

## Psychosocial Significance of Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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**Received:** May 19, 2017; **Published:** June 10, 2017

### Abstract

Amongst the chatter in today's coffee shops, book stores, barber and beauty shops, the halls of academia, to the oval office and the rural farmlands of Mississippi, the question is being tossed around: what will become of black colleges and universities referred to as "HBCUs" -Historically Black Colleges and Universities? I often wonder in my finite mind as an African- American, why do African-Americans have to justify the existences of or prove the relevance of HBCUs? Will they continue to exist? I say the proof is in the pudding. I am not writing this paper to sequester a philosophical argument that often ends up wounding egos and with fragile concepts which simply benefit no one; however, I do present this paper as a document to provide a brief look at the contributions of HBCUs and how they have impacted the lives of many people and continue to change the landscape of not only the Black communities but also the world at large. Not all institutions of higher education are granted the same economic packages to thrive and survive. This often makes it much more challenging for historically Black colleges to survive during these harsh economic times. I do believe wholeheartedly that there is and always will be a role for HBCUs now and forever. The major premise of this paper is to whet the appetite of the readers so that they will be able to walk away with the ability to understand and appreciate the positive psychosocial impact of HBCUs on their students. HBCUs have made tremendous impact on the students who attend them and the positions they occupy when they leave.

**Keywords:** Psychosocial; Significant; HBCUs - Historical Colleges and Universities and Black College Students

### Introduction

It might appear a bit odd to find an article of this nature tucked away in a psychology journal. Psychology deals with the well-being and understanding of how and what makes people function. Despite the many challenges that are unique to African-American people, whose history is deeply entrenched in the atrocities of slavery mangled with racism, discrimination, stereotypes, oppression and injustices, it is quite fitting to find an article of this nature in a psychology journal. One might surmise what I have to say, is not only biased but also overly subjective. Perhaps I should take offense to this but not really. I am deeply entrenched, grounded and rooted in the Black community as I was born African-American, went to all Black schools and lived my early life in an all-Black town in Mound Bayou, in the Mississippi Delta. Mound Bayou was founded in 1887 by former slaves Issiah T. Montgomery and his cousin Benjamin T. Green. They purchased 840 acres of Mississippi swamp land densely covered with forest. So, one would be perfectly correct in his or her assumption. I do, however, beg to differ, as I have witnessed first-hand the magnificent impact HBCUs have had upon their students from the time they arrive on campus until they depart. HBCUs create a space for dignity and pride to breathe freely among the campuses without being snuffed or choked out. HBCUs allow for golden moments of opportunity to engage in scholarly debates about issues of social injustices that others are not comfortable or interested in nor do they find them worthy of their time to discuss. Being able to engage in these healthy types of dialogue

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**Citation:** Linda J. M. Holloway. "Psychosocial Significance of Historically Black Colleges and Universities". *EC Psychology and Psychiatry* SI.1 (2017): P21-P25.

results in students who can engage in lofty discussions that impact them on a personal, psychological and sociological level. This is deeply rooted in psychology and embedded in the cultural of HBCUs.

### Historical Background of HBCUs

Most HBCUs were established after the American Civil War. The primary mission of these institutions was to serve the African-American communities. Other races were given the opportunity to attend as well. Many of the HBCUs were located in the Southern states, formerly referred to as the slave states. There were a few exceptions. Cheyney University of Pennsylvania (1837) and Lincoln University (Pennsylvania) (1854) were established for Blacks prior to the start of the Civil War.

The Federal Government Morrill Act of 1862, provided land grant colleges within each state. Since there was segregation in the Southern states, Blacks were not able to attend land grant colleges. As a result, congress instituted the second Morrill Act of 1890, referred to as the Agricultural College Act of 1890. This act required states to establish land grant colleges for Blacks since they were being systematically excluded from attending the existing land grant colleges. These land grant schools were allowed to receive annual federal funding for their research, extension, and outreach activities. The Higher Education Act of 1964 established direct grants particularly for HBCUs to include federal matching from private endowment.

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed an executive order to disburse adequate and appropriate resources and funds to strengthen the operation and functioning of HBCUs. This order was initiated out of what is referred to today as the "White House Initiative of Historically Black Colleges and Universities"- (WHIHBCU). This is a federally funded program which operates out of the U. S. Department of Education.

HBCUs with a majority Black student body that started after the implementation of *Sweat v. Painter* and *Brown v. Board of Education* are not classified as HBCUs. This is because the U. S. Supreme Court ruled it illegal to segregate public facilities along with the Higher Education Act of 1965.

