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## A Comprehensive Analysis of Aquatic Programming at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

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### **Abstract**

This article provides a comprehensive examination of aquatic programming at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). HBCUs consist of public, private, 2-year, and 4-year institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Historically, HBCUs provided descendants of the enslaved access to higher education opportunities (Brown, Donahoo, & Bertrand, 2001). HBCUs now serve a more diverse community and the core focus remains on inclusion, social justice, diversity, empowerment, leadership, and cultural competence (Kennedy, 2012; Rawlins, 2018). Consequently, HBCUs may provide an ideal environment to address aquatic activity and the drowning disparity in the African American community. In the current study, researchers sent a survey to 102 HBCUs to better assess the prevalence of aquatics programming at these institutions. Approximately 38 percent of the HBCUs responded to the survey. The results of this study indicate that there is inconsistent institutional knowledge about competitive and non-competitive swimming programs from the past to the present. However, 31 percent of participants reported offering swim classes to members of the campus community. Additionally, 51 percent of participants reported offering swim courses for college credit. Most importantly, 49 percent of participants indicated a desire to build or expand aquatics programming. The drowning disparity is a result of a cycle that includes historical barriers that denied many African Americans' access to aquatic facilities and programming (Anderson, 2017). Identifying aquatics programming at HBCUs is a critical step to addressing the drowning disparity.

*Keywords:* race, swimming disparity, drowning disparity, African-American swimmers, diversity in aquatics, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

### **Introduction**

To date, Rawlins (2018), Jensen (2018), Anderson (2017), and Fogan (2014) provide the most recent literature reflecting aquatic participation and perceptions of aquatic programming at HBCUs. However, there remains a lack of historical and current information regarding aquatic programming associated with HBCUs. As a result of a conversation at the 2017 Diversity In Aquatics convention, members of the Diversity In Aquatics HBCU Council desired to learn more about the aquatic history of HBCUs.

This study began with established contacts in the Diversity In Aquatics network. An internet search was then used to expand the existing network. At the onset of this study, summer of 2018, there were 102 HBCUs in the United States. All HBCUs were sent a request to complete a brief online questionnaire through

Qualtrics. Of the 102 HBCUs, 39 responded (38.2%), and 13 (31%) identified as having a swim program for the campus community. Furthermore, 13 (31%) of the responding institutions reportedly offer swim classes to the public and the campus community. The remaining institutions either do not provide any aquatic programming or solely offer aquatic programming to students, faculty and/or staff.

### **Drowning Disparity**

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2016) reported an average of 3,536 fatal unintentional drownings (non-boating related) annually in the United States between 2005 and 2014. This equates to about ten deaths per day over the nine-year period. Although the aforementioned drownings occurred in the United States, there is a disparity in drowning between African Americans and Whites.

The fatal unintentional drowning rate for African Americans was significantly higher than that of Whites across all ages, between 1999-2010. The disparity was most pronounced in swimming pools; African American children 5-19 drowned in swimming pools at rates 5.5 times higher than those of Whites. This disparity was greatest among those 11-12 years, where African Americans drowned in swimming pools at rates ten times those of Whites (The Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016) reports access to swimming pools, the lack of desire to learn to swim, and disinterest in water-related recreational activities may contribute to the racial differences in drowning rates. Perhaps the reported disinterests stem from an uncomfortable or unwelcome environment. Ross, Irwin, Irwin, Martin, and Ryan (2014) concluded that African Americans perceive aquatics recreation as an unwelcome environment. Consequently, some African Americans choose to participate in other leisure activities. The lack of participation in aquatic-based programs, including swim lessons, has contributed to the drowning disparity.

Anderson (2017) suggests that the drowning disparity is a result of a cycle that includes historical barriers that denied many African Americans' access to aquatic facilities and programming. Consequently, a lack of African American aquatic professionals as role models perpetuates the disparity cycle (Anderson, 2017).

Fogan (2014) asserts that an increase in swimming participation at HBCUs may positively affect African American communities. HBCU students who take swimming lessons, complete lifeguard training, and/or compete in aquatics activities are more likely to engage in aquatics programs upon returning to their

home communities. Their presence has the potential of creating a ripple effect of increased swimming proficiency for people throughout the African diaspora (Fogan, 2014).

### **Historically Black Colleges and Universities & Aquatics**

HBCUs consist of public, private, 2-year, and 4-year institutions and are distributed among 19 states, Washington, D.C., and the United States Virgin Islands (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). These institutions were founded and established by Black churches, the Freedman's Bureau, local communities, and private philanthropists (Brown, 1999; Brown, Donahoo, & Bertrand, 2001, p. 554). Consequently, they can provide an environment to help address the drowning disparity through aquatic opportunities and activities as well as the development of African American aquatic professionals as role models.

