

# Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Bringing a Tradition of Engagement into the Twenty-First Century

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## Abstract

For historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), engagement is not an enhancement of their curriculum but part of their birthright. Founded in the Civil War/Reconstruction era, HBCUs had as their core mission educating freed slaves and other free black people to participate in the economy. Later, during the Jim Crow era, HBCUs educated the men and women who built black communities and dismantled segregation.

Fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, almost every college includes cohorts of African American students, and African Americans can be found at every level of the economy and the society. But despite this progress, the black-white education attainment gap continues to widen, depriving many young African Americans of the education they need to begin productive careers, and depriving the economy of the professionals it needs to keep pace in the global economy. It is to these challenges that HBCUs' tradition of engagement now turns.

## Introduction

The narrative of the development of public engagement at most American colleges and universities begins with descent from the academic ivory tower to ground level, where people's lives are lived and where public policy issues have real-life consequences. The histories of the twenty-seven historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) that came together more than sixty years ago to form the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), and of the thirty-nine HBCUs that make up UNCF today, follow a different trajectory. These schools were conceived, birthed, and grew to maturity as expressions of engagement by diverse groups of ministers and religious denominations, philanthropists, scholars, freed slaves, and never-enslaved black people. Engagement was and continues to be an inextricable part of their institutional DNA. Today, after a century and a half of highly productive engagement, HBCUs face a challenge: How to retain the engagement ethic out of which these colleges grew in a world drastically different—and, in many ways dramatically better—than the one that gave rise to HBCUs.

## HBCUs: The Pathway to Freedom

The world that gave rise to the first HBCUs was, of course, a world in which human slavery was not only sanctioned by the U.S. Constitution but the keystone of the economy. Education was antithetical to slavery. The slave owners knew it and ensured that educating slaves, or even teaching slaves to read, was outlawed. The slaves knew it too. The great Frederick Douglass, himself an escaped slave who had been taught to read while still in slavery, referred to education as “the pathway from slavery to freedom.” Little wonder, then, that Wilberforce University in Ohio, founded in 1856 and named after a British abolitionist much admired by Frederick Douglass, quickly became not only a college but a stop on the literal pathway to freedom, the Underground Railroad.

HBCUs multiplied over the next fifty years, most of them private, most of them in the Deep South, most of them established by churches and religious denominations and by philanthropists. Wilberforce, for example, was established by the Methodist Episcopal Church. Morehouse College in Atlanta, my alma mater, was founded by a Georgia Baptist church. Spelman College, also in Atlanta, was founded by two Massachusetts teachers in the basement of a Baptist church and took as its name the maiden name of Laura Rockefeller, whose husband, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., a devout Baptist, was the school’s major funder.

The first HBCUs were predominantly private for a reason. In the decades just before and after the Civil War, the last thing state governments wanted to do, especially in the South, where most former slaves lived, was to educate them and, in so doing, equip them for economic self-sufficiency and political leadership. For the HBCUs of the nineteenth century, then, engagement with society was not something that expanded and deepened their educational mission; it *was* their educational mission. Each HBCU pursued its mission in its own way. At Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) in Alabama, Booker T. Washington, who had been born a slave, offered an education designed to prepare young blacks to engage white society on the terms it offered to blacks, preparing them for the agricultural and industrial jobs to which the economy of the day restricted them. Washington’s younger contemporary, W. E. B. DuBois, educated at Fisk University in Nashville and a professor at two other HBCUs, Wilberforce College in Ohio and Atlanta University (now Clark-Atlanta), wanted young blacks not to fit into the economic roles assigned to them by the white economy, but to challenge that assignment and, while they struggled against it, to build their own self-sustaining society.

Over the near-century that separated the end of the Civil War from the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the HBCUs made good on their mission. They educated the teachers, lawyers, doctors, ministers, and other professionals who built a distinctive black culture and black communities around the country where blacks received the equal treatment denied them in white society. HBCUs also educated those who, in the spirit of DuBois, meant not just to coexist with the nation's segregated society, but to dismantle segregation itself. The NAACP was founded by a group that included DuBois and Ida Wells Barnett, also a Fisk graduate, and was headed for many years by Walter White, a graduate of Atlanta University. Martin Luther King, Jr., graduated from Morehouse. Thurgood Marshall got his undergraduate degree from one HBCU, Lincoln University, and his law degree from another, Howard University. Charles Hamilton Houston, Marshall's mentor at Howard and after, began his legal career and his crusade against segregation as a professor and vice dean at Howard University Law School, which had educated three-fourths of the nation's black attorneys. Houston wrote that ending segregation would require "Negro lawyers in every community," and "the great majority" of these lawyers "must come from Negro schools." The "only justification for Howard Law School," said Houston, "is necessary work for the social good" (Linder 2000).

