

Knowledge = Power

Historically black colleges and universities have helped African Americans tap into the potential of higher learning

BY CHARLES GERENA

Before the U.S. Supreme Court opened new doors to learning in 1954 with its historic ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kan.*, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) played a major role in bringing African Americans the education they sought.

“When black children had no other source of elementary or high school education, the early black ‘colleges’ ... taught them,” noted a 1971 report by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education. “When elementary and high schools for Negroes became available, these colleges provided them with teachers.” When young blacks were barred from most predominantly white colleges, HBCUs “provided all but a very small portion of the higher education available to them.” Even a decade after the Brown decision, they enrolled half of the nation’s black college students.

operating in the Fifth District. They continue to offer tangible and intangible benefits to blacks as they try to broaden their missions and enrollments in order to survive.

A Quest for Knowledge

In the antebellum South, access to higher education was limited. Only the privileged class among whites could afford to attend college, an experience they considered an essential part of a person’s intellectual development.

In contrast, many working-class Southerners didn’t pursue higher education. “From an economic view, there may not have been as strong a push,” surmises Jessica Gordon Nembhard, an economist and assistant professor of African-American studies at the University of Maryland-College Park. “There was such a strong demand for farm labor that there wasn’t as big a place for educated people.” While teachers and other professionals required post-secondary schooling, farmers, textile mill workers, tradesmen, and merchants could learn from experience or through apprenticeships.

As for blacks, they received training to be more productive and handle new tasks as slaves on plantations. Only the favored few obtained any formal schooling, much less a college education. “Most Southern whites declared blacks did not have the mental capacity to be educated, yet feared literacy would encourage escape or revolt,” wrote the authors of a 2000 National Park Service essay on desegregation in public education. “Southern colonies grew increasingly restrictive toward teaching slaves to read or write and giving books or pamphlets to a slave.”



Delegates to the Second Niagara Conference pose in front of Anthony Hall on the Storer College campus in Harpers Ferry in 1906. The Niagara Movement was a precursor to the NAACP. Storer College was West Virginia’s first HBCU when it opened in 1867.

Today, HBCUs serve 14 percent of African Americans pursuing a college degree, although the 105 schools comprise just 3 percent of the nation’s higher education system. Most of these schools are in the South, with one-third

Despite the continued threat of legal sanctions and physical harm, slaves sought to advance and elevate themselves through education. Among those with permissive owners, some gained enough knowledge and skills to take on more responsibilities and be hired out. A few even won their freedom and developed their own businesses.

How did antebellum slaves satisfy their quest for knowledge? Aside from altruistic masters, such as the Baltimore mistress who first introduced Frederick Douglass to reading, there were few options. Quakers and other missionaries opened elementary and secondary schools for blacks in the South. Colleges above the Mason-Dixon Line — as well as institutions of higher learning in England and Scotland — accepted some black students. Only a few colleges in Pennsylvania and Ohio catered to blacks before the Civil War.

Then four years of war between the North and South put an end to slavery in 1865 and blew the gasket of the agricultural engine that had driven the Southern economy. For the next dozen years of Reconstruction, blacks had to rebuild their lives alongside the whites who had oppressed them. Education was an important tool in that process.

“Coming out of slavery, African Americans equated education with power [because] whites who were educated had power,” notes Valinda Littlefield, assistant professor of history and African-American studies at the University of South Carolina. They also saw education as a means of maintaining their freedom.

Thousands of blacks took advantage of new learning opportunities during Reconstruction. Between 1865 and 1870, the federal Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands spent about half of its \$11 million congressional appropriations on helping existing schools for blacks and building new ones. Blacks themselves, though destitute in many cases, also invested in schools.

Blazing a New Trail

Still, education was not equally available to all blacks in the South. While private

schools operated throughout the region, about half of them were in Virginia, North Carolina, and Louisiana, according to Henry Allen Bullock’s book, *A History of Negro Education in the South*.

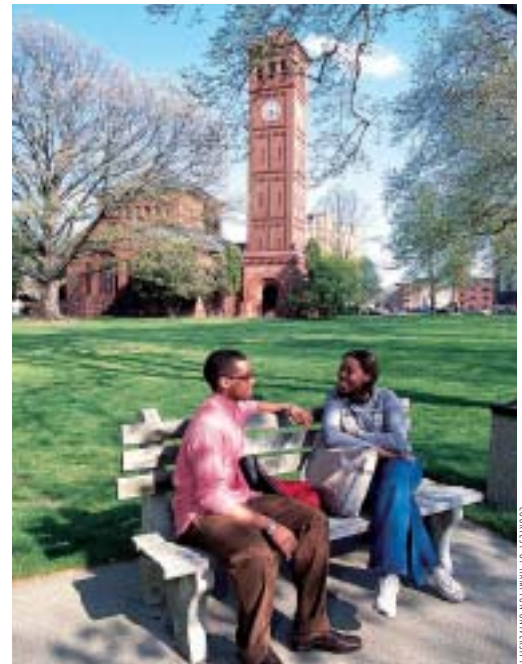
Meanwhile, states didn’t fund public education until Reconstruction, then Jim Crow laws and the Supreme Court’s “separate but equal” ruling in 1896 forced blacks into separate schools. Unfortunately, black schools were hardly equal, receiving less funding and resources than white schools.

