative researchers to “inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). Specifically, our goal was to select persons from various areas in student affairs due to their different interactions with students. We obtained e-mail addresses from the student affairs web pages on the university web site. Then we sent e-mail invitations, which included a description of the study, an informed consent form, a demographic questionnaire, and a request to participate. This process resulted in eight participants. A ninth participant emerged from snowball sampling, which is the process of asking a participant to refer others who meet the study’s criteria (Creswell, 2012). Participants represented the areas of residence life, career services, academic advising, learning resource centers, and student programming. While all of the participants had advanced degrees, only four had an educational background in student affairs or higher education administration. Additional information about participants is provided in Table 1.

Data Collection

Data were collected from multiple sources (e.g., interviews, observations, the institution’s web page as well as other documents) in a bounded system, which is consistent in work involving case studies (Stake, 1994). Moreover, we also conducted one face-to-face, in-depth interview with each participant, which ranged from 65 to 75 min in length. Participants signed an informed consent form and completed a brief demographic form prior to the interviews. The demographic form allowed us to collect information such as age, position for the identification of functional area, highest degree earned, and years at the institution. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality.

Although a semistructured interview protocol was used to conduct the interviews, discussions often became conversational, which allowed the researchers and participants to mutually share experiences relevant to the topic of discussion, encouraging the participants to talk and open up. Observations regarding the ways in which participants responded to questions were recorded.
throughout the interviews. Sample questions included: (a) How do you define the role of HBCUs in general, and your HBCU in particular, in modern American higher education? (b) Do you perceive a need for your HBCU to become more inclusive of non-Black students? Why or why not? and (c) How would you describe the climate of your HBCU toward non-Black students? Please provide examples.

An essential aspect of qualitative research is judging when data collection has reached saturation. For the present study as well as the larger study, we followed the classical definition of saturation, which is the point where information becomes redundant (Creswell, 2012). Employing this standard, we reviewed each subsequent interview in light of the preceding interviews. Results from this iterative process suggested that the participants in this current study provided sufficient information to inform the research question we set out to investigate in the larger study, which informs the data for this current study.

Data Analysis

Given that Charmaz (2000) recommended that grounded theory strategies could be incorporated into other qualitative perspectives, tenets of grounded theory strategies were used to analyze the data. Because of this approach, this study did not employ a pure grounded theory approach in which a theory would emerge. We engaged in the constant comparison of data, including reviewing memos, observations, and interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns (Charmaz, 2000). Constant comparative analysis engages the researcher in a process of collecting and analyzing the data simultaneously (Charmaz, 2000).

To aid in organizing, managing, and coding the data, we used ATLAS.ti (7.0), a qualitative data management software program. Following Charmaz (2000), we used line-by-line open coding to identify initial concepts and categories. We then performed axial and selective coding procedures. Specifically, with axial coding, data were reanalyzed to determine words or patterns that could be combined or collapsed into similar categories. Lastly, selective coding was utilized to elucidate detailed examples and accounts, which helped us to solidify and cluster the data into the themes presented in the Findings section of this article. In the findings, we present excerpts from the participants’ responses verbatim to preserve the essence of their voices.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

To ensure the data’s trustworthiness, we triangulated the data by making use of notes from interviews and observations as well as documents collected from the university during the data collection process. We also conducted member checks by returning the transcribed interviews to all participants so they could review transcriptions to ensure that they were not misquoted. This process did not result in any changes or corrections to the data. As the study progressed, participants were provided an opportunity to review our interpretations of the data. This process did not result in any changes to our interpretation of the data.

Table 1
Description of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sex/age</th>
<th>Student affairs position</th>
<th>Years in current position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sheila</td>
<td>Female, 27</td>
<td>Student programming</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francine</td>
<td>Female, 29</td>
<td>Student programming</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity</td>
<td>Female, 49</td>
<td>Residence life</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>Male, 32</td>
<td>Student support services</td>
<td>8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonard</td>
<td>Male, 27</td>
<td>Student programming</td>
<td>10 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Female, 52</td>
<td>Counseling center</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>Female, 34</td>
<td>Residence life</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jada</td>
<td>Female, 36</td>
<td>Career services</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>Female, 23</td>
<td>Career services</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All participants racially identified as Black.
Lastly, we used feedback from two peer-debriefers, both of whom were Black females, who were well versed in in-depth interview methods and active researchers on HBCUs, to ensure credibility. Similar to the participants, the debriefers were provided with raw transcripts from each participant and later our interpretation of the data. The debriefers reanalyzed significant portions of the data and engaged the researchers in a series of ongoing discussions regarding the tentative meanings made of the participants’ experiences throughout the research process (Creswell, 2012). Given that one of us attended an HBCU and another one of us worked at an HBCU, we found this process helpful because the debriefers were able to check for potential biases.

