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Historically Black Colleges and Universities Are Vital and Valuable to the United States

James V. Koch and Omari H. Swinton

Abstract

Though Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are little recognized, both in the United States and internationally, rigorous empirical analysis reveals that given their circumstances, they typically perform at a high level. This is the first comprehensive empirical analysis that has examined the performance of HBCUs.

HBCU—these are well-known letters within the United States' 47.3-million-member Black community. HBCU stands for “Historically Black College and University,” a group of slightly more than 100 institutions within the country, which currently enroll about 280,000 students. Such a grouping of institutions might seem unusual to some people, but racially- and ethnically-focused universities are a relatively common phenomenon internationally. They exist in many countries and serve diverse groups including Muslims, Jews, Kurds, and Uzbeks.

Awareness of the existence, purpose, and achievements of HBCUs is not only spotty among non-Black Americans but also almost nonexistent in the rest of the world. *Vital and Valuable* (Columbia University Press, 2023) is designed to address this knowledge deficit. It provides facts—carefully derived empirical evidence—generated from a sample of more than 700 US colleges and universities that included more than 60 HBCUs. It compares the situations and performances of HBCUs to other types of colleges (for example, flagship state universities), a procedure that places the performance of HBCUs in context. This is the first such comprehensive empirical analysis of HBCUs that has ever been conducted.

A Bit of History

HBCUs came into existence prior to the American Civil War. The reality was that Black Americans either were held in slavery or, if free, could obtain admission only to a handful of colleges. Many states in the American South responded after the Civil War by establishing HBCUs that were rigidly segregated by race. An influential 1896 US Supreme Court decision blessed this arrangement by stating that it was acceptable to provide “separate but equal” facilities and services; however, no state with an HBCU ever came close to satisfying this standard. It was not until 1965 that HBCUs were recognized as a distinct group of institutions by the US government.

The HBCU Talent Pipeline

HBCUs are well-known for generating famous and conspicuously successful graduates who range from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King (Morehouse College) to Oprah Winfrey (Tennessee State University). HBCUs have graduated about three-quarters of all Black physicians, college professors, and military officers. They provide and sustain a talent pipeline that is vital to the prosperity of the Black community and the United States at large.

Some have criticized HBCUs for not graduating larger proportions of their students. However, in one of the most important findings, the study demonstrated that this conclusion reflects the use of an inappropriate measuring stick. Once one takes account of the differences in the family and academic backgrounds of HBCU students, one sees that a representative HBCU graduates higher percentages of its students than a representative non-HBCU. Think in terms of a prospective student who comes to campus from a family with an annual income of 30,000 US dollars and has an SAT score of 950. What kind of institution is most likely to provide this student with the environment and support that will enable them to graduate? The answer is an HBCU. Once we account for family incomes and SAT scores, we find that the probability of this student graduating from a representative HBCU is higher than it would be at a comparable non-HBCU.

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Providing Upward Economic Mobility

HBCUs excel at improving the economic status of their students. Pragmatically, this involves hoisting students upward from the lowest income quintile to the fourth or fifth highest income quintiles. Consider Florida A&M University, an HBCU, where at the turn of the twenty-first century, 39.8 percent of the students came from households whose incomes ranked them in one of the two lowest quintiles in the United States. Nevertheless, within a period of time averaging 15 years, 47.6 percent of those students had incomes that placed them in one of the highest two income quintiles. This is especially notable because it occurred in a society that had become increasingly stratified, both economically and socially.

HBCUs Are Becoming More Diverse

Approximately 78 percent of HBCU students self-declare that they are Black. However, the proportions of Hispanic- and Asian-background students enrolled at HBCUs have nearly doubled over the past decade. More than one-quarter of the students at such HBCUs as Talladega College in Alabama and Prairie View A&M University in Texas are Hispanic. Further, some HBCUs (e.g., Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland, and Howard University in Washington, DC) enroll substantial numbers of international students, who relish these institutions' cosmopolitan atmospheres.

HBCUs Are “Places to Be”

The influence of HBCUs on US society extends well beyond graduation and mobility. HBCUs are social and economic pillars within their communities, and their events (for example, football games) sometimes draw 50,000 or more spectators.

Viewed historically, HBCUs often presented the only available opportunities for Black Americans to access higher education. This may still be the case. The percentages of Black students enrolled at prominent American universities often is disturbingly small—only 2 percent at the University of Colorado, 4 percent at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, and 5 percent at Virginia Tech. The doors of opportunity at non-HBCUs may have cracked open for Black Americans at such institutions, but not very far.

Challenges

There are several challenges that will influence the future of HBCUs. One is what many now term an impending “enrollment cliff”—a decline in the absolute number of high school graduates in the United States that will begin in 2026 and will last more than one decade. This will exacerbate an already dire higher education enrollment situation: Higher education enrollment in the United States has been declining for 11 years already. This demographic challenge could force some smaller, privately supported HBCUs in rural locations to close their doors. This would constitute an irreversible change. Because no one expects new HBCUs to be created, the demise of an HBCU is analogous to losing an endangered species. Once gone, it will be gone forever.

Another challenge to HBCUs relates to the healthy level of expenditures that they typically make on administrative functions. More than a few HBCUs are administratively top-heavy, a characteristic that reduces the funds that they have available to spend on other vital functions such as instruction and research. This situation in part reflects the reality that HBCUs as a group are smaller in size than non-HBCUs and therefore are unable to realize the administrative economies of scale that non-HBCUs typically enjoy because of their larger sizes.

Summary

HBCUs constitute a unique segment of higher education in the United States, whether one's perspective is national or worldwide. They are frequently unknown or misunderstood. ▲

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