

Are Historically Black Colleges & Universities Relevant During an Era of “Change”?

BY KHADIJAH ALI-COLEMAN

There are only 105 historically black college and universities (HBCUs) in this country representing just three percent of the nation’s institutions of higher learning. However, according to the United Negro College Fund, HBCUs graduate nearly 20 percent of African Americans who earn undergraduate degrees.

As President Obama moves toward completing his first year as the first black president of the United States under the mantra of “change,” do HBCUs still fill a need. There is no question that historically, HBCUs provided an educational sanctuary for blacks who were not allowed to attend university with white people. But is this still necessary?

Whether the question is asked or not, there is no question that HBCUs are making college possible for students with limited options and steep challenges. According to a 2004 McKinsey study, the average graduation rate at many HBCUs is higher than the average graduation rate for African Americans at majority institutions, particularly for those students with financial and learning challenges.

Though DC’s Office of the State

“I wanted an authentic black experience and decided to attend an HBCU to help “balance” my perspective on life.”

~ Sharon Burton, graduated from two HBCUs (right)



“Meeting and learning with people whom share so much can aid in dispelling the myth that blacks in college are a rarity and can also boost morale.”

~ Jamia Ferrell, May 2009 graduate of Morgan State University (left)

Superintendent of Education (OSSE) has no clear statistics on how many high school graduates from DC choose HBCUs, a study funded by the Lumina Foundation found that students attending HBCUs are primarily low-income—with 98% qualifying for federal need-based aid.

Initiatives on HBCUs

Almost thirty years ago, President Jimmy Carter signed Executive Order 12232, which established a federal program “... to overcome the effects of discriminatory treatment and to strengthen and expand the capacity of historically black colleges and universities to provide quality education.” The very next year, President Reagan established the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, which expanded Carter’s initiative and initiated a government-wide effort to strengthen HBCUs.

The White House initiatives recognized the historical significance of HBCUs. Without HBCUs, many African-Americans who attended college during the days of legal segregation would not have been able to do so. But, at the same time, they attempted



to create standards that some HBCUs struggle to meet now that black students have more choices for higher education, which has impacted enrollment numbers, the academic caliber of applicants and school services.

From the Student's Point of View

"I basically wanted to attend an HBCU because of the familial environment," says 18 year-old Damion Hunt, a recent graduate of Friendship Collegiate Academy on Minnesota Ave, SE.

Hunt graduated with a high grade-point average and received several competitive scholarships to cover all of his college expenses. He is attending Florida A & M University (FAMU) in the fall. During his high-school senior year, Hunt was introduced to many schools—both HBCUs and predominately white institutions (PWI), but he fell in love with FAMU immediately after a visit to the campus.

"An HBCU is like a big family," he said. "You have a support system whereas, in other universities, the resources are scarce."

Hunt is an Achiever Scholar—a recipient of a scholarship funded through Bill and Melinda Gates. He credits scholarship programs like the Achiever Scholars as a resource that helped him be successful in high school by focusing him academically and lending support as appropriate. He believes similar types of resources will be available and aid him in college at FAMU.

Despite Hunt's feeling of comfort with his college choice, FAMU nearly lost its accreditation. Less than two years ago, FAMU was put on accreditation probation due to 35 findings in the 2005-2006 operational audit and the 13 findings in the 2005-2006 financial audit. Though the school received its accreditation after revamping systems to meet standards, FAMU is still in a six-month probationary period to maintain standards.

Jessica Solomon, a youth worker who has worked with young people for the past eight years has often debated the issue of PWIs vs. HBCUs and uses her own experience as a basis.

"When I was choosing a college, I knew that those four years would shape the next 40 years of my life," said Solomon. "It was important for me to be a part of a community that included people who didn't look like me or function under the assumption that we shared the same experiences. As hard

as that was for me sometimes, I don't regret my choice to attend a predominately white institution. I learned a lot about myself and how to navigate [the world] as a woman of color in mainstream spaces."

Solomon has counseled youth in her former work with the Higher Achievement Program and in her current work as a consultant to local nonprofits, to choose colleges based on the services they offer, the campus visit and ultimately the overall vibe of the college.

"Our HBCUs have cultivated the minds of some of the premier scholars in the world. However, HBCUs must make the business case for their existence and sustainability in 2009 which is a challenge given the economy and trends in Higher Ed," Solomon asserts.

Those who attended HBCUs offer a counter view.

"For me attending a HBCU is much like my superhero's own epiphany," says Morgan State University (MSU) junior Stephan Cox. "When I walk the campus and I see students who look like me, and I'm at a place that is designed to cater to me, I feel like a kid, not a black kid. I feel as though I have a better chance of succeeding because I'm not in the minority."

Cox transferred to MSU in 2007 after attending a local community college in Maryland. His classmate, recent MSU graduate Jamia Ferrell moved back home to SE after being pleased with an experience she believes she wouldn't have been able to find elsewhere.

"While attending a predominately white institution has its benefits, there is something special about higher learning among people who have similar backgrounds, beliefs, ancestries and yes, even skin color," she says.

Ferrell, who earned a BS in General Family and Consumer Sciences works with young people and hopes to eventually do work that impacts her immediate community on a larger scale. She believes that not all HBCUs are the same and should not be looked at as irrelevant because, like PWIs, they all have their individual distinctions.

"All HBCUs are not the same. While their missions and the hardships they face may be similar, each HBCU has something unique that it gives to its students and their college experience. Each institution is as unique as the student bodies which they serve." ★



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