Limitations

One of the critical limitations of this study is that interviewing student affairs practitioners offers a partial perspective about how HBCU stakeholders feel toward the racial diversification of Black colleges. Given this, future researchers should be more intentional about interviewing other HBCU stakeholders in order to get a more rounded view regarding how other HBCU constituents feel about the racial diversification of HBCUs.

Findings

Four themes emerged from this study. The first theme indicates that while all participants supported racial diversification of HBCUs, they expressed nuanced perspectives regarding the traditional mission of these institutions. The second theme delineates the participants’ perspectives regarding the perceived reasons for and benefits of racial diversification. The third theme focuses on the participants’ perceptions regarding actual institutional progress toward diversification. The final theme explores the participants’ perceptions regarding challenges to the social integration of non-Black students at HBCUs as well as hindrances to the diversification of these institutions. In the following section, we delineate the themes and present quotations from participants to preserve the essential aspects of their experiences.

Consensus Around the Racial Diversification of HBCUs: Nuanced Viewpoints Regarding Their Mission

All participants expressed a belief that racial diversity is necessary on HBCU campuses. However, the agreement participants shared became nuanced when they were asked to offer their views regarding the ongoing relevance of the traditional HBCU mission to serve primarily Black students. For example, two discussed moving beyond the HBCU nomenclature completely to avoid projecting a message of racial exclusivity. Specifically, they strongly favored racial diversification with no special attention to Blacks. Sandra, a residence hall staff person with 10 years of experience at her institution, proposed a post-HBCU model. She discussed the need to remember “where we come from or where we started, but [also] having a vision that’s inclusive of a new modern society.” She continued by emphatically saying, “So to be successful in the future as a university, we have to go in a new direction,” and “should continuously be evolving.”

Charity, who worked in a mid- to senior-level position for 15 years, was even more direct than Sandra. She confessed not supporting the HBCU designation at all. In her view, the terminology is antiquated and inappropriate for a public college because the term could be construed as a divisive or exclusionary label. Specifically, she shared:

I do not particularly agree with the HBCU concept and its relevance today. I think society has progressed and I think, for my institution as a state funded institution, I think it should just be an institution. I do not like labels of PWIs and HBCUs and [Hispanic Serving Institutions]; I just do not like that and I never have.

In contrast, seven favored keeping the HBCU classification in an effort to preserve or emphasize HBCUs’ traditional focus on Blacks while also promoting racial diversification. For example, with 4 years’ experience in student programming, Francine encouraged an approach of diversification anchored to their HBCU roots, while not evolving beyond them. She was for racial diversification, but she maintained the critical, ongoing relevance of HBCUs’ historical mission to serve Blacks. Francine remarked, “I [still] think there’s definitely the need to be intentional in promoting [Black] culture and
heritage, and really kind of affirming that identity.”

Jack, who worked in student support services for 8 years, was more conservative than Francine. He expressed openness to diversification while simultaneously revealing concerns about eroding HBCU traditions. Jack felt preserving traditions would “lift the pride back up at HBCUs,” and that the benefits would also “trickle down to the newer students who are not [Black].”

To summarize, all participants agreed with the concept of racial diversification within HBCUs. Differences of opinion became apparent, however, in the participants’ views regarding the continued relevance of HBCUs, particularly the degree to which they should focus on Black students versus non-Black students. Some felt a stronger need to maintain HBCU traditions and their focus on Black students amid diversification, but the opposite view was also expressed that HBCUs had outlived their status.

