The Role Of HBCUs In Addressing The Unique Needs Of LGBT Students

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This chapter highlights some of the extant literature on LGBT students at HBCUs and discusses some of the challenges they encounter at these institutions. Furthermore, it offers recommendations to help HBCUs be more intentional about creating a more affirming and inclusive campus environment for LGBT students.

The Role of HBCUs in Addressing the Unique Needs of LGBT Students

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Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have a rich history of being at the forefront and prominently championing controversial issues within American society, internationally, and in numerous Black communities. During the 1950s and 1960s, HBCUs and their students had a large presence in the Civil Rights movement. HBCU students also played a significant role in the Black Power movement in the 1970s. Also, in the 1980s and early 1990s, HBCU students were part of the fight against apartheid in South Africa. Overall, these institutions have played a critical role in creating spaces for civil rights and providing voice to those who encounter systematic oppression. Interestingly, HBCU communities and their students participated in these movements while often operating in very culturally conservative environments (Harper & Gasman, 2008). Consequently, a palpable tension persists within HBCUs as they continue to negotiate their commitment to the mission of racial uplift and their historically conservative campus environments.

Today, HBCUs find themselves grappling with a new civil rights issue when it comes to working with gay and lesbian students. Recent media reports portray HBCUs as actively suppressing the expression of gay and lesbian students—for example, limiting opportunities for these students to form student organizations or forcing them to conform to traditional forms of dress. Rather than encouraging students to walk in their own truth and embrace their authentic selves, many HBCUs compel students who identify as gay or lesbian to suppress these identities while on campus. The few campus interventions that seek to retain and engage gay and lesbian students are oftentimes limited in either scope or visibility.
HBCUs and their students exist at a crossroads, an intersection of border spaces constituted by race, gender, and sexuality. We believe that HBCUs can no longer disregard the presence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students on their campuses, nor can they continue to disregard the connections that exist between student identity, student sense of belonging, and college persistence. Now is the time for faculty and administrators at HBCUs to begin transformative dialogues that confront stereotypes and to challenge HBCU students, faculty, and administrators to extend conversations surrounding LGBT issues across their campuses and into the larger community. The ways that HBCUs provide support for their LGBT populations will undoubtedly impact higher education, Black communities, and society at large. We hope that this chapter will call HBCU communities, higher education scholars, and scholar-practitioners to action so that HBCUs may begin the necessary work to become inclusive campus communities for all of their students.

Looking Back

HBCUs have been recognized within higher education for their remarkable ability to provide their students with engaging academic and social environments (see, e.g., Fleming, 1984; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002). The existing HBCU research includes an array of topics. There is a substantial body of literature that focuses on the history, missions, and challenges of these institutions (see, e.g., Anderson, 1988; Brown & Davis, 2001). Other studies have compared the experiences of African-American students who attend HBCUs with those who attend predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (see, e.g., Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Previous scholarship has also examined the social adjustment, ethnic identity development, and academic success of HBCU students (see, e.g., Drezner, Villarreal, & Mobley, in press; Palmer & Davis, 2012). Taken together, HBCU research largely asserts that HBCU communities foster environments that allow their students to successfully integrate into the academic and social contexts of undergraduate student life through significant faculty contact, opportunities for campus leadership, and collegial peer interactions. While this assertion may be true, today HBCUs are grappling with their reputations of oftentimes being unreceptive and hostile to their students who identify with lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) communities (Gasman, Nguyen, & Kalam, 2013; Squire & Mobley, 2015; Strayhorn & Scott, 2012).

Challenges often manifest due to the conservative religious affiliations of both the students and these institutions. Many HBCUs were founded by religious organizations, including the Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal (AME), Catholic, and Presbyterian churches. Black church leaders are often cited for condemning LGBT populations within the Black community (Valera & Taylor, 2011). The conservative attitudes present within Black
communities, including HBCU environments, have made it challenging for students who identify with LGBT communities to reconcile their sexual identities while in college (Kirby, 2011). The historical and contemporary religious affiliations that are inherent within HBCU communities present a tension of how and whether these institutions can and will take a reaffirming and nonjudgmental stance regarding the presence of Black LGBT communities on these campuses.

