

HBCU: A Profile in Survival and Success

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were created for one reason: to educate African Americans. HBCUs first came into being shortly after the Civil War, when it became possible for former enslaved individuals and their children to attend institutions of higher learning but were denied entry into existing institutions. These institutions for African Americans were started by religious orders and the Freedmen's Bureau, which was an agency of the Department of War and was established in 1865, with assistance from sympathetic whites who wanted to Christianize or train African Americans for industrial work. African Americans have long understood the relationship between education and upward mobility. Following the abolition of slavery, learning to navigate the American society and how to provide the necessities required a system of education for former enslaved individuals that did not exist. Without an education and a system to teach African Americans, freedom for many would be meaningless. In many quarters, African Americans were viewed as disinterested in education, too lazy to learn or lacked the discipline or mental ability to engage the academic process. However, all those assumptions were rapidly dismissed as HBCUs sprang up in several states.

Prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, HBCUs were, with limited exceptions, the only higher education option for African Americans. With the civil rights efforts in full force, Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) opened their doors to all people. Shortly thereafter, PWIs started to recruit the strongest scholars and the best athletes. This recruitment effort at PWIs presented new challenges for HBCUs. Today, 105 HBCUs enroll approximately 11% of African American students and with the push for the integration of historically white institutions during the civil rights movement, enrollment dropped at HBCUs, and their role of educating the near entirety of the black middle class shifted. Some of the institutions are financially stable while the greater portion of these institutions face severe financial challenge.

HBCUs played a crucial role in transforming how America was to understand and envision what it meant to be African American following the Civil War. Since their inception, HBCUs have served as engines for African American thought, innovation, upward mobility, freedom and justice. For example, it was on HBCU campuses where strategies birthed the mass protests of the 1960s that fueled the civil rights movement. The marches and sit-ins across the south were led by HBCU students and produced the impetus for the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Inventions such as the pioneering method of storing blood plasma was discovered on an HBCU campus. The practice of crop rotation that generated higher cotton yield and alternative cash crops was first introduced by an HBCU researcher. HBCUs have produced scholars and athletes that have set and hold records in many areas. The legal team that forced integration of the public school system trained and worked at an HBCU. HBCUs have taught America the value of African Americans and displayed to the nation and the world that African Americans can successfully compete with anyone on any stage when given the chance.

Challenges to HBCUs have been a consistent issue since inception. Southern states have traditionally provided funds to HBCUs disproportionately when compared to awards to PWIs. There have been numerous recommendations from funding sources that HBCUs limit their curriculum to domestic service, technical fields and agriculture. Now, many African American scholars have a choice of attending an HBCU and graduate with significant debt or attend a PWI and graduate debt free. In similar manner, promising athletes have a choice of attending a PWI

with superior training facilities and specialty coaches or attend an HBCU with fewer resources. Unfortunately, severe challenges to HBCUs continue to this day.

Despite the challenges, HBCUs continue to serve a productive role for America. HBCUs comprise approximately 2.5% of all institutions of higher learning in America. Yet, approximately 20% of all African Americans with a bachelor's degree, earned their degree at an HBCU, and HBCUs continue to produce 25% of all African American earning science, technology, engineering and math degrees. Of the 400 ABET accredited engineering schools in the country, only 14 are housed on an HBCU campus. Yet, these 14 are producing approximately one-third of the African American engineers. With regards to their economic impact, despite being historically under-resourced, in 2014, the nation's HBCUs injected \$14.8 billion in direct spending impact to the national economy, adding more than 134,000 jobs, on- and off-campus, according to a recently published landmark study, [HBCUs Make America Strong: The Positive Economic Impact of Historically Black Colleges and Universities](#), commissioned by the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). Considering the challenges, most HBCUs are in Southern states, and disproportionately provide educational opportunities for first generation, low income, rural, inner city students. HBCUs continue to provide a meaningful service to America.

Regardless to the contributions HBCU have made and continue to make to America, there is a growing course of claim that HBCUs are facing extinction.

“It is hard to determine a worse proposition for historically black colleges; that industry, culture and finance have converged to threaten the existence of most of our schools, or that Black America doesn't have the wealth or awareness to do anything about it. About 50 HBCUs will survive the next decade.” (HBCU Digest 2017)

“Yet desegregation of higher education has devastated black colleges. About 90 percent of African American students are enrolled in majority colleges and universities. As result, notwithstanding their historic significance and their past and current contributions to higher education and American society, many black colleges are imperiled -- and have been for quite some time. In fact, whether they care to admit it or not, for a variety of reasons, some beyond their control, many HBCUs are in a death spiral and may not be salvageable.” (Insider Higher Education 2017)

“A perfect storm of fractured board-president relationships, abysmal alumni giving, budget cuts from state and federal governments and declining enrollment is plaguing all of higher education, but for historically black colleges and universities, which already struggle to come up from behind their majority-serving peers, the bubble may be poised to pop even sooner than some think.” (Education Dive 2017)

“Some college finance experts predict that dozens of HBCUs will disappear in the next 20 years.” (Atlanta Journal Constitution February 11. 2018)

Severe threats and challenges to HBCUs are not new. However, there is a need to strengthen and help make HBCUs financially sustainable. And the practical approach to do that is The Wharton-HBCU Social Impact Technology Innovation Fund (Wharton-HBCU Innovation Fund).