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How to Paint a Better Portrait of HBCUs

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Abstract

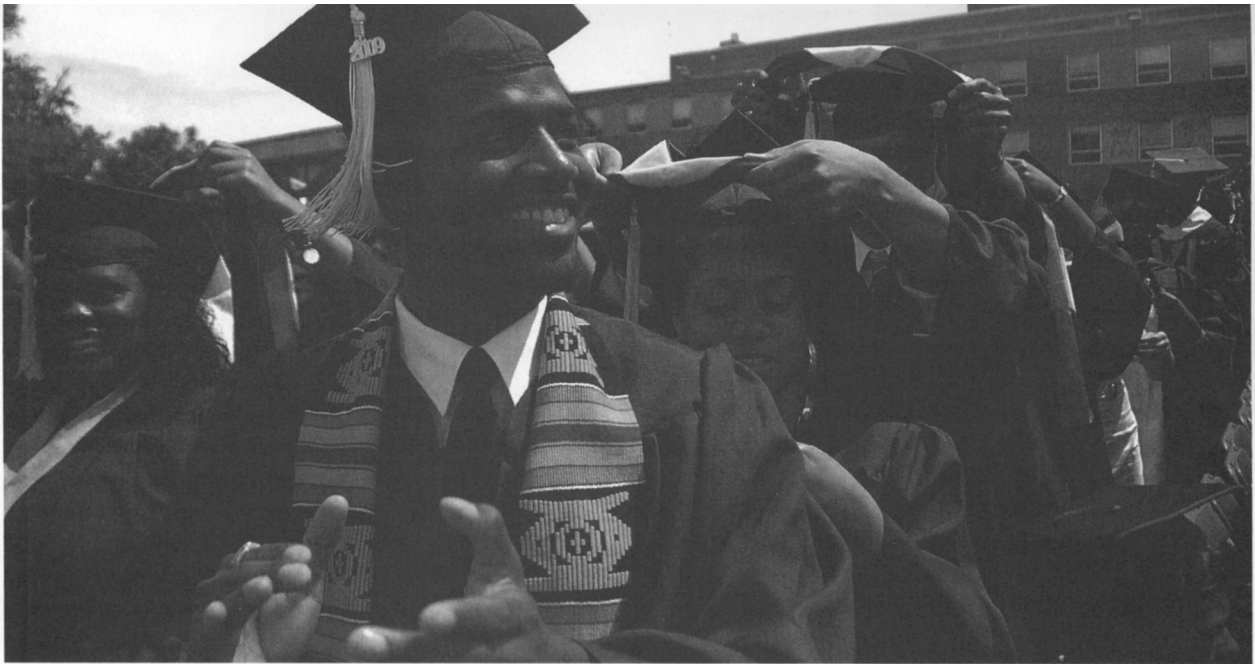
The mainstream media's often-negative portrayals of historically black colleges and universities mislead the public and can even exacerbate problems some HBCUs already face. Those portrayals can—and should— be challenged and changed.

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How to Paint a Better Portrait of HBCUs

BY MARYBETH GASMAN AND NELSON BOWMAN III

The mainstream media's often-negative portrayals of historically black colleges and universities mislead the public and can even exacerbate problems some HBCUs already face. Those portrayals can—and should—be challenged and changed.



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In September 2010, Jason L. Riley, an op-ed writer and member of the editorial board for the *Wall Street Journal*, took aim at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in an article titled “Black Colleges Need a New Mission.” He wrote, “When segregation was legal, black colleges were responsible for almost all black collegians. Today, nearly 90 percent of black students spurn such schools, and the available evidence shows that, in the main, these students are better off exercising their non-HBCU options.” Using outdated information and no

empirical research apart from graduation rates, Riley disparaged HBCUs, not just claiming that they needed a new mission but also questioning their very existence. He compared them with Ivy League institutions, which, of course, have much larger endowments and are much more selective than the average college or university. He referred to research from the 1960s by Harvard sociologists Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, who had barely set foot on a black college campus, in describing the current climate at HBCUs. He also used *U.S. News & World Report* rankings—which, because they are based largely on endowments, securing of grants, selectivity, and alumni giving, privilege wealthy research institutions—to make judgments about the quality of education provided by HBCUs.

Riley's op-ed was extreme compared with most news coverage of HBCUs, but other journalists and editorial writers have made similar points and have similarly ignored the successes of these institutions. Few reporters consider historical racism in the United States and the systematic lack of access to wealth experienced by African Americans and their institutions. An examination of the history of media coverage reveals a pattern of unfair news accounts and shows that HBCUs have experienced intense scrutiny from the beginning.

THE WEAKEST LINK

Perhaps the most serious problem with media coverage is the tendency to report the direst circumstances at HBCUs and then portray these circumstances as the norm. Some reporters, having little knowledge of HBCUs, paint them with a broad brush, not understanding the significant variation that exists among these institutions.