Perceptions Regarding Benefits to the Racial Diversification of HBCUs

Two benefits of diversification of HBCUs also emerged from the interviews: preparation of Black students for the real world, and access and opportunity for all populations. Regarding the first benefit, seven participants believed diversity was important for preparing Black students for the real world. Jada, who worked in career services for 2 years, held this view. She explained “Education must be diverse in order for [Black] students to get the full brunt of what they’ll need prior to working in corporate America or just going out as entrepreneurs.” She continued “The whole purpose of it is to ensure that we’re doing what the institution was created for, which is educating [Black] students. But today in order for [Black] students to be educated, they can’t do it like in a silo by themselves.” Kim, who worked in career services for 1 year, was equally direct. Although the tenor of her interview suggested that she respected non-Black students, one of her comments framed them more as a means to serve or enhance the education of Black students:

I mean it’s going to be difficult. There may be people who may not agree and may say that “This isn’t Black,” or “This isn’t something that we’re used to,” but at the same time, in order for our students to be prepared to be in this environment, you have to bring in these other opportunities and things that may be outside of the norm for us, in order for our students to succeed.

Similarly, Charity, the participant who believed the time for the Black-focused HBCU model had expired, said that diversity is important for the Black students “so when they graduate, they can assimilate in the ‘real world’ because they’ve had that exposure.”

Access and opportunity for all populations also emerged as a reason for the racial diversification of HBCUs. Francine remarked that HBCUs can play a “big role [in] providing access to as many students as possible that might not gain access to higher education anywhere else.” Similarly, Jada stated that the access mission of the HBCU can extend to “any student in general, that may or may not be able to get into say a Harvard or a Yale, you know schools along those lines, but they desire to get an education. They have the opportunity for enrollment here.” Charity also affirmed the access tradition. She acknowledged that most HBCUs provide “an opportunity to get a good education” for students who lack the preparation for elite schools.

Overall, the two reasons for the diversification of HBCUs that participants shared are consistent with the HBCU traditions of racial uplift and access for all. Racial uplift is reflected subtly in the way participants discussed diversity as a benefit first and foremost to Black students. In other words, diversification was important for these participants primarily as a way for preparing the Black students for life after college. However, participants also supported a broader, more inclusive access mission for HBCUs that would enable HBCUs to benefit students of all races and ethnicities.

Perceptions Regarding Institutional Progress Toward Racial Diversification

Although all participants expressed sentiments in favor of diversification, they offered varied and sometimes conflicting assessments regarding the progress their HBCU was making toward diversity. Considering they belonged to the same institution, this range of perspectives is noteworthy.

Six participants were optimistic, stating that their institution was making good-to-excellent
progress. For example, Jack observed “a big increase” of non-Black students on campus over recent years. Sheila, who worked in student programming for 5 years, also noted “a lot of changes” in her department, clarifying that “if you had asked me this last year, it would’ve been a different answer.” Sheila expressed satisfaction with several newly hired student affairs personnel who had “a different perspective” and were “bringing in a lot of [different] practices.” Additionally, she pointed to the concrete example of changed format in student dance parties to make them more welcoming to students of all backgrounds. However, she was also quick to clarify that the goal of the Division of Student Affairs has been to “reduce” but not “eliminate” programs with a strong appeal to Black students. Sandra reported that many of her division’s annual programs were “on acceptance and understanding of cultural diversity.” She also referred to an unofficial mandate from the Office of the President to diversify, which in her view could result in the school no longer being an HBCU by the year 2020. However, Sandra was unable to offer further details about the mandate, and despite feeling positive about the diversification of her institution, she expressed some concern over the lack of clear campus leadership in articulating a firm direction around which all stakeholders could galvanize. She described her perception at length:

I think the university goal or the vision of the president needs to be stated. I think the mission of the university should mirror our efforts of attracting new students and if we are moving in a more non-HBCU direction, then that should be openly communicated and discussed with our senior staff, so that everyone can come to a consensus and everyone can be on board with whatever the mission or vision of the university is.

Sandra continued:

If we’re going in a non-HBCU direction, then that should be stated. It shouldn’t just be hidden, like a hidden agenda. And perhaps, if that’s openly discussed, then people can understand the when, what, why, and will not be frustrated and voice that to various people. Because sometimes you can spoil the reputation of the university and the greatness that we’re doing, because of peoples’ murmurs of frustration.

Three participants were less optimistic regarding the progress of their HBCU toward diversification. Francine stated frankly “I don’t think that our campus is actively doing it.” She continued: “I think it’s a pretty cold climate [for non-Black students] . . . I mean, based on the music that we play at our dances and just kind of how we structure our programs, it’s not inclusive.” When asked to imagine how she would feel as a non-Black student, Francine stated that she would feel excluded. Leonard, who had been working in student programming for 10 months, held a similar opinion. Leonard hypothesized that he would feel excluded if he were a non-Black student, saying “From a student affairs lens, the programs we offer sometimes don’t necessarily cater to a diverse group. So it would just make me feel really awkward.” He added,

I don’t believe there’s a total embrace of other ethnicities and really catering to other populations. I think a lot of times we put an emphasis on serving our [Black] students versus really considering the needs of other student populations.