Although HBCUs are seemingly an ideal learning environment to implement aquatics programming with a history of doing so, nearly all HBCUs have discontinued their varsity NCAA swim programs. In 2016, the North Carolina A&T swimming program disbanded, leaving Howard University as the only HBCU with a varsity NCAA swim team (Steinberg, 2016).

### **Purpose**

As a response to Waller & Norwood's (2011) call to engage African Americans' in an aquatic lifestyle, Rawlins (2018) acknowledges the importance of community collaborations toward cultural inclusion and a culturally conscious lens. The purpose of this study was to assess the current availability of aquatic programs at HBCUs. Researchers used a brief Qualtrics survey (Appendix A) to gather data. The primary research questions were as follows:

1. What is the aquatics programming history of Historically Black Colleges and Universities?
2. What is the correlation between competitive swim programs (beginning, ending, and/or continuing) to the continuation of community swim programs, and academic aquatic programs?

### **Methodology**

#### **Participants**

This study began with previously established contacts in the Diversity In Aquatics network. Researchers used a snowballing technique to start recruitment. In other words, a list of Diversity In Aquatics contacts were asked to complete the survey and provide contact information for other institutions.

Next, researchers utilized data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.) indicates that there were 102 HBCUs nationwide in the

summer of 2018 (“The NCES Fast Facts Tool provides quick answers to many education questions National Center for Education Statistics,” n.d.). Utilizing the list of 102 HBCUs provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.), the researchers began compiling contact information for each college and/or university. The process continued with an online search of each facility individually to document the institutions' web address. Once a web address was procured, researchers used keywords to search for aquatics information.

Keywords included but were not limited to, aquatics, recreation, and swim lessons. This process produced additional contact information from Alumni Associations, Student Life Divisions, Aquatics Coordinators, Recreation Professionals, and Athletic Directors. The initial email (Appendix B) was sent out on June 27, 2018. After giving potential respondents nearly a month to respond, the email was resent on July 24, 2018. A third and final email was sent on August 22, 2018.

**Table 1**

*List of participating HBCUs and their locations*

<u>Institution</u>	<u>Location</u>
Alabama A&M University	Montgomery, Alabama
Barber-Scotia College	Concord, North Carolina
Bennett College	Columbia, South Carolina
Bethune-Cookman University	Daytona Beach, Florida
Bluefield State College	Bluefield, West Virginia
Bowie State University	Bowie, Maryland
Central State University	Wilberforce, Ohio
Cheyney University of Pennsylvania	Cheyney, Pennsylvania
Clinton College	Rock Hill, South Carolina
Coppin State University	Baltimore, Maryland
Delaware State University	Dover, Delaware
Dillard University	New Orleans, Louisiana
Elizabeth City State University	Elizabeth City, North Carolina
Florida A&M University	Tallahassee, Florida
Florida Memorial University	Miami Gardens, Florida
Grambling State University	Grambling, Louisiana
Hampton University	Hampton, Virginia
Howard University	Washington, DC
Huston-Tillotson University	Austin, Texas

Jackson State University	Jackson, Mississippi
Jarvis Christian College	Hawkins, Texas
Johnson C. Smith University	Charlotte, North Carolina
Lincoln University of Missouri	Jefferson City, Missouri
Morehouse College	Atlanta, Georgia
Morgan State University	Baltimore, Maryland
Norfolk State University	Norfolk, Virginia
North Carolina Central University	Durham, North Carolina
Oakwood University	Huntsville, Alabama
Paul Quinn College	Dallas, Texas
Prairie View A&M University	Prairie View, Texas
Savannah State University	Savannah, Georgia
Shaw University	Raleigh, North Carolina
Southern University and A&M College	Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Southern University at New Orleans	New Orleans, Louisiana
Spelman College	Atlanta, Georgia
Tennessee State University	Nashville, Tennessee
Tuskegee University	Tuskegee, Alabama
University of the District of Columbia	Washington, DC
West Virginia State University	Institute, West Virginia
Winston-Salem State University	Winston-Salem, North Carolina

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### Results

Based on the return of 39 online surveys (not including one incomplete survey), institutions were asked to provide institutional knowledge in 4 areas of reference: Competitive Swimming, Aquatics Community Programming, Aquatics Academic Course Offering, and the Re/establishment of Academic Aquatic Courses. The search yielded a list of 102 HBCUs eligible for this study. A Qualtrics survey was sent to all 102 HBCUs on June 27, 2018 and remained open until August 22 of the same year. The researchers were pleased with the 38%, 39 out of 102, response rate. Baruch & Holtom (2008) note that to obtain data from organizations averages “35.7 percent with a standard deviation of 18.8 percent...” (p. 1139). The data set generated from the survey was exported into an Excel spreadsheet. Researchers used formulas in Excel to generate the descriptive statistics to analyze the data set.