A recent example of this tendency can be seen in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article on Barber Scotia College in North Carolina. The reporter, Eric Kelderman, provided a thorough account of the difficult situation at Barber Scotia, which lost its accreditation and is deeply in debt, and compared it to similar colleges that are not historically black. But the subtitle of the article made it clear that Barber Scotia is an HBCU, and because the media (including the *Chronicle*) do not give much coverage to HBCUs, the situation at Barber Scotia stood as a representative case. Barber Scotia is not a fair representative of HBCUs, however: the institution has only twelve students, lacks accreditation, has an \$11 million deficit, and can barely keep its doors open. Some HBCUs are in almost as bad a situation, as are a number of small private colleges across the country, but the majority of HBCUs do not face such troubles.

The Barber Scotia example is just one of many. In 2003, when Morris Brown College took a turn for the worse as a result of poor leadership, mismanaged funds, and a lack of philanthropic support, a myriad of newspapers, including the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, published stories about the college that equated Morris Brown's troubles with those of other black colleges. The coverage questioned the viability of black colleges overall. Although it is accurate to state that Morris Brown was not a stable institution and that its future should be questioned, exaggerated claims about the state of all or even most HBCUs inevitably influence student and faculty recruitment, fund-raising, accreditation, and policy and funding decisions at the state and federal level. The media have an obligation to avoid using the "weakest link" among HBCUs to represent the whole lot.

Often, HBCUs are depicted as the poor stepchildren of American higher education. As a group, they are portrayed as being unable to manage finances and having weak leadership, unresponsive alumni, and low graduation rates. Some HBCUs have one or more of these attributes, but the same is true of historically white institutions (HWIs). The notion that HBCUs "never measure up" or are a "lost cause" permeates the media narrative, and as a result, the general public, the higher education community, and even some African Americans have negative perceptions of HBCUs. Reporting on institutions that are in trouble is, of course, news, but without stories about their successes, HBCUs tend to be dismissed by mainstream media despite their many accomplishments.

PORTRAYAL OF FACULTY AND PRESIDENTS

Interestingly, most media stories—with the exception of those that are scathing in their tone—discuss how hard the faculty and staff at HBCUs work. HBCU faculty members in the private sector work for considerably less than their HWI counterparts, according to data in the AAUP's *Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession*. The media concentrate on these salary disparities and on the overextended administrators at black colleges. When reporters point to the antics of some HBCU presidents, they will often simultaneously emphasize the work ethic of the faculty. For example, in an article for *Inside Higher Ed*, "Turmoil over 70 Faculty Layoffs at Clark Atlanta," Scott Jaschik examined the actions of Clark Atlanta University president Carlton Brown and discussed Brown's lack of respect for due process and tenure. In the same article, Jaschik called attention to the many years that Clark Atlanta's faculty members had given

to the institution. (One of the authors of this article—Marybeth Gasman—served on the AAUP’s investigating committee for the Clark Atlanta case, gaining firsthand knowledge of Carlton Brown’s actions.)

Jaschik’s portrayal is not an exception. The majority of media articles about HBCUs focus on these institutions’ ability to “do more with less”—a slogan that HBCU leaders themselves have perpetuated. This slogan, although pointing to the immense dedication of many faculty and staff members at HBCUs, can backfire. “Doing more with less” perpetuates the idea that HBCUs do not need as much financial support from foundations, corporations, and individuals as other institutions—when the opposite is true. HBCUs need comprehensive support to make up for past discrimination and to level the playing field among institutions of higher education. Both HBCU leaders and the media need to move beyond the idea of “doing more with less” and focus instead on institutional successes and bolstering these successes with more funding.

Media portrayals of top administrators are also problematic. The media often laud HBCU presidents when they pick up the reins of an institution, but reporters are just as quick to criticize or vilify them if they falter. For example, the media initially applauded the selection of Delores E. Cross as president of Morris Brown College and praised her decision

that HBCUs are rarely discussed in mainstream higher education stories. For example, when journalists write about governance, leadership, or student or faculty issues within the larger higher education context, they almost never use a black college or university as an example. HBCUs are treated as if they operate in a bubble, incapable of representing colleges and universities in general and treated as if they operate differently from HWIs.

A good example of mainstream press coverage that includes HBCUs can be found in an article by Kathryn Masterson in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Private Giving to Colleges Dropped Sharply in 2009.” Masterson gives examples of colleges hit hard by the economic downturn, including elite private institutions as well as state flagship institutions, but she also includes a black college, highlighting the success of that institution’s endowment campaign in the midst of the country’s financial woes. If more journalists would take this approach, reporting either positive or negative information, black colleges and universities would appear to be a more central part of the landscape of higher education, and their strengths and challenges would be seen as similar to those of HWIs.

