This chapter provides a historical and contemporary overview of diversity at HBCUs, challenges five myths related to diversity at HBCUs, and concludes with opportunities for future research consideration on diversity at HBCUs.

Myths Dispelled: A Historical Account of Diversity and Inclusion at HBCUs

Marybeth Gasman, Thai-Huy Nguyen

In this chapter, we provide both a historical and a contemporary backdrop on diversity at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). In particular, we provide evidence to dispel these five pervasive myths related to diversity and HBCUs:

1. HBCUs serve only Black students.
2. HBCUs have only Black faculty.
3. HBCUs do not have lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students or centers.
4. HBCUs have only Christian students.
5. HBCUs are unable to advance our nation’s higher education goals.

We then present unanswered questions and opportunities for new research in the area of diversity that we hope future scholars will tackle.

Myth 1: HBCUs Serve Only Black Students

Because HBCUs are “historically Black,” many people assume that these institutions have served only Black students throughout their history and continue to serve only Black students today. However, at many HBCUs throughout the nation the first students were White. Often, the founders of HBCUs were Whites who had served in the Northern army and worked with the federal government’s Freedmen’s Bureau. In other situations, these White founders were missionaries who went south after the Civil War to educate the formerly enslaved Black population. Because they were serving in leadership roles at many of the American Missionary Association’s Black colleges, Whites also sent their children to these institutions. In particular,
at Howard University, founded in 1867, General Oliver O. Howard, the president, sent his daughters to the institution along with the daughters of another founder of Howard, making five White females the first students at Howard University. The presence of White females (or males for that matter) at HBCUs often was unreported because intermixing of the races during the period of the founding of HBCUs was highly taboo (Gasman, Lundy-Wagner, Ransom, & Bowman, 2010).

Although the majority of students at HBCUs during the institutions’ formative years were Black, these colleges and universities were also home to international students from Europe and China. HBCU presidents often wanted to expose their students to new ideas and people from different cultures, and hosting international exchange students was one way to do this. At Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, President Charles Spurgeon Johnson knew that in order to take his students to a new level and expose them to outside forces beyond the South, entertaining exchange students on campus was necessary. Fisk had exchange programs with French, English, and Spanish colleges and universities as well as those in the Caribbean (Gilpin & Gasman, 2003). Of note, many of the international students visiting the Fisk campus would work hand in hand with Fisk students to fight and challenge American racism, attempting to integrate movie theaters and pushing back against “colored” and “White” drinking fountains. These students served as an inspiration for each other and an impetus for civil rights agitation (Gasman, 2001).

After de jure segregation ended in 1954, but before there was large-scale integration of colleges and universities, the United Negro College Fund, trying to establish a purpose for HBCUs in a post–legally segregated United States, surveyed White students in Northern states to see if they might be interested in attending HBCUs. Although Black college presidents were not deeply committed to enrolling large numbers of White students, they saw the writing on the wall after Brown v. Board of Education and knew that their institutions would be seen as vestiges of segregation—a label that would not be placed on the formerly all-White institutions. The survey showed that only a handful of White students were interested in attending HBCUs, as they considered HBCUs foreign in nature and assumed they were inferior institutions (Gasman, 2007). The integration of colleges and universities was certainly a gradual process, but by 1980, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), White students made up 10% or more (up to 88%) of the student populations at 22% of all HBCUs (see Table 1.1).

Although Brown v. Board of Education enforced a federal mandate for institutions to integrate, the changes in racial composition at HBCUs were also affected by the growth in the Hispanic and Asian populations. The conversation pertaining to equal access to postsecondary education was no longer just a Black and White issue. For instance, Table 1.1 provides a list of HBCUs with student populations of 10% or more White students for the years 1980 and 2011. Institutions with less than 10% White students were
Table 1.1. Enrollment at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, 1980–2011

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina Central University</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>77%</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of the Virgin Islands</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Central State University</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alabama A&amp;M University</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>66%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elizabeth City State University</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>-14%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Winston-Salem State University</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>-14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>84%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fayetteville State University</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Langston University</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harris-Stowe State University</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>81%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Savannah State University</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>75%</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Maryland Eastern Shore</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>69%</td>
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<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bishop State Community College</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>-13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee State University</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>-8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowie State University</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>-</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware State University</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>-21%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Philip’s College</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>-5%</td>
<td>-13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln University</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky State University</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>-27%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelton State Community College</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>-23%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia State University</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>-25%</td>
<td>-6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gadsden State Community College</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>-13%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bluefield State College</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>-3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. F. Drake State Technical College</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Councill Trenholm State Technical College</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawson State Community College–Birmingham Campus</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>75%</td>
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</table>