As illustrated in Table 2, 17 of the 39 HBCUs reported that they have a history of varsity collegiate competitive swim programs. Table 2 also depicts 62% or 24 respondents to this survey, do not have a community swim program at their institutions.

**Table 2**

*Swim programming at HBCUs*

*Competitive swim program	Yes	17
	No	22
Community swim program	Yes	15
	No	24

\* *Historically or currently*

The researchers questioned how many respondents that have or had a competitive swim program also have community swim programs. This data was exported from an Excel spreadsheet into SPSS. Researchers used SPSS to test for a correlation and/or significant significance. The results determined that there was no correlation or statistical significance to suggest a link between competitive NCAA programs with community programs. Table 3 indicates that of the 17 HBCUs that once or currently have a varsity competitive swimming program, 6 (35.3%) currently offer community swim programs, and 11 (64.7%) do not offer any community programs.

**Table 3**

*HBCU Competitive Swim and Community Swim Program Correlations*

	Competitive Swim Program (n=17) %(n)	No Competitive Swim Program (n=22) %(n)	Overall (n=39)
Have a Community Swim Program	6 (35.3%)	9 (41.0%)	15 (35.71%)
No Community Swim Program	11 (64.7%)	13 (59.1%)	24 (61.6%)
Totals (N=39)	17 (100%)	22 (100%)	39 (100%)

Opportunities for swim classes are portrayed in Table 4, where 31 percent of HBCUs offer swim classes to the student, staff, and/or faculty only. An additional 31 offer swim classes to the student, staff, and/or faculty as well as the public. Lastly, approximately 38 percent of HBCUs do not offer swim lessons at all.

**Table 4**  
*HBCU Aquatics Class Offerings*

Swim Class Offered to...	Competitive Swim Program (n=17) %(n)	No Competitive Swim Program (n=22) %(n)	Overall (n=39)
*campus community	5 (29.4%)	8 (36.4%)	13 (31.0%)
To *campus community and public	7 (41.2%)	5 (22.7%)	13 (31.0%)
No class offerings	5 (29.4%)	9 (41.0%)	16 (38.1%)
Totals (N=39)	17	22	

\* The campus community includes students, staff, and/or faculty at the institution.

For this study, aquatic courses include, but are not limited to, swimming, diving, and/or other water sports. Aquatics courses are differentiated from classes. Classes are non-academic and do not meet the requirements, nor are they counted towards graduation. Students enrolled in an aquatic course will receive college credits towards graduation for successful completion of the course. Out of all respondents, 20 institutions (51 percent) reported students could take aquatics courses for college credit.

The researchers of this study asked if the respondents wanted to build or establish aquatics programming. As seen in Table 5, 49 percent of respondents indicated a desire to establish/build an aquatics program at this time. Unfortunately, 36 percent indicated they do not want to establishing or expanding aquatics programming at this time. Furthermore, 15 percent had absolutely no interest in establishing or expanding aquatics programming at all.



**Table 5**

Are you looking to establish or build your current aquatics program?

Desire to build program	Competitive Swim Program (n=17) %(n)	No Competitive Swim Program (n=22) %(n)	Overall (n=39)
Yes	8 (47.1%)	11 (50%)	19 (48.7%)
Not at this time	6 (35.3%)	8 (36.4%)	14 (35.9%)
No	3 (17.6%)	3 (13.6%)	6 (15.4%)
Totals (N=39)	17 (100%)	22 (100%)	39 (100%)

### Discussion

In an attempt to understand the role HBCUs are already playing in providing aquatic programming opportunities, researchers of this study asked the following:

1. What is the aquatic history of Historically Black Colleges and Universities?
2. What is the correlation between varsity NCAA swim programs (beginning, ending, and/or continuing) to the continuation of community swim programs, and academic aquatic programming?

### Aquatics History

The results of this study indicate that there is inconsistent institutional knowledge about competitive and non-competitive swimming programs from the past to the present. Researchers found at least two instances where a respondent incorrectly identified their school as never having a competitive aquatics program. In such instances, institutional contacts and previous knowledge were used to rectify respondent answers. This could have resulted from the high rate of turnover at leadership positions at HBCUs (Commodore & Owens, 2018). Consequently, some of the histories of aquatics programming has been lost. Current literature regarding swim programs at HBCUs is minimal, which calls for an increase awareness and research to address the drowning disparity impacting African American communities.

Literature notes that historical barriers to aquatic facilities and programs contributed to a drowning disparity in African American communities (Anderson, 2017). Our study provided data to suggest 62 percent of HBCUs offer swim classes to the campus community. Furthermore, 31 percent extend this invitation to the public. Identifying a network of HBCUs that offer aquatics programming is a critical step in reestablishing a history of aquatics programming at HBCUs.