### *Brown v. Board of Education: Justice Delayed*

The Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* was revolutionary. But the revolution that *Brown* triggered has taken many decades to unfold and, in some important ways, is still not complete. Over the half-century since *Brown*, important progress has been made in creating higher education opportunities for African Americans. Black students are represented at elite colleges like Harvard and Stanford in numbers that approach African Americans' share of the national population. The University of Mississippi, which required armed U.S. marshals in 1962 to enroll a single black student, today has a student body 13 percent of which is African American—slightly more than the national percentage.

But despite this progress, the educational attainment of African Americans continues to lag that of the majority population. In fact, the black-white education attainment gap is widening. While more African Americans graduate from high school and enroll in college than ever before, they *graduate* from college at a rate just slightly

more than half that of their white counterparts. As a result, with each cohort of students, African Americans fall further behind.

### **HBCUs: Focusing a Tradition of Engagement on Twenty-First-Century Challenges**

This state of African American higher education poses important challenges to historically black colleges and universities such as those that belong to the United Negro College Fund, challenges that are forcing these colleges to refocus their traditional mission of community engagement, formed in the nineteenth century, to the facts of the twenty-first century. Some, educators and members of the public alike, see African Americans heading an Ivy League university and the U.S. Department of State<sup>1</sup> and conclude that the educational playing field has now been leveled and the historic mission of HBCUs has been fulfilled. Others, including some African American college students and their middle-aged parents, were born or came of age after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., and after the era in which the civil rights struggle led the news and topped the national agenda, and see the objective of their education as being primarily self-betterment.

In the face of such perceptions, however, there are encouraging signs that HBCUs and their students are beginning to recognize that while the challenges facing African Americans have certainly changed since the days of Reconstruction and Jim Crow, they have not disappeared, but evolved. Where once HBCUs provided a college education to young men and women who had almost no other options, today they are needed as an educational option for students who want the unique cultural environment and small-college experience, and for those whose potential may have been masked by inadequate high school preparation. Where once some saw HBCUs as a training ground for skilled laborers in a largely segregated workforce, today these colleges and universities prepare students for the demanding careers of the high-technology, information-age economy in a country in which, by midcentury, “minorities”—African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans—will outnumber the present majority population, white Americans. And where once HBCUs reached out to lift up the African American community, today they also reach out to use what they know and what they can learn for the benefit of both their students and the community at large.

UNCF member college Xavier University in New Orleans, for example, has based its community engagement on its aca-

demic specialty, training students for the health professions. With a student body most of whom receive need-based financial aid, Xavier is the alma mater of 25 percent of the nation's six thousand pharmacists and is the country's top producer of African American medical school students. On this foundation, Xavier has built a continuing program of community engagement. Through the clinical programs of its College of Pharmacy, the only one in the city, Xavier works with physicians, hospitals, and pharmacies to provide pharmaceutical services for the city's low-income populations. And until Hurricane Katrina devastated the college, Xavier pharmacy students, under faculty supervision, also provided stop-smoking and medication-monitoring assistance to New Orleanians at locations around the area.

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Another UNCF member institution, Voorhees College in Denmark, South Carolina, has launched a \$2 million program aimed at eradicating health disparities in the rural south where Voorhees is located. A grant from RBC Liberty Insurance supports Voorhees's Center for Excellence in Rural and Minority Health, which provides health education programs, clinical services, and health research in southeastern South Carolina; a health-oriented "Learn and Serve America" grant program; and a UNCF scholarship program for HBCU students in health-related fields.

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Seven additional UNCF colleges, located in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and South Carolina, have also focused Learn and Serve America activities on reducing health disparities. A ten-year grant from the Ford Foundation enabled ten UNCF member colleges to institutionalize the engagement ethic with which HBCUs are so deeply imbued and focus it on developing new programs, fostering academic-community partnerships, training faculty, and promoting the sustainability of service-learning by integrating it into academic curricula.

In addition to these localized, highly focused service-learning and community engagement projects at HBCUs, UNCF and its member colleges have been increasingly called to a broader level of engagement, a level distinctly reminiscent of the calling that animated HBCUs in their earlier days. We live in a society that has

changed drastically in the past decades. Gone are the skilled and semiskilled industrial jobs that could support entry into at least the lower rungs of the middle class. Almost every career whose salary progression will support a growing family, and almost every career projected to grow over the next decades, requires a college degree and, increasingly, graduate training or advanced degrees. The economy has, of course, changed for black and white alike. But the changes pose special challenges to African Americans and to the wider economy to which HBCUs are beginning to respond.

