

Creating an Environment for Sustainable Leadership at Public HBCUs



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REORDERING OUR STEPS

As a result of an amendment to the Higher Education Act of 1965, HBCUs are recognized as any black college or university (that was) established prior to 1964, whose principal mission (was and) is the education of Black Americans. There are currently 105 institutions of higher education recognized as historically black colleges and/or universities located in 19 states (NCES, 2013). Some of these institutions are community colleges, private four-year institutions and public four-year institutions. Forty-six of these institutions are public historically black colleges and/or universities (HBCUs).

Developing new designs to research the effectiveness of HBCU presidents is imperative because the reputation of the institutions and the ability of presidents was severely crippled at one time by the publication of research by Harvard sociologists, Christopher Jencks and David Reisman. Their research only highlighted problems and mistakes at HBCUs and failed to present any empirical data about effectiveness and success at HBCUs. In fact, they labeled HBCUs as “academic disaster areas” (Freeman & Gasman, 2014).

Presidents of HBCUs are often accused of being autocratic and the mission of these institutions are said to compromise academic quality while upholding segregation (Hamilton, 2002). There was a time when presidents of historically black colleges and universities remained in those positions for decades until they are of a ripe old age and ready to pass on the blood stain banner (Watson, 2013). However, that is not the current situation with the exception of Hampton University whose president has been there for thirty-years, or recently retired president of Xavier University whose reign was forty-seven years are exceptions to the recent rule of revolving door of HBCU Presidents. The tenure of most public HBCU Presidents is five-years or less. Hamilton postulates that factors which affect leadership capabilities at HBCUs include: financial instability, accreditation challenges, questionable governance structure(s) and lack of a clear vision. Decision-making contexts for leaders at HBCU’s can be affected by structural, cultural, or situational distinctions that leaders of these institutions must take into account (Minor, 2004).

Most if not all HBCU Boards of Trustees are too conservative and unwilling to change the current pattern of recycling and or hiring only persons with past president’s experience. (Gasman, 2013). “I do have concerns when presidents at HBCUs (and in general) are recycled despite past indiscretions. HBCUs, nor any other institution, can afford to take chances on leaders with bad track records.” When referring to matters of “governance contrary to regulations, this means in custom but not necessarily ordained law” (Brown and Burnette, 2014). Arnett (2015) quoting Dr. Norman Davis, President Emeritus-Xavier

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University of New Orleans, HBCUs are facing the traditional perceptions that all black colleges are going to close or go out of business. “That is foolish,” Francis said. “We who operate the institutions know we have a major job to do (in educating Black students) as we have done for the 100 past years.” Since HBCUs inception, they provided a unique service, and significant role for African Americans to “explore their racial identity; and equipping students with the tools to function in a racist society” (Davis, 2015).

When I look at the future, it's going to a future that will demand strong leadership from boards, from faculty and from staff; the same dedication in terms of commitment to students that we've always had, we're going to have to have more of that, because not all of our students that I am talking about are going to get the beneficiary of having a quality high school education. Some will, and we have students who can go anywhere but they want to go to HBCUs, and there are some who need us and that has been true over the years. The importance of facilities' appearances to student recruitment is emphasized in the 1987 study of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching on how students chose a college. For the 62% of students surveyed, the “appearance of the buildings and grounds was the most influential factor during campus visits. (Kaiser, 2009)

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In an article published in 2014 by Arnett entitled the “State of HBCUs”, stakeholders list financing programs, affordability and leadership as top issues. Between the lack of leadership, a dearth of advocacy at all levels, and local problems with declining enrollment and concerns over competitiveness with predominately white institutions (PWIs). Dr. William Harvey, president of Hampton University and chair of the President’s Board of Advisors on HBCUs, “decried the lack of support from the federal government on behalf of the HBCUs.” He further stated in this speech, that we face “enormous challenges. These are difficult times for our students and their families” (Arnett 2014). In the 2014 State of HBCUs Report, a survey of 105 HBCU stakeholders listed the top two issues of HBCUs were affordability and insufficient leadership/governance running close behind. Brown and Burnette stated:

while higher education is becoming a “dynamic, global commodity, facilities management is becoming increasingly more complex. “Driven by the technological revolution, higher education scholars, identifies the challenges associated with “aging and expanding facilities as one of the top change drivers in the field, exceeded only by insufficient financial resources, technological upgrades, and student demographics transformations. (Brown and Burdette, 2014)

The 2012 annual report on the participation of HBCUs in federal programs suggests that funding to HBCUs has decreased, compared to all institutions of higher education, in recent years. To demonstrate this phenomenon, HBCUs were awarded in grants -7.33 less when compared to 2007 funding data records show. This is an alarming downward trend of federal funding for HBCUs, and “our friends in Washington need to know that we are watching and counting” (Arnett, 2014). Shametrice Davis, education scholar from University of California Long Beach, questioned the mission paradox of HBCUs, through administrative changes to faculty workloads that are “increasing prioritization of research, as faculty at HBCUs have historically valued teaching and student mentorship more heavily than scholarship and publication” (Davis, 2015).

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