HBCUs filled the gap. Most were private schools founded by churches, mutual aid societies and businesspeople from the South’s black communities, as well as by missionaries and wealthy benefactors from the North. They served as central institutions for the black community’s educational needs in the same way that race-specific business districts formed to meet its economic needs.

The earliest HBCUs were colleges in name only. A few schools taught Latin, music and other liberal arts, says Littlefield, but most provided basic instruction on reading, writing, and arithmetic to prepare blacks for college-level studies. “The educational foundation wasn’t there yet,” she explains.

As students caught up, many HBCUs began offering training for occupations that were open to blacks and had strong employment demand. Bennett College in Greensboro, N.C., Coppin State University in Baltimore, Md., and others started out as “normal schools” that trained teachers, mostly female students. Hampton University in Virginia and other HBCUs emphasized agriculture and industrial arts such as mechanical engineering because educators like General S.C. Armstrong, Hampton’s founder, believed that these fields of study were best suited for blacks.

“[Armstrong] presented industrial education as the character-building force capable of elevating Negroes to a level of acceptance by the South and the nation,” wrote Bullock in his 1967 book. “Not only would [such training] render Negroes self-supporting ... but they would make them valuable,



Starting with an industrial arts focus, Hampton University has broadened its curriculum into fields ranging from chemistry to sport management.

thereby giving the South a labor force of great potential wealth.”

While Booker T. Washington and other leaders inside and outside of the African-American community wanted to emphasize practical training for blacks, some felt that wasn’t enough. Several HBCUs — including Howard University in Washington, D.C., and Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C. — broke racial stereotypes to teach law and medicine because blacks couldn’t obtain these professional services within the white community.

Other schools like Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, N.C., stressed liberal arts over vocational or professional training. Their mission was to prepare students for leadership roles within the black community.

W.E.B. DuBois was a leading advocate of HBCUs developing what he called the “Talented Tenth.” These were the “best of the race,” the select group of blacks who needed to be developed in order to lead the African-American community. Still, “the nation decided that vocational education for African-Americans was in the best interest of the nation [and] a lot of money went

Important Dates in Black Higher Education

- 1823 Alexander Twilight** became the first known African American to graduate from college.
- 1837 The Institute for Colored Youth** opened in Philadelphia. The school evolved into Cheyney University, the nation's first historically black college and university (HBCU).
- 1862 The federal Morrill Act** funded state-run land grant colleges to expand access to higher education. None of these colleges opened in the South until the former states of the Confederacy rejoined the Union.
- 1865 The American Baptist Home Mission Society** established the predecessor to Virginia Union University and Shaw University in Raleigh. These institutions were among the first HBCUs in the South.
- 1867 Howard University** opened in Washington, D.C., with four students. With funding from the federal Freedmen's Bureau and other sources, Howard expanded rapidly.
- 1890 The second Morrill Act** prohibited federal funding to states for land grant colleges if they made distinctions of race in admissions, unless there were separate schools for blacks. As a result, southern states opened several land grant colleges for blacks, including North Carolina A&T, South Carolina State, and Virginia State.
- 1896 The Supreme Court's ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*** upheld "separate but equal" institutions for blacks and whites.
- 1954 The Supreme Court's ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kan.*** struck down the "separate but equal" doctrine.

to schools that had vocational programs," says John Fleming, a historian and vice president of museums at the Cincinnati Museum Center.

These differences in curricula illustrate a tension that exists in higher education in general. Should colleges prepare students for specific careers, or make them better thinkers? In the black community, this tension fueled debates over the purpose of HBCUs well into the 20th century.

New Paths Forged

With the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision 50 years ago, the dismantling of the legal framework for segregation began. However, that process took time and didn't immediately eliminate the need for separate institutions for blacks.

"A lot of people think that in 1954 segregation was all over; everybody could go everywhere. That wasn't the case," describes Jill Constantine, senior economist at Mathematica Policy Research in Princeton, N.J., who has studied HBCUs. "There are some public higher education institutions, particularly in the South, that did not admit a black student until the late '60s."

For many of today's black students, an HBCU is still the first choice because their parents and grandparents attended one. "People shouldn't think of all of these barriers as being 100 years in the past," stresses Constantine. "This is the first generation that hasn't faced profound, structural barriers."

Still, now that new paths are open to blacks, are separate institutions of higher learning necessary? HBCU boosters argue that these schools still provide tangible benefits to black students which they cannot find elsewhere.

By lowering the bar for admissions and providing financial assistance and remedial training, HBCUs enable students to attend college that otherwise wouldn't have sufficient money or academic credentials. That's why research has shown that "black students with lower test scores from poorer high schools are more likely to attend black colleges," says Constantine.

HBCUs also provide a supportive environment that fosters camaraderie and a sense of common purpose. This encourages students to be more involved in campus activities and take leadership roles. In Jessica Nembhard's opinion, students are more marketable as a result.