Over the past five years, both of us have worked to change the narrative about HBCUs in the media. We have explained to journalists that HBCUs are not a monolithic entity: they are diverse in makeup and

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to equip each new student with a laptop computer. Various newspapers and television outlets labeled her as “forward-thinking” and “innovative” at the onset of her presidency. However, once Cross’s financial missteps were exposed, including the misuse of student financial-aid dollars, these same media outlets questioned not only her leadership but also her selection as president. Of course, being critical of HBCU presidents is part of the media’s job. However, we wonder why the media are not equally vigilant in uncovering examples of positive leadership at HBCUs or, better yet, leadership that is neither entirely successful nor entirely bad—the kind often attributed to HWIs.

INTO THE MAINSTREAM

One of us, Marybeth Gasman, reviewed three hundred national articles over a two-year period and found

include public and private, small and large, religious and nonsectarian, and selective and open-enrollment institutions. We have also made sure that journalists understand the common commitment of HBCUs to racial uplift and the education of African American students, a mission that sets them apart from community colleges and other HWIs.

Some HBCU presidents have also pushed back and tried to educate the media about HBCUs. One of the most persistent of these presidents is Walter Kimbrough of Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas. (Marybeth Gasman has blogged with Kimbrough for the *New York Times*.) When Kimbrough read the previously mentioned article on Barber Scotia that appeared as a feature story in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, he was frustrated that a small, failing black college with only twelve students was being highlighted in a

major news outlet. Kimbrough knew from past media coverage that readers would believe that Barber Scotia was representative of HBCUs. Kimbrough called the *Chronicle* staff and expressed his dismay. This call, coupled with Kimbrough's success at Philander Smith, led the *Chronicle* in May 2010 to publish a positive article by Kathryn Masterson on Kimbrough's presidency and to speculate that his leadership style might be indicative of a new generation of college presidents.

FAIR COVERAGE

In order to depict HBCUs more fairly and accurately, the media should provide context for their stories. For example, when making comparisons with HWIs on the basis of graduation rates, journalists need to use similar institutions with similar student populations in terms of percentage of Pell Grant eligibility, SAT scores and selectivity, student expenditures, and endowments. Comparing HBCUs with institutions that are vastly different in these areas—elite, wealthy, research-focused universities—sets HBCUs up for failure. Journalists also need to remember how historical context shapes the challenges that these institutions face today and explain this context to their readership. We are not asking journalists to make excuses for the performance of HBCUs, nor are we suggesting that HBCUs use the country's history of racism toward and oppression of African Americans as an excuse. These institutions have never had a level playing field, however, and we often forget this fact and judge them as if they did.

Another approach that reporters should take is to draw from all 105 HBCUs for stories. Typically, the successes of HBCUs are represented by only a few institutions—Spelman, Morehouse, Howard—and the weaknesses are represented by only a few as well. Holding up the extremes does HBCUs a disservice and does not demonstrate the diversity among these institutions or their full contributions to American higher education.

ENGAGING THE MEDIA

HBCU leaders need to better engage the media. It may be tempting to distrust the media because of past misrepresentations, but HBCU presidents, as well as others in positions to talk to the media (in fundraising and public relations, for example), need to establish relationships with reporters at the local, state, and national levels. Such ongoing relationships will not stop reporters from writing articles that expose problems at HBCUs, but they will make reporters more sensitive to telling the entire story and providing better context. If HBCUs build better relationships, craft press releases that showcase successes, and tell their stories more

consistently, they are more likely to be the subject of nuanced articles.

Faculty members can also play a part in advancing HBCUs in various media outlets. Important research and innovative teaching is taking place at HBCUs. Faculty members need to be more vocal about these activities. They can write op-eds in their areas of expertise. They can also answer queries from reporters about their research. Too often, the experts used in news stories are only from HWIs; this is a shame, since HBCUs have many faculty members who could offer unique perspectives on current issues. In order to facilitate faculty interaction with the media, HBCUs need to create expert databases that public relations offices can consult as they field media inquiries or pitch stories. And, of vital importance, HBCU leaders should encourage and support faculty members who wish to speak to the media rather than seek to curtail their speech.

According to those in the media, many HBCU leaders and administrative staff members do not return reporters' telephone calls. It is much better to talk to the media and contribute the institution's perspective than to have an outsider do it. Hiding from the media during difficult times implies guilt. Of course, presidents need to be strategic in their interactions with media—especially in this era of viral news—but avoiding the media stifles the voices of HBCUs and their leaders. HBCU presidents are under constraints because they lead what many see as race-based institutions. However, speaking out on the challenges that HBCUs face contributes in meaningful ways to a national dialogue and dispels the many myths that surround these institutions.

Those who work in external relations at HBCUs can also shape the treatment of these colleges and universities by couching their institutions' accomplishments within a larger context whenever possible. For example, if an institution has an unexpected jump in enrollment, providing comparison with other institutions or connecting the enrollment to national trends will make that particular story more likely to be covered by the press. Successes are also more likely to receive coverage when they are described in terms of a problem that has been overcome.

HBCUs must stay on top of state and national higher education news and look for ways to contribute stories of interest to media outlets. Overall, they need to be wise to the ways of the media and use an aggressive strategy. They must contribute to a national discourse on "their" institutions and not leave it to the mainstream media to set the agenda. ■