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# Opinion Editorial: Challenging Minds and Changing Lives: How Historically Black Colleges and Universities are Intentional about Educating the Whole Student

ReChard L. Peel Jr.  
*Grand Valley State University*

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## **Challenging Minds and Changing Lives: How Historically Black Colleges and Universities are Intentional about Educating the Whole Student**

*ReChard Peel, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI*

The field of student affairs has centered around the same theme since its very existence, educating the whole student. The seminal documents of the field, such as the Student Personnel Point of View, Learning Reconsidered, and The Student Learning Imperative, have reiterated this in different forms over the years. The words have been different, and over time, different ways of understanding this objective have arisen, however this is the basis of the field. Centering that notion provides great perspective on why Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) add value to the higher education landscape in America. These institutions look to do more than provide knowledge or prepare students for specific workforce tasks. HBCUs aim to build students' character, instill self-worth and pride, and dispense knowledge that will help students become better people overall.

In particular, I have had the opportunity to experience four HBCUs that have led me to this conclusion. Through a study-away experience to Atlanta, Georgia, in May 2016, I was able to get a small glimpse into the world of Spelman College, Morehouse College, and Clark Atlanta University. A week after that experience, I transitioned to Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, for an internship in the Office of Recruitment and New Student Engagement. What I gained in Atlanta, and Jefferson City is invaluable to my career and my understanding of what it means to educate the whole student.

First, these institutions showed me what building students' character looks like. Morehouse College in particular, stood out in this area. Whereas many institutions discuss building character as part of their goals, there were several key things simply embedded in Morehouse culture and tradition that showed their intentionality towards building character. For example, "Crown Forum" is a weekly event held throughout the academic year with the purpose of exposing students to great leaders and role models, as well as providing insights into issues affecting large society. Our tour guide, as well as other students whom we had the chance to interact with, expressed to us that previous Crown Forum discussions pushed students to think about what it means to be a man in society, understanding race and spirituality and more. Crown Forums are mandatory for all students unless they are in their fourth year and have not missed any in the previous years. Crown Forum is a great example of an intentional effort to build students' character, not just through a short-term one-time program, but through continuous molding and shaping of students. That these events are mandatory shows just how

committed Morehouse is to accomplishing something with students that goes well beyond academia.

But it was much more than just Crown Forum. There are other intentional ways in which Morehouse seeks to build character. Inside the lobby of the auditorium where Morehouse was held there was an open area with three walls, each plastered with a different quote by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. People quote Dr. King all of the time, however Morehouse is more intentional by making it a tradition for freshman to enter the lobby space and choose one of the quotes to live by. This creates a special moment for each student who participates in this ritual and creates a reminder of the life they need to fulfill each time they enter this building. This type of tradition strays from typical college traditions associated with fun activities, making memories, or celebrating accomplishments, and instead challenges students to move toward inward reflection.

Another example of intentional development was the tradition between both Spelman and Morehouse of adopting brothers and sisters. Students from both campuses explained to us that during a convocation style event for freshman students on both campuses, students would walk through campus side by side with a person of the opposite sex who would then become their brother or sister and they would pledge to support and help their brother or sister, and it was made known to them that they should not choose to date them. This is an important ritual because it challenges students to find value in one another's support and help. It challenges students to look beyond romantic relationships and find true value in the opposite sex in an intentional and organized way. At least that was the reaction of several students we spoke to about the tradition. These examples are just a few, but they go to show how some of these institutions put value in providing students more than an academic educational experience.

It is not just about building character either. These institutions also aim towards instilling a sense of self-worth and pride in students. The three colleges in the Atlanta University Center (AUC); Morehouse, Spelman, and Clark Atlanta, exemplify this idea. From the portraits of great and notable figures who influenced these colleges on the walls, to the AUC Library, which houses documentation on the Atlanta Student movement, there was a sense that this wasn't just history for history's sake but rather a call to action. There is an intentional connection directly to the students' lives, giving them inspiration to be the next portrait on the wall or the catalyst for the next movement. While in Atlanta, we also saw bonding rituals aimed at allowing them to show their self-worth and value to the rest of the institution. Spelman women bond through their residence halls creating chants and symbols to distinctively build in group identity, and they carry this identity with them well beyond their years at Spelman. They see themselves as bringing value to their small groups and therefore value to the institution. Morehouse graduates distinguish themselves from other alum by identifying as "Morehouse men" and carrying with them a meaning and philosophy with such terminology. Prior to graduation, they identify only as "Men of Morehouse." In addition, Men of Morehouse dress for excellence. Their attire is another example of intentional culture at Morehouse that cultivates high levels of self-value.

Through the experience of the study away to Atlanta, I came to understand the significant ways in which HBCUs show care for deeper levels of the student and human experience beyond academia. This is not to say that academia is less valued by any

means. Academia has a significant place at some HBCUs; however, from my experiences, I have noticed that the knowledge put forth is for the creation of a better person rather than the creation of a better or more intelligent worker. For example, Lincoln University of Missouri hosts a lecture series called “Droppin’ Knowledge.” They bring in prominent speakers to discuss a variety of topics, but the emphasis is on examining history and its influence on people’s lives today. For example, in 2015, Dr. Michael Eric Dyson discussed the history of the Internet and social media and how it relates to social justice. Rather than just giving a history lesson which may influence how we adapt to new technology, he went a step further to analyze how it influences society in the present and how technology can be utilized to create a better future. Learning the history of social media can be seen as an academic exercise and practical to a job in marketing, business, etc.; however, Lincoln is intentional about why such topics are more than just about the workplace.

My experience of HBCUs has been eye opening to say the least, and I think it has brought about a unique perspective on student affairs. HBCUs have issues and problems that challenge them in ways that Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) couldn’t understand, but one thing that PWIs can learn from is the intentionality and cultural creativity that promotes the education of the whole student. This is how HBCUs have a larger impact for black students and sets them apart. Through my experiences, Alum of HBCUs have a special loyalty and pride in their college experience, and it sticks with them for many years beyond graduation. This idea is what makes HBCUs a monumental part of society. These institutions are historic because of their foundations, some during the reconstruction era, some later, but what will continue to make them matter in the future is the lasting impact on their students’ holistic lives.

*Correspondence for this article should be directed to ReChard Peel at [peelre@gvsu.edu](mailto:peelre@gvsu.edu).*