"In this day and age, a lot depends on 'soft skills' like leadership and initiative," notes the University of Maryland professor. "Even if you don't have the same credentials as somebody coming from Harvard, you might have built up enough self-confidence, leadership skills, and networking ability that would show in [a job] interview."

The supportive environment of HBCUs also supposedly helps black students persist in their studies. Several studies have shown that black students who attend these schools are more likely to finish their four years of studies and

get a bachelor's degree than those who attend predominantly white colleges.

Of course, other factors could explain this phenomenon. Constantine's research found that a high percentage of black students who forego an HBCU choose a two-year college, where they are less likely to continue to a four-year institution for a bachelor's degree. Most HBCUs are four-year institutions.

Her study also demonstrated that graduates of HBCUs earn higher wages. However, it is difficult to determine how much these schools contribute to the wage equation. For example, black students who decide to attend HBCUs may share certain traits that make them more productive but are independent of their college experiences.

The supportive environment at HBCUs has intangible value as well. On the HBCU Network web site for alumni of black colleges, the feedback page has numerous postings from graduates talking about having a special connection to their school, sharing in tradition, and belonging to a family.

In the turbulent years when blacks frequently faced violence and racism, HBCUs became safe havens to learn and develop. "For a while, you were isolated from some of the worst stereotyping and discrimination," says Nembhard. "You had the entire community of black scholars who wanted to make sure that you succeeded, whereas in the white universities you didn't necessarily have that same mission and commitment."

A year later, the court ordered that states desegregate public schools with “all deliberate speed.” However, they could ask for more time if necessary.

1955 Storer College, the first HBCU to open in West Virginia, closed after losing its funding.

1958 Virginia Tech graduated Charlie Yates, reportedly the first African American to earn a bachelor’s degree from a white

land-grant university in the former Confederacy.

1962 James Meredith became the first black student to attend the University of Mississippi, despite the school’s legal maneuverings. Resistance to his admission peaked during a violent riot in September 1962.

1965 The Higher Education Act provided aid for HBCUs to improve their academic programs and

facilities. The act was amended in 1998 and is pending reauthorization this year.

1981 The University of North Carolina reached an agreement with a federal district court to boost white enrollment at its non-white campuses, increase black enrollment at its white campuses, and devote more funding to its five HBCUs.

1985 The U.S. Department of Edu-

cation’s Office for Civil Rights and the Maryland Higher Education Commission reached an agreement to foster equal opportunity in the state’s higher education system.

1992 The Supreme Court’s ruling on *United States v. Fordice* found that Mississippi failed to desegregate its state university system, despite efforts to remove discriminatory practices.

Are these historical advantages enough? Higher education is a tough business. Colleges and universities are always under pressure to expand and modernize to compete for students. This has forced tuition upward, especially as private colleges have seen their endowments drop in value and public colleges have lost state funding.

These challenges can be difficult for HBCUs to handle. Black colleges are usually reluctant to increase tuition because it would reduce access; yet they tend to bear heavier costs for student aid, student services, and remedial instruction compared to predominantly white colleges. “For the HBCUs that are already more on the margins, they go down for the count” during difficult financial times, notes Constantine. However, few HBCUs close down because they are used to operating under tight financial circumstances. They also receive federal aid – \$223 million in fiscal year 2004 alone.

HBCUs also have the unique problem of trying to hold on to their no-longer-exclusive clientele. Most blacks still live in the South where many HBCUs operate, but that concentration diminished over the last century as millions of blacks migrated to the Northeast and Midwest looking for new opportunities. Among the region’s remaining blacks, the best-prepared high school graduates are wooed by predominantly white colleges looking to increase their diversity.

Black colleges have been recruiting students of all races to combat declining enrollment. This isn’t always easy to do, given that whites and Hispanics don’t always feel welcome at these schools and may perceive them as inferior.

One success story is West Virginia State College, which was founded in 1891 when the federal government threatened to remove its funding for West Virginia University unless it admitted blacks or created a separate land grant school for them (see 1890 Morrill Act in timeline). The college voluntarily desegregated in 1954, enrolling nearly 400 white students and making diversity one of its defining traits. Today, the school bills itself as a center for black culture, even though 4,000 of its 4,800 students in fall 2001 were white.

Besides becoming more diverse, HBCUs must compete with community colleges that offer a similar hand-up to the world of higher education. An Aug. 28, 2003, article in *Black Issues in Higher Education* noted that changes in state higher education systems have shifted remedial education to the community colleges. This has led some HBCUs to drop their open-admissions status and be more selective. Others like Norfolk State University have partnered with community colleges to allow students to transfer from two-year programs to four-year programs.

What else can HBCUs do? John Fleming believes they can find new ways to fulfill their traditional mission

of meeting societal needs. For example, HBCUs could help supply teachers for urban school systems that have failed to educate black students adequately. “There are problems facing the black community that can be addressed by HBCUs if they refocus their missions,” he adds.

Black colleges cannot afford to be static. They must evolve and venture into new territory in order to distinguish themselves in the competitive higher education market. Not all schools may be willing or able to do this, though, especially those that view their mission as sacrosanct. **RF**

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