Leonard went as far as to say that serving Black students stemmed from a “silent agenda” and a “hidden message” within his HBCU to emphasize service to Blacks despite claims of concern for racial diversification. However, despite that strong statement, Leonard later nuanced his position: “I don’t think we’ve made an intentional outreach to non-Black students, but I don’t see where it would be an issue if someone [from Student Affairs] decided ‘Let’s do that.’”

In sum, findings from this theme demonstrate how complicated individual perceptions of diversification can become when participants are asked to evaluate the state of their own institution. Despite welcoming the idea of racial diversity at HBCUs, participants offered a range of perspectives, some of which contradicted each other, regarding the progress that their institution was making toward not only diversification, but also fostering an inclusive campus climate for all students. Notwithstanding, many of the participants felt their institution was not sufficiently inclusive of all students.

**Perceived Roadblocks to the Racial Diversification of HBCUs**

Participants identified three roadblocks to the diversification of HBCUs: (a) Black students, (b) older Black faculty and staff, and (c) non-Black students. Specifically, they explained that Black students served as challenges to the diversification of HBCUs because some were un-
willing to help non-Black students become socially integrated into the campus environment of HBCUs. Moreover, they revealed that some older Black faculty and staff were displeased with the racial diversification because they feared that it could change the culture of HBCUs. Participants also noted that non-Black students were reluctant to take on the onus of becoming socially integrated into campus as well.

For example, all participants discussed stakeholders who they perceived as hindrances to the diversification of their campus. For example, Sheila, a professional in student programs with 5 years of experience, placed some culpability on the Black students: “I’m not really sure how open [our Black] students are to students who are not like them. I don’t know if the interest is there for our Black students to reach out.” Sandra referred to “disgruntled [Black] faculty and staff that are upset that we tend to be moving away from the traditional HBCU culture.” Moreover, as noted earlier, Leonard felt his division did not “have that dialogue with students from other ethnicities” to the level it should. “We’re not really [asking for] their input,” he remarked. Leonard partly attributed this to the fact that many of his student affairs colleagues lacked formal academic training or degrees in student affairs. Rather, their degrees tended to be in other fields.

Five participants explained the non-Black students served as roadblocks to the diversification of their campus because they seemed less inclined to become socially integrated into the campus environment. For example, despite previously placing responsibility on student affairs, Leonard demonstrated ambivalence by later shifting the onus for social integration to non-Black students: “We really don’t see non-Black students really engaging on campus. Very rarely do we see that.” Kim concurred with Leonard: “I feel like college is what you make it. You decide if you’re going to stay in your bubble with what you’re used to or if you’re going to step outside your bubble, it’s up to you.” Jack also questioned whether non-Black students really wanted to integrate into nonacademic student activities, saying: “For the academically centered programs, we have more non-Black students attend. For social programs, we have a large [Black] student population and a very minimal non-Black student population.” He stated that, among his student affairs colleagues “there’s a perception that either (a) [non-Black students] don’t care, or (b) they won’t show up.”

When participants discussed their own role in helping to integrate non-Black students to campus, they seemed somewhat unsure about what non-Black students wanted—that is, what programs would attract and integrate them. Instead, they shared a variety of ideas for recruiting and including non-Blacks, which ranged from using International Programs, to creating a White student union, to socials that emphasized more inclusive themes and food (e.g., a French-themed event). Some invoked stereotypes that White students dislike hip-hop music and dance. One participant, Sheila, assumed White students would be more interested in a Western themed event with line dancing than hip-hop music. Several confessed that the perception on their campus is that non-Black students tend to be athletes in sports such as volleyball, bowling, and baseball. According to Francine “they’re otherwise not as visible.”

In general, participants indicated that some Black students, some older Black faculty and staff, and some non-Black students served as challenges to racial diversification of their campus. They also confessed that they were uncertain regarding programs that would attract and help non-Black students become integrated on campus.

