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# What Can Penn Learn From the Nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities?

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# What Can Penn Learn From the Nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities?

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## Talk About Teaching and Learning

### What can Penn Learn from our Nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)?

*Marybeth Gasman*

Most White Americans' knowledge about Black colleges comes from the popular media, with very few having visited an HBCU or understanding these institutions' legacy of educating African Americans (and many others). Yet HBCUs have a rich history. Even before the Civil War brought emancipation to slaves, Wilberforce, Cheney, and Lincoln Universities were founded in the North to educate free Blacks. However, most Black colleges were established by the federal government and missionary associations after the Civil War. Currently, there are 105 historically Black colleges and universities. A Who's Who of Black leaders has graduated from these institutions, including Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King, Jr., Toni Morrison, and Marian Wright Edelman.

Despite the influx of Blacks into historically White institutions (HWIs) in the 1970s—a result of the Civil Rights Movement—HBCUs still enroll 24% of Black students today. Moreover, they are more successful at graduating Black students than their White counterparts. For example, Spelman and Bennett Colleges, both Black women's institutions, together produce 50% of the Black women who pursue science-related graduate degrees. Moreover, Xavier University of Louisiana educates more of the African Americans who enter medical school (and succeed, passing board exams) than any other university in the country (AMA, 2004).

All colleges and universities, including HBCUs, face their own challenges; however, Black colleges are particularly good at meeting the needs of African Americans. Within an HWI, there are numerous factors working against the success of Black students and hindering their chances at graduation. For example, according to higher education scholars, African American students who attend HWIs face limited economic assistance, cultural isolation, lack of Black role models, culturally uninformed staff and students, and even hostile campus climates (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984). HWIs like Penn were founded for Whites and have traditionally operated according to White cultural norms—everything from the art in the campus museum to the portraits on the walls of academic buildings to the readings assigned in the classroom tends to reflect Whiteness. As minority students gained access, these cultural norms did not necessarily change—all students were [implicitly] expected to assimilate to the "White world." At HBCUs, on the other hand, Black students are presented with an environment in which their cultural values and contributions are manifestly honored. Here, HBCUs make us aware that our university is less than universal and that we have a cultural viewpoint that resonates more with some students than others.

There is much that an institution like Penn can do to emulate Black college success. Because these institutions have a commitment to racial uplift, HBCU faculty members and administration take a strong interest in their students' overall success. At HBCUs, faculty members are closely involved in retention efforts and consider themselves retention agents as well as researchers and teachers. Seeing oneself in this role at a place like Penn—with its rigorous publication and tenure demands—might seem unrealistic to some. However, these retention efforts can be linked to good teaching, careful advising, and even one's research agenda. Ultimately, a professor's voice is amplified by relationships with students and colleagues who carry on in that professor's wake. At many HBCUs, undergraduate students are

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involved in faculty research projects, working side by side in an apprentice-like role. Because of their faculty members' willingness to collaborate with students and demonstrate rigorous research methods, HBCUs are responsible for the greater share of African Americans who attend graduate and professional school. With increased emphasis on faculty-student relations as well as better infrastructure for supporting these collaborations, Penn could play a larger part in sending African American students to graduate and professional programs.

At Black colleges, student success is bolstered not only by faculty members but by the curricula they teach. These institutions offer a curriculum that is multicultural, aiming to include the views of all rather than privileging Western White male perspectives. While the push for multiculturalism in the early 1990s produced some broadening of the curriculum at HWIs, much of this movement has lost its momentum. Exposure to diverse ideas and in particular voices that resonate with African American worldviews can be empowering to Black students, especially at an HWI such as Penn.

Because they are accustomed to dealing with student problems stemming from oppression, HBCUs have had great success attracting and supporting other minority populations—in particular, Latinos and Asian Americans. These non-Black students have easily adjusted to HBCU campuses. Over the past 20 years, many of the nation's HBCUs have attracted the attention of White students as well, especially those looking for a solid education and lower tuition. With the influx of these non-Black populations, some HBCUs have become multi-ethnic in their student make-up. And, many HBCUs have hired non-Black faculty and administrators, further diversifying their staffs. Yet overall, these colleges have maintained close ties to their African American origins and mission of racial uplift.

Of course, one of the main assets that Black colleges have to offer is African American role models. The fact that at Black colleges students see so many people like themselves succeeding at intellectual pursuits is one reason these institutions have played an enormous part in creating the nation's Black leadership base. At Ivy League institutions, African Americans are disproportionately represented in the faculty, making up only three percent of tenure track positions and just over two percent of tenured positions (Reed, 2005). Even under favorable circumstances, the number of Black faculty will never be as high at Penn as at an HBCU. However, having a critical mass of African American scholars enhances the experience of African American students (and all others as well). Since it has been shown that having intellectual role models helps minorities succeed, Penn should reinvigorate its commitment to hiring faculty of color (Allen, 1992).

One final area in which HBCUs excel is in providing opportunities for Black students to gain leadership experience. This comes through student organizations and the commitment that HBCUs make in the larger African American community. For example, many students at HBCUs have worked in various capacities to understand the AIDS epidemic plaguing segments of the worldwide Black population. Others have worked to reduce issues of urban blight in surrounding neighborhoods. Still others have taken advantage of internship opportunities with Black government officials to help understand politics from an African American perspective. What can Penn learn? We need to make sure that service efforts address African American issues here in the local neighborhood and throughout Philadelphia. Moreover, we need to involve more African Americans in the design and administration of community partnerships.

Although committed to democratic education, Penn lacks the specific mission of racial uplift that HBCUs have had throughout their history. Yet, this Ivy League university can still strengthen its commitment to studying the cultural universe, which includes African Americans. We often place too much emphasis on assimilation, rather than allowing African American students to come as they are and contribute their unique perspective to campus and classroom. Black colleges meet Black students where they are and give them the support to succeed, emphasizing leadership, research and service. We must do the same.

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*Her essay continues the series that began in the fall of 1994 as the joint creation of the College of Arts and Sciences and the Lindback Society for Distinguished Teaching.*

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