not included on this list. At first glance, one can see that not every HBCU with 10% or more White students in 1980 was on the list in 2011, and that three additional HBCUs—J. F. Drake State Technical College, H. Councill Trenholm State Technical College, and Lawson State Community College–Birmingham Campus—had at least a 4% to 32% increase in White students. Of the HBCUs that maintained at least a 10% White student enrollment in 2011, several institutions encountered steep reductions in that population. However, and most notably, seven HBCUs in 2011 also experienced a reduction in Black enrollment. St. Philip’s College, for example, experienced a 5% reduction in White enrollment, as well as a 13% reduction in Black enrollment. Why is this the case? According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011),
“More than half of the growth in the total population of the United States between 2000 and 2010 was due to the increase in the Hispanic population” (p. 3), and “the Asian population grew faster than any other major race group between 2000 and 2010” (p. 4). Our nation is rapidly changing, and the demand for postsecondary education is stronger than it has ever been, suggesting that U.S. postsecondary institutions must continue to widen their doors to different demographic groups in order to keep pace with the changing populace.

Today, 24% of students at HBCUs identify as non-Black, a striking difference from 1950 when these institutions were nearly 100% Black (Gasman, 2013). In the inaugural report, The Changing Face of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, released by the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for Minority Serving Institutions, Gasman (2013) reports that much of the non-Black student population growth can be accounted for by multiple regions and states that have experienced significant changes in racial composition. As a case in point, one can look to the state of Texas. Prairie View A&M University has witnessed a 123% increase in Hispanic students between 1980 and 2011, while Texas College and Huston-Tillotson University have encountered a 9% and 19% proportional growth in Hispanic enrollment, respectively. Moreover, the top three HBCUs with the highest Asian-American enrollment are also in the Lone Star State. To insist that HBCUs serve only Black students is to ignore their historical mission and their growing potential to provide education to all, especially those who have been excluded by institutions that are unaware of or insensitive to the challenges brought on by limited opportunities and resources.

**Myth 2: HBCUs Have Only Black Faculty**

Much like general perceptions of HBCU students throughout these institutions’ histories, the common belief about HBCU faculty is that they are also monolithic, representing only Blacks. Not only is this myth completely false, but also at all but a few HBCUs, the faculty was almost entirely White during the 1800s and early 1900s. The exceptions are the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church–related colleges, which were run by and staffed by free Blacks from the North who were active missionaries in the AME Church. However, all other HBCUs relied upon teachers from the North initially, and most of these teachers were White missionaries who had ventured south to address educational needs and bring their form of Christianity to Blacks.

Most HBCUs, again with the exception of the AME schools, did not have Black presidents until the mid-1930s or 1940s. Once these Black presidents, all male with the exception of Mary McLeod Bethune (Bethune Cookman College) and Willa Player (Bennett College), assumed leadership at these institutions, they began to hire additional Black faculty members.
Eventually, the faculties of HBCUs became predominantly Black, offering African-American scholars a place to teach, do research, and thrive (Thompson, 1973). Rarely were these scholars afforded similar opportunities at predominantly White institutions even when they were equally qualified and had earned their doctorates at mainstream research institutions (Anderson, 1997). Despite growing numbers of Black faculty members—the result of more and more African Americans attending college and choosing teaching as a profession—HBCUs remained open to White faculty.

During the 1940s and 1950s, in particular, Jewish faculty members at northern, predominantly White schools were often fired because of real and alleged ties to communism. HBCUs became safe havens for these individuals. Having been ostracized and after surviving their own Holocaust in the United States, African Americans could empathize with Jews and the discrimination that they felt. When these highly qualified Jewish professors needed a place to teach, HBCUs welcomed them with open arms, capitalizing on their academic talent in various fields, especially math and science (Edgcomb, 1993).

Although most Jewish professors found refuge at HBCUs, there were some who faced difficult situations on campus and had to move on or were fired. One such incident took place at Fisk University under the leadership of Charles Johnson. Lee Lorch, a prominent Jewish mathematician, was a popular faculty member on the Fisk campus. However, in 1954, he decided to enroll his White daughter in a Black Nashville public school to test the limits of the new law put forth by Brown v. Board of Education. Because of Lorch’s action, in addition to accusations that he was a communist, the campus was under extreme pressure from funders to get rid of him. Johnson, as Fisk president, succumbed to the pressure and fired Lorch. Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas, then hired Lorch, but soon fired him as well, unable to withstand the controversy or to risk loss of White funding (Gasman, 1999). When HBCU presidents felt pressured and feared losing their sources of funding because of comments made by outspoken faculty, they chose the course of action they believed to be in the best interest of their institution over a particular faculty member’s livelihood.