Research inquiry that explicitly seeks to examine the experiences of LGBT students who attend HBCUs is limited. There are a few existing studies that underscore the experiences of gay or bisexual males (see, e.g., Carter, 2013; Means & Jaeger, 2013; Patton, 2011; Strayhorn & Scott, 2012) and lesbian students (see, e.g., Patton & Simmons, 2008) who attend HBCUs and the challenges that they face during their undergraduate years. Overall, this scholarship paints a dichotomous picture of the experience of gay and lesbian students on these campuses. At one extreme, LGBT student experiences mirror previous research findings that students are able to develop positive peer relationships and engage in the academic and social communities on campus. On the other hand, this scholarship also emphasizes the conservative nature of HBCU environments and how many members of gay and lesbian communities often feel ignored and misrepresented. The strong religious and cultural pressure on HBCU campuses at times forces gay and lesbian students to feel as if they are silenced and invisible. These studies also reveal that gay and lesbian students on HBCU campuses may experience a sense of otherness both explicitly and implicitly during their interactions with their peers, administrators, and faculty. Within educational spaces individuals are often “othered” due to their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status. This process involves a majority exercising their societal power dynamics to create distance and advantage (Lorde, 1996; Mojto, 2009; Tatum, 2000).

While this scholarship does highlight concerns relating to LGBT students who identify as gay and lesbian within the HBCU context, there is a dire need for additional critical inquiry in order for this discourse to progress. Even though HBCUs may be welcoming environments for many of their students who choose to attend, for those populations who openly identify as gay or lesbian, these environments may present struggles that mirror those that have challenged the African-American race in its fight for racial equality in White America. President Barack Obama declared during his 2013 inaugural address, “Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law ... for if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well” (Obama, 2013). In order to aptly begin this journey and answer this call for acceptance and equal rights, there must be more research and campus interventions that recognize the complexity and multiplicity of identity.
Responding Now to Impact the Future

Based on the extant literature and current policies and practices enacted by institutions of higher education, we offer recommendations on how HBCUs can holistically respond to and make sense of the needs of their students who are members of LGBT communities. HBCUs must work toward creating more inclusive and supportive campus environments for their diverse study bodies. In order to have substantial change with regard to transforming any particular HBCU into a more inclusive campus environment not only for LGBT students, but for students and staff seeking to express themselves on campus without fear of retribution, HBCU campus administrations must examine the roles they play in reinforcing and perpetuating heteronormative practices that privilege some while marginalizing others. These institutions must begin to reexamine their traditions and policies that impose strict rules that often inhibit individual student expression. HBCU communities must also begin to recognize how institutional practices that include dress codes, a lack of student health services geared toward gay and lesbian students, and same-sex housing policies often silence and “other” members of LGBT communities.

To begin this work, educators and administrators at HBCUs must intentionally structure conversations and provide forums where individuals from diverse communities can learn from their differences to build mutually respectful interactions. This can be achieved through: (1) developing campus resources for members of the LGBT community, (2) providing opportunities for students to engage in intergroup dialogue, and (3) encouraging the expansion of course offerings to include the voices and experiences of LGBT scholars and individuals. Our recommendations are not exhaustive but do provide a meaningful starting point for HBCU leaders to consider.

Developing Campus Resources for Members of the LGBT Community

The transition from high school to college can be particularly challenging for gay and lesbian students. While all students must learn to adjust to the academic responsibilities of college life, LGBT students are also often wrestling with the development of their sexual identities (Patton & Simmons, 2008). Support services for LGBT students are crucial during their time in college, as it is during this period that many individuals decide to come out and disclose their sexual identity to others. While HBCUs may provide an accepting environment for African Americans who choose to attend, those students who are openly gay or lesbian may be met with fear, suspicion, and distrust (Carter, 2013).

Within HBCU environments, gay and lesbian students oftentimes choose either to selectively disclose this aspect of their identity to supportive family members and friends or not to disclose at all. Black students
who identify as gay or lesbian negotiate several oppressed identities at all times: the gay or lesbian persons they are internally and the heterosexual persons they present to the world on a daily basis (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003; Patton & Simmons, 2008). Being able to find supportive services on campus would potentially help alleviate these concerns. This can be accomplished in several ways—by initiating “safe zones” on campus, promoting student-run LGBT organizations, and creating campus-based LGBT resource and research centers.

**Safe Zones.** As a first step, if HBCU communities were to spearhead safe zone initiatives, these student-centered forums could be a valuable means of providing critical support for LGBT students throughout their college years. A safe zone (or safe space) refers to an on-campus space where LGBT students are able to seek support and affirmation and express their feelings and concerns without fear of harassment or violence. In order for this initiative to be enacted on HBCU campuses, administrators and faculty would need to receive safe zone training so that they could work with LGBT students through issues that are salient to them. Safe zone initiatives provide higher education communities with forums to educate students, faculty, and administrators on issues that are pertinent to LGBT students. Safe zones would undoubtedly assist HBCU campuses with issues surrounding the transition process into college that are unique to members of LGBT communities, and foster further immersion into the larger campus environment.