### Competitive NCAA and Community Programs

Although HBCUs may be an ideal place to implement aquatics programming

(Rawlins, 2018), reportedly 56% of HBCUs never formed a competitive swim team. Furthermore, 16 out of the 17 institutions who reported having a competitive swim team closed their program. Today, Howard University is the only HBCU with a varsity swim team (Steinbergh, 2016). The present study found that 17 universities, 44% of respondents, had collegiate NCAA swim programs. Of the 17 universities that had varsity swim programs, six currently have community-based aquatics programs.

Varsity programs have quickly faded from the institutional memory at HBCUs. After North Carolina A&T varsity swim program disbanded in 2016, Howard University as the only HBCU with a varsity swim team (Steinbergh, 2016). Additionally, only Norfolk State reported having a swim club. Although varsity NCAA swim programs do not generate substantial financial gain (Belson, 2009), the potential effect of community-based aquatics programming within African American Communities may be invaluable. However, this study did not yield significant statistical evidence to suggest a correlation between a history of competitive swim programs and current community swim programs at HBCUs. This suggest a NCAA program is not necessary to establish a learn to swim program.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Despite the best efforts of the researchers, the implementation of this study produced at least two limitations. The results of this study were impacted by two categories of these limitations, the recruitment process, and institutional memory. First, approximately 12 institutions did not receive an opportunity to complete the survey. This number was derived by the emails returned as undeliverable. By choosing to survey over the summer may have yielded fewer results than another time in the year. Secondly, this study lacked evidence to support a correlation between NCAA swim programs and the continuation of community swim programs. The lack of evidence may be a result of miss reporting. Accurate reporting could support the need for competitive swim programs.

Future research should validate the findings in this study by contacting the institutions archivist and/or the Alumni Association at each of the 39 HBCUs that participated in this study and attempting to reconnect with the remaining institutions. By obtaining past aquatic programming information, it is the researchers' goal to establish a historical account of institutional swimming history, which has been omitted.

### **Conclusions**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016) reports access to swimming pools, the lack of desire to learn to swim, and disinterest in water-

related recreational activities may contribute to the racial differences in drowning rates. Waller and Norwood (2011) called for African American communities to ameliorate the swimming gap and lesson may improve the disparity of drowning. HBCUs are a big part of the African American community. Despite the well documented drowning disparity, little is known about the collective effort of HBCUs in addressing the drowning epidemic (Rawlins, 2018).

Historical factors limit the number of African American aquatic professionals. Without African Americans in leadership positions as role models in aquatics and making aquatic strides within the African American community, the drowning disparity continues (Anderson, 2017). Most importantly, 49 percent of participants indicated a desire to build or expand aquatics programming. The drowning disparity is a result of a cycle that includes historical barriers that denied many African Americans' access to aquatic facilities and programming (Anderson, 2017). Identifying aquatics programming at HBCUs is a critical step in addressing the drowning disparity.

Maintaining aquatics programming with community leaders is key to addressing the drowning disparity within the African American community. As suggested in Anderson (2017) with the proper implementation of aquatic programs reflective of the cultural demographic in leadership positions, the scarcity of visibility transitions into a "norm" rather than a phenomena.

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### **Appendix A: HBCU Aquatics Survey**

#### **Demographic Information**

1. Name of Institution  
<Free text Field>

#### **Competitive Swimming Information**

2. Does or did your institution have a competitive swim team?  
Yes  
No
3. If yes, please provide dates of program (include discontinuation and return of program). If no, please type N/A.  
<Free text Field>

#### **Community Programming**

4. Do you have a community swim program?  
Yes  
No
5. Do you currently offer swim classes?  
Yes, to campus community (students, staff and faculty) only  
Yes, public only  
Yes, swim classes are offered to students and the public  
No
6. Can students take aquatics based courses for college credit?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
7. Are you looking to establish or build your current aquatics program?  
Yes  
Not at this time
8. If yes please list the courses available. If no, please type N/A.  
<Free text Field>
9. Can we contact you to follow up on this survey?  
Yes  
No thanks

**Appendix B: Email Request**

Subject: HBCU Aquatics Program Survey

Dear Colleague,

As a fellow member from an HBCU, we have a rich history toward education and community engagement. To date, the African-American and Latino communities are facing the ongoing public health issue of drowning. Furthermore, there is a drowning disparity between African-American and Latinos compared to their Caucasian counterparts.

In an attempt to understand the history of aquatic programming (competitive swimming, community swimming, and academic aquatic courses), Delaware State University and Indiana University are working together to understand past and current aquatic programming.

The following link [link] connects to an IRB approved survey. Please, take the time to complete the 1-2 minute survey. If you are unable to complete this survey and it should be forwarded to another individual, either forward this email to that individual or respond to this email so we may contact that individual.

We greatly appreciate your time and we look forward to your contribution.