

Chapter 1

Valuing the History, Missions and Traditions of HBCUs: Back to the Basics

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ABSTRACT

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) serve the educational needs of students of African descent while providing an atmosphere of nurture and guidance enriched in cultural norms. In considering how HBCUs can remain competitive, this chapter recommends that one of the first steps is to return to the basics, reviewing the historical significance, missions and traditions of HBCUs. In doing so, this work investigates the role HBCUs play in student identity and character development by looking at the history, mission and traditions of Morehouse College and Howard University. The authors, who both are alumni of these institutions, respectively, will examine relevant documents and statements from the schools as well as provide auto-ethnographic narratives explicating the impact those institutions had on their academic, social and professional successes.

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INTRODUCTION

Thurgood Marshall. Oprah Winfrey. Spike Lee. What do these names have in common? Aside from being known throughout the world for their contributions to politics, business and culture, specifically as it relates to the lives of Black people, what uniquely links them is their alumni status at HBCUs. Either through undergraduate or graduate school matriculations, these prominent black figures are examples of the phenomenal successes that HBCUs cultivate. The scope and diversity of the Black college educational experience in America has spanned for over a century and a half. Since Cheyney University and Lincoln University opened their doors in the mid-1800s (Harris, 2014), young students of African descent have had access to higher education in environments where their specific academic needs and issues were acknowledged and understood.

In 2015, over 160 years after these institutions were chartered, scholars have debated the question: Do Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) remain relevant and needed? In light of the all too familiar events in the United States of America over the last few years where Black lives are taken, often by those empowered by the government, and seemingly without sanctioned consequence, attention shifts to black leaders and their responses to the tragic events that have crippled black communities. Particularly, leaders at HBCUs must address these issues and forge their applicability to higher learning. Black students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) are commonly demeaned through racist practices, such as the fraternity chants at University of Oklahoma (Koppel & Belkin, 2015). Additionally, students are devalued when white administrators (like the former president of the University of Missouri), fail to address their cultural concerns (Morris, 2015). It is evident that America is not a post-racial society as many would like to believe. Black students need academic environments that exist to educate and create scholars prepared to deal with community and global issues from a centric perspective. In other words, Black students need HBCUs.

Several HBCUs are endangered by low enrollment and financial woes (Chambers, 2015). Many are concerned about their ability to effectively exist. While it is important that HBCUs make institutional changes to be competitive in the fast moving technological world and offer contemporary courses that attract the best and brightest scholars, this chapter will present foundational recommendations on how HBCUs can remain a prolific educational force for black students. Specifically, it will examine the role that HBCUs play in both nurturing and developing the identity and character of black students by examining the significance of history, missions and traditions of HBCUs. For the purposes of this chapter, the authors will reference two HBCUs, Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, and Howard University

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