First, because the current K-through-college-graduation education system disadvantages them, African Americans are especially vulnerable to the widespread trend toward careers that require college degrees. Second, because by 2050 a majority-minority population will feed a majority-minority workforce, the widening black-white education attainment gap will increasingly become a problem not just for African Americans but for the national economy and its position in the highly competitive global economy. Changing demographics dictate that a substantial share of the scientists, engineers, biomedical specialists, and software designers that the country needs to stay abreast of surging economies like China's and India's must come from the ranks of African Americans and other minority groups.

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To update what Charles Hamilton Houston wrote at the dawn of the civil rights era, addressing the nation's twenty-first-century economic needs will require African American professionals in every community, and a substantial number of them will need to come from historically black colleges and universities. For one thing, although there are many more college opportunities for African Americans today than years ago, the number of such opportunities trails the need. The student body at the University of Alabama, for instance, is 12 percent African American. But the state it serves is 26 percent African American. Enrollment at Georgia's two flagship institutions of higher learning, the University of Georgia and the Georgia Institute of Technology, is 5 percent and 7 percent African American respectively; the population of Georgia, 29 percent.

Even at a northern school like the University of Illinois's flagship campus at Urbana-Champaign, a university whose enrollment is 7 percent African American serves a state that is 15 percent African American.

Whatever the causes of these disparities, whatever the solutions, and whatever the mitigating factors—often, for example, nonflagship campuses have substantially higher African American enrollment than do main campuses—those who are disadvantaged by them should not have to wait for the education opportunities they need and deserve until the nation roots out disparities. And a nation that badly needs highly educated professionals to keep pace in the global economy cannot *afford* to wait. This concatenation of economics, education, and national priorities calls HBCUs today to engage with the world beyond their campuses in much the same way that freed slaves' need for basic education called during Reconstruction and that the need of Jim Crow-era African Americans for leadership called during that long and dark period of history. And the call finds HBCUs well positioned to respond.

HBCUs are well positioned, first, because it is their specialty. The academic programs, the affordable tuitions, the one-on-one small-college experience, and an understanding of the cultural environments from which our students emerge has given HBCUs a record of higher graduation rates than the African American graduation rates of majority institutions. A 2004 report on "Graduation Rates at Black Colleges" by the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* points out that one of the best HBCUs, Spelman College in Atlanta, "has a higher black student graduation rate than such prestigious and primarily white colleges as Bates, Hamilton, Grinnell, and Bryn Mawr [and] the University of Chicago" (*New Data 2004*, 14). In fact, controlling for college size, HBCUs, especially UNCF's small HBCUs, do a *better* job of graduating African Americans than majority institutions. Among the mostly medium-size schools that compete in the NCAA's Division II, for example, UNCF schools' African American graduation rate is 23 percent higher than that of traditionally white institutions. Among the small schools that compete in the NAIA, HBCUs' rate is more than 26 percent higher than that of traditionally white institutions.

The HBCU expertise that produces that record of success is a direct result of the fact that educating young African Americans—many of them longer on potential than on financial resources—is our primary mission. That there are more opportunities today than in past decades for African Americans to attend majority institutions is nothing but good news. But for these schools, enrolling,



educating, and graduating young African Americans is but one piece of a multifaceted mission. They are, furthermore, limited by law and mandate in the tools they can bring to bear in pursuing that aspect of their mission.

For HBCUs, by contrast, the education of young African Americans and the closing of the black-white education attainment gap are our core mission. Other schools may come to count a majority of African Americans among their enrollment. But for HBCUs, providing the education these young people need is our *raison d'être*.

## Conclusion

From their founding 150 years ago, historically black colleges and universities have been an exercise in engagement. For almost a century, they functioned not only as institutions dedicated to the education and betterment of their students, but very deliberately as engines for the improvement of a community and population toward whose well-being and social integrity society at large was at best indifferent, at worst hostile.

Today, at a time when African Americans are far more integrated into the broader society than ever before, HBCUs serve a wider public purpose. In a society rapidly trending toward majority-minority status, HBCUs define their mission as encompassing not only the welfare of their students, but the interests of a society and an economy, hard-pressed by technological change and competition, that badly needs HBCUs to do on a larger scale what they have always done, to prepare for careers and leadership the young men and women on whom our national well-being depends.

## Endnote

1. I cannot resist observing that Brown University president Dr. Ruth Simmons received her undergraduate degree from UNCF member-college Dillard University, and that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is the daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter of UNCF graduates.

## References

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New data on graduation rates at black colleges: A dismal performance overall, but two HBCUs beat Harvard. 2004. *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 43 (spring): 14–15.

### About the Author

- Dr. Michael L. Lomax is president and CEO of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). Prior to joining UNCF he was president of Dillard University in New Orleans and a professor at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges and Emory University. For twelve years, he served as chairman of the Fulton County (Atlanta) Board of Commissioners, the first—and, to date, only—African American to hold that post.