Fayetteville State University (FSU), an HBCU in North Carolina, is currently instituting safe zone programming. The purpose of the safe zone program at FSU is to “create an affirming and supportive campus climate through identifying and educating members of [the] campus community who are opened to and supportive of all individuals regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression” (Fayetteville State University, 2013). In other words, the program attempts to provide structured support to students and to refer students to appropriate resources for issues and concerns. This programming is a part of the university’s efforts to raise awareness and education for LGBT students and their allies. It can serve as a model for other HBCUs that choose to initiate these programs. Safe zones have the unique opportunity to provide their LGBT populations with positive mentors/allies and cutting-edge programming that could inform the greater campus community about the lived experiences of its students who identify with LGBT communities.

**Establishing Student-Run LGBT/Ally Organizations.** According to Astin (1993), peer groups significantly influence students’ growth and development during their undergraduate years. These peer relationships are oftentimes forged through membership in student organizations. Currently, there are 21 HBCUs that have recognized LGBT/ally organizations on their campuses (Kirby, 2011). For example, Morehouse College has an organization (Safe Space) that has offered several campus forums and programs to discuss issues that are facing the Black gay community,
including a weeklong series of events entitled “I Am a Man: Black Masculinity in America.” The Human Rights Campaign (HRC), an LGBT advocacy group, has a key relationship with a number of HBCUs. Through its HBCU Initiative, the HRC trains students to build viable student-led LGBT-friendly organizations on campus, and works to mobilize students to engage discourse on LGBT issues on their respective campuses. Community partnerships and campus-wide stakeholders are critical to not only establishing these organizations but also ensuring their viability, perpetuity, and survival. These student-run organizations provide LGBT communities on HBCU campuses the opportunity to find comfort and the sense of belonging that fosters student retention and success (McMurtie, 2013).

**LGBT Resource and Research Centers.** The newly established LGBT resource and research centers on HBCU campuses have marked a pivotal step in creating campus cultures of acceptance and inclusion for LGBT students at HBCUs. These centers offer many benefits that include providing the necessary tools to educate an entire college or university community on critical LGBT issues, advocating for LGBT-inclusive institutional policies, and fostering positive campus atmospheres for LGBT students to feel safe and welcomed on campus. Bowie State University opened its Gender and Sexual Diversities Resource Center in 2012, making it the first HBCU to have a dedicated LGBT center. The center is intended to provide information, resources, and counseling to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, and ally (LGBTQIA) students, and “increase awareness and affirmation of LGBTQIA individuals to reduce discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity” (Bowie State University, 2013). North Carolina Central University (NCCU) soon followed with the opening of its center. The goal of the North Carolina Central LGBTA center is “to create a place where everyone feels welcome” (North Carolina Central University, 2014), and it is part of a university effort to transform NCCU into a more inclusive campus environment. Located within the student union building, the center serves as a clearinghouse of information and resources and often cosponsors events and activities with student-run LGBT campus organizations to educate the wider campus community about LGBT-related issues.

LGBT resource and research centers have the capacity to substantially enrich campus communities. Kirby (2011) contends:

The creation of LGBT resource and research centers at HBCUs is not simply about following the newest trend in higher education; it is about protecting the students who have chosen to attend those schools. ... HBCUs must decide to stop playing politics with religious denominations and alumni and do what is in the best interest of their students.

While the establishment of LGBT resource centers has marked a significant shift among HBCU communities, Kirby reports that there are only
three HBCUs with active centers. If more HBCUs were to establish LGBT resource and research centers on their campuses, a strong message would be sent to broader HBCU and Black communities that now is the time to build bridges of acceptance and inclusion.

Facilitating Intergroup Dialogue

Due to the conservative campus cultures that characterize many HBCU communities, meaningful interactions between gay and heterosexual students have been routinely avoided. To remedy this, HBCUs could substantially benefit from the opportunity to introduce focused intergroup dialogues to their campuses. Zúñiga (2003) defines intergroup dialogue as a “face-to-face facilitated conversation between members of two or more social identity groups that strives to create new levels of understanding, relating, and action” (p. 9). These conversations would provide a forum for LGBT and heterosexual students to talk with one another across boundaries, dispel stereotypes, and move the campus toward an environment where all students could become positively engaged in the HBCU context. Bringing college students together to confront controversial subject matters is a complex and challenging endeavor. Effective dialogues will require considerable work by both facilitators and participants. Moreover, there will presumably be resistance to discussing controversial and sensitive topics such as sexual orientation or gender expression within an African-American context; therefore, facilitators must be aware of this resistance and actively challenge students to engage in these difficult conversations.