### Some Facts about HBCUs:

- U. S. Department of Education published in 2004 a study which reported HBCUs as of 2001 accounted for 13 % of Black enrollment.
- The Thurgood Marshall College Fund in 2007 published a report which stated that minority recruitment by Fortune 500 companies and that of government agencies included 13 % of students who had graduated from HBCUs and the other 87% were recruited from other non-HBCUs.
- A stimulus bill in 2009 provided more than \$1. 3 billion additional federal support to HBCUs.
- There are a total of 107 HBCU's in the United States, 27 offer doctoral programs and 52 provide graduate degree programs at the Master's Level. On the undergraduate level, 83 of the HBCUs offer bachelor's degree programs and 38 of these schools offer an associate degrees.
- The Civil Right Laws of 1960 required all educational institutions that receive federal funding under affirmative action to make some assertive efforts to increase their racial diversity resulting in a few of the HBCUs now having non-Black majorities. For example, West Virginia State University and Bluefield State College whose student bodies have been largely White since the 1960s.
- HBCUs are faced with financial challenges due to the increase in costs to deliver an education and the decline in student's finan-

cial aid.

- The National Center for Education Statistics in 2006 released a report showing HBCUs have a \$10.2 billion positive impact on the nation's economy.
- According to a study produced by the United Negro College Fund, HBCUs are responsible for producing 70% of all Black doctors and dentists, 50% of Black engineers and public school teachers, and 35% of Black lawyers.
- The Gallup poll, in 2015, released a report stating that students who attended HBCUs had a higher sense of well-being in five areas: purpose, social, financial, community, and physical compared to students who do not attend HBCUs. Also, Black graduates of HBCUs, when compared to those at non-HBCUs, were twice as likely to receive support at their school in the following domains: 1. Having professors who make learning exciting. 2. Having professors who take a personal interest in them. 3. Having mentors who push them to pursue their own personal goals.
- Each year the U. S. Department of Education designates one week in the fall as "National HBCU Week". During that week, several conferences and events are held in Washington, D. C. for the sake of discussing and celebrating HBCUs, as well as recognizing select scholars and alumni from HBCUs.

### Reasons for Attending HBCUs

- Teachers and staff are extremely compassionate and strongly believe in the students
- Everyone is made to feel special
- Affordable
- Classes are designed to teach students real world skill sets
- Culturally diverse atmosphere because people who attend these universities are from culturally diverse backgrounds. HBCUs also have a growing population of international students
- Plenty of extracurricular activities to allow the students to grow both socially and emotionally
- A very supportive Alumni Association. The alumni take great pride in their schools and support them in any way that they can, i.e. raising money for scholarships, beautification of the campus, recruitment, and helping purchase band uniforms.
- Very distinct history and legacies that are still being carried out in many facets of the university
- A safe place where students feel free to speak on issues and concerns that are impacting African-American communities, i.e. health care disparities, Black on Black crime, under employment, HIV, AIDS, teenage pregnancies, drugs and alcohol and Black Lives Matter
- Opportunities to serve your local communities and understand truly what it means to be a servant leader
- Dual enrollment for high school students. Many have a Memorandum of Agreement with local community colleges
- HBCUs offer Second Chances as part of the Department's Second Chance Pell for incarcerated students
- Implements innovative and creative ways to ensure that students graduate in a timely and efficient manner

As with any organization, there are things HBCUs can improve upon; however, with the proper guidance and responsible accountable leaders, this too shall come to pass.

### The Plight of Black Colleges

Several Black colleges have experienced a drastic drop in their enrollment. HBCUs have been impacted financially due to drops in enrollment and loss of financial aid support. In the post-racial society, many Black students have opted to attend predominately White institutions; whereas previously many Black students chose to attend HBCUs. Economic hardship, which has impacted the HBCUs, has forced some to close their doors and others to be on the brink of closing (i.e. St Paul College in Virginia in 2013, Morris Brown College in Atlanta lost its accreditation reportedly with a student body of 35 students, Mary Holmes Community College closed, South Carolina State is facing financial devastation along with many other HBCUs).

HBCUs are known for educating traditionally underserved students despite the many challenges they have come up against. HBCUs have a legacy of overcoming the odds and their main focus is to provide a better life for students and their families by offering them education to compete in a global society. Many Blacks, because of HBCUs, have been able to economically advance themselves.

### Some Notable Black Graduates of HBCUs:

- W. E. B. Du Bois – Fisk University
- Martin Luther King – Morehouse University
- Thurgood Marshall – Howard University
- Rod Paige – Jackson State University
- Ella Baker – Shaw University
- Ed Bradley – Cheyenne University
- Marian Wright – Edelman – Spelman
- Langston Hughes – Lincoln University
- Jessie Jackson – North Carolina AT & T
- Nikki Giovanni – Fisk University
- Sharon Pratt Kelly – Howard University

HBCUs have been extremely successful in the past and continue to place themselves in the position to produce some of the world's top innovative thinkers.