Discussion

Given that the student population of HBCUs is gradually becoming more racially diverse, coupled with the extant literature indicating that this has caused tension among some Black students and other stakeholders at HBCUs, this study examined the perceptions that one set of stakeholders—student affairs practitioners—have toward the racial diversification of Black colleges. A number of findings emerged from this current study. For example, one finding indicated that participants were in favor of racial diversification at HBCUs. While this may be the case, some participants emphasized the need to preserve the culture of HBCUs, which is steeped in Black history and culture, as HBCUs continue to enroll more diverse students. Participants indicated that some older Black faculty and staff were especially concerned that the
increased enrollment of non-Black students could alter the culture of HBCUs. This emphasis on the need to maintain the culture of HBCUs as they continue to enroll more non-Black students is related to research that asserts that the increased enrollment of non-Black students may significantly change the culture of HBCUs (Drummond, 2000; Levinson, 2000). Brown (2002), however, suggested that the mere presence of non-Black students at HBCUs will not disrupt the continuation or the maintenance of the culture of HBCUs as long as the proportion of non-Black students “does not exceed the threshold at which [Black] students will refuse to attend” (p. 276).

Some participants in this study expressed that racially diversifying HBCUs would or should lead to greater emphasis on maintaining the traditional culture of HBCUs to avoid cultural erosion. Others argued that HBCUs should foster an inclusive campus climate by being more intentional about promoting the culture of other racial and ethnic groups on campus, and even moving beyond the traditional HBCU mission. This perspective is similar to one expressed by Lee and Keys (2013), who argued that the shifting enrollment patterns at HBCUs will necessitate that they embrace diversity as a core operating principle. Specifically, Lee and Keys indicated that merely opening doors to diverse students is not sufficient, as creating welcoming and supportive environments will be necessary to retain them and prepare all members of the campus community for participation in the global marketplace. Similar to Lee and Keys’ perspective, extant literature on non-Black students at HBCUs also indicate that they want HBCUs to be more intentional about creating an inclusive campus environment for diverse students (Palmer & Maramba, 2015a; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009). For example, in a study of Asian American and Latino/a students and their interactions with faculty at HBCUs, participants explained that HBCU faculty unintentionally created an exclusive experience in the classroom because they only focused on the Black experience while teaching (Palmer & Maramba, 2015a). This caused the participants to feel a lack of belonging in the classroom.

Participants of this current study also expressed that the diversification of HBCUs would be advantageous to Black students because it will help prepare them for the real world. Indeed, research has shown that exposure to diversity is critical for all college students (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999). Although this current study was not focused on Black students, research (e.g., Dancy, 2005; Palmer, Maramba, & Lee, 2010) has shown that some Black students are less inclined to enroll in HBCUs because they feel that the lack of diversity at HBCUs will be a liability to them once they graduate and compete in the global economy.

Although participants explained the benefits Black students at HBCUs would accrue from the increased racial diversification on HBCUs, they offered conflicting messages regarding the efforts that their institution was making toward recruiting and enrolling non-Black students as well as making the campus environment inclusive for racially diverse students. Despite this discord, there was consensus among participants that non-Black students were not being sufficiently included in on campus activities. The participants’ divergent perspectives may suggest that neither all members of the campus community are kept up-to-date about events and issues occurring on the campus of this HBCU. Research (i.e., Birnbaum, 1988) states that large organizations, such as colleges and universities, tend to experience gaps or delays in communication, which can result in miscommunication or some individuals excluded from the decision making process.

Though some participants posited that their institution was making a good effort to increase the enrollment of non-Black students, they all discussed individuals that served as roadblocks to the racial diversification of HBCUs. For example, participants noted that some older Black faculty and staff, who wanted to maintain the status quo, were not willing to work proactively to understand the needs and concerns of non-Black students. As mentioned, some research has indicated that non-Black students felt that they were unintentionally excluded in the classrooms on HBCU campuses (Palmer & Maramba, 2015a; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009). Similarly, research has shown that faculty at HBCUs care deeply about the success of all students—Black and non-Black alike (Strayhorn, 2010). With this in mind, the finding from this current study that some older HBCU faculty were unwilling to understand the needs of non-
Black students is, in some way, contradictory to this research (i.e., Strayhorn, 2010). It is important to note, however, that research on faculty at HBCUs has not disaggregated the age of faculty members. Therefore, we do not know if older Black faculty are exhibiting some resistance to the changing racial demography of HBCUs, as suggested by research (i.e., Drummond, 2000; Levinson, 2000) or if this mindset is endemic to Black faculty at HBCUs generally. Given this, future research should examine Black faculty perceptions regarding the increased racial diversification of these institutions. This research should disaggregate the age of faculty as well as the amount of time they have worked at the institution to discern differences in the perceptions they may have toward non-Black students as it relates these characteristics (i.e., age and time worked at the school).