In 2011, Spelman College held the Audre Lorde Historically Black College and University Summit, which focused on LGBT issues within African-American and HBCU communities. This action-oriented conference created the opportunity for HBCU administrators, faculty, students, and alumni from 10 HBCUs to engage in dialogue about LGBT issues and offer recommendations about how HBCUs can establish open and inclusive environments for LGBT students and employees. Efforts like this are a potential first step for establishing ongoing opportunities to conduct dialogue across differences and to promote policies and practices that lead to systemic support for members of LGBT communities.

Creating Inclusive Academic Spaces and Expanding Course Offerings

As members of the academic community, HBCU faculty members have the opportunity to create inclusive intellectual spaces and expand course curricula that engage issues that are pertinent to LGBT communities. Currently, there are no HBCUs that offer LGBT studies as an academic major, minor, or certificate program. This void has been attributed to the negative repercussions associated with institutional backlash, faculty fear of being
seen as confrontational, faculty apprehension of being “outed” as gay or lesbian, and (for junior faculty) potential refusal of tenure (Spelman College Women’s Research and Resource Center, 2011). As a result, there are limited academic opportunities for students to examine issues surrounding gender and sexuality. Scholars at the Spelman College Women’s Research and Resource Center (2011) contend:

In contexts where same-sex sexuality remains taboo, presumably supported by religious dictates that mark it as such, pervasive ideas about heterosexual morality or heteronormativity usurp the place of curricular engagement in ways that make it difficult for LGBT students to locate themselves within a robust intellectual legacy. (p. 19)

There have been a few instances where gay and lesbian authors are included in classroom discussions and course topics, but their identification with LGBT communities is seldom mentioned and often goes without interrogation (Spelman College Women’s Research and Resource Center, 2011). Including the voices of acclaimed scholars such as Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, and Langston Hughes in the classroom and recognizing the LGBT themes throughout their work would provide spaces that challenge and renegotiate the notions of what it means to be Black and gay or lesbian in the broader societal context.

While there is a lack of LGBT studies curricula within HBCU contexts, at some HBCUs the topics of gender and sexuality are being addressed in select course offerings. In 1981, Spelman College introduced the women’s studies minor, and in 1996 it expanded the program into a major in comparative women’s studies (Spelman College Women’s Research and Resource Center, 2011). Spelman is the only HBCU with a women’s studies major. This department currently offers courses that broach matters that are inclusive of key LGBT issues, including a course titled “Black Queer Studies.” Morehouse College also recently offered a course titled “A Genealogy of Black LGBT Culture and Politics” that was taught remotely by a Yale University professor. The campus’s gay/straight alliance organization partnered with Yale to make this course offering a reality. It is very encouraging to see HBCUs taking steps to develop courses and expand their curricula. Other HBCUs should use these examples to further develop their academic spaces and move forward so they can aptly address LGBT history, issues, and culture.

Moving Forward

Within the past decade, HBCUs have begun to recognize the unique needs of their LGBT communities. Although HBCUs have been slow to fully embrace the LGBT students who are present on their campuses, it is evident that there have been significant strides in examining campus climates so that
LGBT students may truly feel welcomed. For far too long, HBCUs have communicated to LGBT students that as long as they are not too “out” with expressing their sexual identities, then everything is okay. The new and emerging initiatives highlighted in this chapter convey great potential and demonstrate how HBCU communities are indeed beginning to recognize and address the challenges and potential barriers to college persistence that LGBT students encounter during their time in college. Still, there is work to be done.

Many HBCUs continue to prevent their students from establishing permanent student-run LGBT/ally organizations and have failed to facilitate campus-wide programs that highlight LGBT issues. Because most HBCUs lack an infrastructure of support for their LGBT students, progress at many institutions comes because of the work of a few activists. It is crucial that student-run organizations and student services expand to other HBCUs so that LGBT students can be embraced and aided during their time within HBCU contexts. Each year, students voluntarily withdraw from institutions of higher education, not due to poor academic performance but due to feelings of isolation or alienation within the academic or social spaces of campus. Moving forward, it will be imperative for HBCU communities to embrace the diverse students who are matriculating on their campuses, especially their students who also identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Future initiatives and interventions must critically examine LGBT issues and propose effective solutions. Understanding the experiences of marginalized students and the meanings that these students attach to their experiences is paramount in aiding their growth, development, and success.

References

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