### Where do we go from here?

- Continue to improve graduation and retention rates
- Ensure students are able to gain employment and have employable skills prior to graduating
- Create global citizens - increase access to studying abroad and speaking another language
- Close the gender gap – increase the enrollment and graduation of Black men
- Cultivate an atmosphere for increased fundraising activities
- Increase supportive faculty climate-decrease teacher's workload, increase salaries, improve shared governance

- Promote and support forward and creative thinkers from the groundkeepers to the President
- Make use of data acquired to assist with making improvements
- Do not be afraid to re-energize, re-organize curricula that are relevant to respond to the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- Continue to prepare students to be leaders in the community
- Improve working relationships with primary and secondary schools in the local communities to serve as a pipeline to higher education
- Increase the quality of senior level leadership who can contribute to the institution financially, intellectually, and socially
- Create consortia of learning opportunities with the use of technology
- Boldly tell the HBCUs story, the history and legacy and what impact it will have on the future of today's society

The question we should be asking ourselves is no longer do Black colleges matter but rather what can we do as a country to ensure that they do matter. Since unemployment rates are highest among the Black communities, Black men are more likely to be incarcerated than sitting in a college classroom. We must continue to provide safe places where Black Americans can feel welcome and be given the opportunities to learn where they can become productive citizens. Black colleges specialize in working with the underserved populations of people who will be least likely attend college. Often, students at HBCUs are the first one in their family to attend college. Black colleges and universities create social milieu so that these students can learn, thrive, graduate, and become productive citizens in our society. HBCUs give an affordable learning package, not only financially, but socially and psychologically as well. When the students leave an HBCU, he or she feels extremely confident they can meet the challenges of the world. This is contrary to popular belief that students at HBCUs receive inferior educations. This myth had been debunked by the sheer number of Blacks who have graduated from HBCUs and have been exceptionally productive in mainstream society.

### Message to Black Colleges

By

Linda J. M. Holloway

Black colleges hold your head high, walk with a sense of dignity and pride. You know your legacy, you shall live and not die. Many have walked through your doors and made it to the Board of the Supreme Court Judge. They have fought for the Brown vs. Board of Education of 1954. They have marched across the Pettus Bridge with firehoses against their bloody backs, ferocious dogs biting through their flesh, and placed in jail cells that could not hold them down.

Thank God for Dr. Martin Luther King who was Civil Rights Bound, and Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat. Yes, Black colleges, it gets tough sometimes, but look at what you have already done.

Black Colleges you have nothing to be ashamed of, you have often been given two fish and five loaves of bread, but you simply told all God's children to sit down, stay for a while, this is not how your story ends, this is only how it begins.

You have never gone without. Shutting our doors, what the heck are they talking about? We know how to do more with less! Watch us, as you sit back and hold your breath. This is simply a test.

We have been taught by the best. Who took five loaves of measly bread, two tiny poor little pieces of fish, and fed 5,000 women and children? No, that is not even counting the men. It was a gourmet fish dinner out in the middle of no man's land.

I heard you've been worried about your drop in enrollment. Tuition's gone sky high, and President talking about cutting the budget for HBCUs and White House Initiatives have gone down the drain. Your thinking is what are we going to do? You are about to go insane.

Come on now, let's take a walk down memory lane, when we learned under big oak tree. We have been without. Now that ought to make somebody in here shout.

I know it might sound all so sad. But, old dear Black Colleges keep holding your head to the sky, you were built to last.

Your legacy will continue to live on.

People often ask, do Black Colleges really matter?

Do not stutter, stumble, or tremble when you speak. Let the world know we are the ground beneath your feet. We are the air you breathe- without air you will suffocate. So do not hate, celebrate. Because we are here to stay.

We are the warm blood that runs through your veins, there is no shame in our game. We have produced some of the best- W. E. B. Du Bois, Jessie Jackson, Oprah Winfrey, Samuel Jackson, and Ed Bradley too.

Black colleges your resume speaks for you.

Continue to hold your head high, lifted toward the big blue sky.

Keep on, keeping on, you have much more work to do!

You will not die, you will live on and on, until God almighty calls all his children home.

### Conflict of Interest

It does not constitute a conflict of interest for the authors.

### Recommended Readings

1. Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coats
2. Everybody Looks Like Me. At the Crossroads of America's Black Colleges and Culture by Ron Stoghill.

Volume SI Issue 1 June 2017

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