Moreover, though participants worked in student affairs capacities, they expressed an uncertainty about the extent that they should reach out to non-Black students in order to understand their needs and concerns. This is perplexing because one of the primary roles of student affairs practitioners is to work with all students on a college campus in order to help facilitate their growth and development (McClellen & Strenger, 2009; Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2010). Nevertheless, while research has shown that many student affairs practitioners at HBCUs often do not have an educational background in student affairs (Harper & Kimbrough, 2005), four of the nine participants of this current study either had a Master’s degree in student affairs or earned credits toward their doctoral degree in student affairs. Thus, five participants lacked a degree in student affairs. Although typical at HBCUs, Harper and Kimbrough (2005) argue that HBCUs must become more intentional about hiring formally prepared professionals whose practice is grounded in theory. Training through workshops and professional development is important, but they view a formal student affairs education as essential. While findings from our study is not in conflict with Harper and Kimbrough’s assertions, they highlight the need for HBCUs to talk with their student affairs practitioners about working with and supporting non-Black students.

Finally, the finding that Black students may be less inclined to interact with non-Black students at HBCUs to help them integrate into campus life is interesting and not quite clear. While research has shown that some Black students at HBCUs might not be completely comfortable with the presence of non-Black students on campus (Carter & Fountaine, 2012; Closson & Henry, 2008; Hall & Closson, 2005; Palmer & Maramba, 2015b), some literature indicates that non-Black students have experienced isolated incidences of racial microaggressions from some of their Black peers at HBCUs (Arroyo, Palmer, & Maramba, 2015; Palmer & Maramba, 2015b). This is important to point out because this may suggest most Black students at HBCUs welcome the presence of non-Black students. Despite this, no empirical literature exists to understand Black students’ views toward the racial diversification of HBCUs in general and specifically their willingness to help non-Black students at HBCUs become integrated into the campus community. As HBCUs continue to racially diversify, this is an area that warrants further exploration. Given that findings from this current study have shown that some non-Black students may be reluctant to interact with Black students at HBCUs, future research should also consider the willingness of non-Black students at HBCUs to interact with Black students on these campuses.

Implications for Practice and Research

The findings from this current study have important implications for practice and research.

Implications for practice. In terms of practice, it is apparent that student affairs professionals are open to non-Black students enrolling into HBCUs. In fact, all participants in this current study placed value on the increased racial diversification of HBCUs. To this end, senior leaders and administrators, who are interested in diversifying their HBCU campuses, might consider engaging their student affairs personnel in defining (a) a clear picture of what diversity means for their school and (b) developing concrete strategies for actualizing the vision. Indeed, although student affairs professionals are essential for creating inclusive environments on a daily basis, senior leaders are needed to set clear institutional direction. This includes college presidents, who hold the most power to leverage institutional resources around diversity agendas (Kezar & Eckel, 2008).
As part of this process, the current study suggests that senior leaders and administrators should recognize that differences of opinion might exist among student affairs practitioners, even when they agree about diversification in principle. They should also be cognizant that student affairs practitioners may hold some frustration if they perceive an unclear vision for diversification at their institution. Indeed, participants in this study expressed some confusion and discord about where their institutions stood in terms of a diversified vision and progress toward that vision. Thus, leaders have an opportunity to facilitate dialogues among key stakeholders in student affairs to create a coherent strategy that fits their institutional context. Cross-campus dialogues are also important, as some of our participants referred to some older Black faculty and staff, student affairs practitioners, and Black students as potential impediments to an inclusive campus environment for non-Black students. As noted, scholars (e.g., Brown, 2002; Stuart, 2013) have shown that some HBCU stakeholders might be displeased over the increased enrollment of non-Black students because they feel that it could alter the culture and climate of Black colleges. To this end, conversations that address concerns about how the diversification of HBCUs might change the culture of these institutions are especially important. Such dialogue might help to ease some of the anxieties of these individuals and engender conversation about how the increased enrollment of non-Black students might not only be beneficial to HBCUs, but also this discourse might serve as the catalyst for helping HBCUs create a more inclusive campus climate for all students.

Another implication of the current study is lack of clarity regarding the onus of responsibility for fostering inclusive environments. Participants in this current study cited Black students, Black faculty and staff, student affairs professionals, and non-Black students as parties who bore some obligation to ensure diversification. Consequently, strategic conversations about including non-Black students should include defining the roles of these parties. Specifically, campus leaders should impress upon all parties, student affairs professionals, in particular, that they must work to support all students—Black and non-Black alike—on campus. Working proactively to reach out to non-Black students is important because although the participants in this study expressed not knowing how to engage non-Black students, they also reported having very few dialogues with non-Black students. Strategic conversations can take place informally and formally, and student affairs professionals can incorporate what they learn into their practice.

Finally, participants in the current study felt there was a lack of non-Black student affairs professionals in their divisions. Furthermore, their assumption was that greater staff diversity would attract non-Black students because they would feel more comfortable interacting with people who look like them. Therefore, persons involved in hiring might consider broadening racial/ethnic staff profiles within the guidelines of current employment law. Interestingly, Harper and Kimbrough (2005) expressed similar sentiments in their national study of directors, senior officers, and chief officers at 52 4-year HBCU student affairs divisions. Specifically, they noted a mismatch between the average numbers of non-Black students who enroll at 4-year HBCUs and the percentage of Black personnel occupying positions at the director (94.23%), senior officer (90.24%), and chief officer (100%) levels. To this end, Harper and Kimbrough recommended that diversification could improve the division of student affairs’ ability to understand and serve non-Black students.

Implications for research. Several implications for research are apparent from this current study as well. For example, as we discussed previously, given that this current study represents one view of how HBCU stakeholders perceive the diversification of these institutions, future research should consider interviewing additional stakeholders at HBCUs. This will provide a more accurate picture of how the HBCU community may feel about the diversification of HBCUs. Moreover, given that some Black students and faculty were cited as potential barriers to racial inclusivity at HBCUs, it is important that researchers understand their perspective on the diversification of HBCUs. Therefore, these additional stakeholders, as this study emphasizes, must include further research on perspectives of academic affairs, student affairs, and students. This emphasis will strengthen the communication lines among these groups. Thus, this opens up more dialogue about perceptions and encourages more effec-
tive communication about reinforcing of the importance of diversification of HBCUs.

Furthermore, the concern for racial/ethnic inclusivity at HBCUs extends beyond the traditional purview of academic affairs (e.g., faculty, classrooms, and curricula). Student affairs divisions interact with students as well, and researchers must understand their role in the diversification of HBCUs. Additionally, research is needed to further explore the perspectives and perceptions of HBCU student affairs professionals in larger numbers and in various institutional contexts. This current study involved interviews with a small number of professionals at one public HBCU with a student population that was 82.8% Black. Student affairs professionals at schools with greater or lesser percentages of non-Black students, or that are private rather than public, might offer different perspectives than those found here.

Finally, research that examines how non-Black HBCU students experience their student affairs divisions will shed additional light on the efforts of diversification at HBCUs. An interesting study would triangulate the perspectives of student affairs professionals with non-Black students at the same campus to ascertain the degree to which their viewpoints coincide. It may be that student affairs professionals perceive problems where none exist; or conversely, they might be underestimating the significance of their concerns. Nevertheless, the role of student affairs practitioners first and foremost is to serve all students to the best of the institution’s ability. Thus, their perspectives on diversification play a pivotal role in creating an environment that serves students equitably and effectively.

Conclusion

While HBCUs were founded to provide educational opportunities to Black students, they never barred the enrollment of students from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Notwithstanding, during the 1950s, the student population of HBCUs was largely comprised of Black students. Since that time, the racial diversification of HBCUs has increased significantly, and research indicates that this trend may continue. Given that literature has posited that the increased racial diversification of HBCUs may alter the culture and climate of Black colleges and that some non-Black students have experienced isolated incidents of racial microaggressions, we interviewed one segment of HBCU stakeholders—student affairs practitioners—in order to explore their views toward the racial diversification of HBCUs. Although perspectives of the student affairs professionals in this article represent a partial view of the perceptions that HBCUs stakeholders have toward the diversification of Black colleges, this article provides critical implications for future research and institutional practice to help HBCU leaders as they navigate and negotiate the complexities of racially diversifying their campuses.

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