During the 1970s and 1980s, some White and Asian faculty members came to HBCUs, mainly to teach in the sciences as there was a dearth of Black faculty in this academic area. Once these individuals spread the word that teaching within the HBCU setting was acceptable, others came. Slowly, the numbers increased, and today only 57% of tenured and 64% of tenure-track faculty at HBCUs are Black (Gasman, 2013).

Certainly many Black faculty choose to teach at an HBCU because it represents a service to their communities and an opportunity to help pave the way for a new generation of students. Although the culture of HBCUs has been based on maintaining the conditions to support the achievement of their students, such as the hiring of diverse faculties, more recently
HBCUs have experienced a “brain drain,” whereby the competition with majority institutions for Black faculty has been exceptionally fierce (Seymore, 2006). In effect, this has opened up several academic appointments for recent Black graduates. Moreover, a national study of minority-serving institutions (Conrad & Gasman, 2015) that included three HBCUs demonstrated that there is a push to broaden the hiring search—to recruit faculty from all walks of life—in order to expose their students to more different and competing beliefs and ideologies. Such a push to diversify the faculty is a reflection of some HBCUs’ awareness of a new world that rewards students who possess the ability to work and collaborate with those different from themselves with greater opportunities.

**Myth 3: HBCUs Do Not Have LGBT Students or Centers**

Because of their historical mission, many HBCUs are challenged by a culture of social conservatism. They are unwilling to dismantle tradition for the sake of addressing an increasingly diverse and active generation of students who may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) or may deviate from social mores, such as by dressing in drag (Harper & Gasman, 2008). This conservatism has emerged from segments of Black communities (Cohen, 1999) such as the Black Protestant churches. Both churches and HBCUs continue to stigmatize their LGBT populations and create subcultures of fear, denial, and secrecy. This environment, which nurtures racial pride, creates conflict for LGBT-identifying students, especially as they progress through college and come to new realizations about themselves beyond their racial identity. Due to the historical relationship between HBCUs and the church, HBCUs have been slow in institutionalizing support for LGBT students by having a special resource center or faculty and staff training (Patton, 2011).

Despite these challenges, LGBT student populations certainly exist at HBCUs. The real question—the more pressing matter—is whether any LGBT students are open about their sexuality and comfortable about self-identifying to another person. The needs of these students, whether they are in or out of the closet, have significant implications for college student services (Nguyen, Samayoa, Mobley, & Gasman, 2014). There is no doubt that the LGBT population experiences prejudicial treatment by society, resulting in observed depression and negative behavior, such as unprotected sex and drug and alcohol abuse that lead to poor physical and psychological health outcomes (Brown, Danovsky, Lourie, DiClemente, & Ponton, 1997; Institute of Medicine, 2011). Studies suggest (Harper & Gasman, 2008; Nguyen et al., 2014; Patton, 2011) that the conditions in which students learn—listen, question, and engage in deep and meaningful conversations with faculty, staff, and other students—as well as the conditions that encourage them to socialize, interact, and develop and maintain open and honest
relationships with others must be altered to signal to LGBT students that their presence is not merely tolerated, but truly valued.

In the past decade, HBCUs have been moving toward institutionalizing LGBT support services and establishing special centers to meet the needs of LGBT students. To date, 20% of HBCUs have an institutionalized center devoted to their LGBT communities (Gasman, 2013). LGBT support has come through specially trained student services personnel, centers, courses, and national conferences that spur conversation. For example, Howard University has had an on-campus support organization for gay and lesbian students since 2000. Bowie State University opened its Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Allies Resource Center in 2012. Moreover, Morehouse College is offering its first LGBT course in 2013. The course will focus on Black gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender history and will be taught by a Yale faculty member via Skype. And Spelman College has been an exemplar among HBCUs, sponsoring a national conference in 2011 on HBCUs and LGBT issues. A small minority of HBCUs is leading the charge in addressing the challenges and supporting the needs of LGBT students.

**Myth 4: HBCUs Have Only Christian Students**

Religion is significant to both the historical foundation of HBCUs as well as the individual experiences of male and female Black students. While there is great variety among HBCUs in mission and environment today (Brown & Freeman, 2004), the majority of HBCUs were founded by religious missionaries, including members of the Baptist, Congregational, African Methodist Episcopal (AME), and African Methodist Episcopal Zion denominations (Gasman & Tudico, 2008; Williams & Ashley, 2004). These are all Christian denominations, and, as such, most HBCUs operate with a Christian ethos even when they are public and state-affiliated.

Although there is little discussion of religious differences among African Americans on HBCU campuses, there is great diversity among the student bodies. Students represent myriad religions from Muslim to Catholic to Protestant. Institutions such as Dillard University and Xavier University of Louisiana have large percentages of Catholic students due to their presence in New Orleans, where the Catholic Church is dominant. Institutions in more urban areas, including Spelman College, Morehouse College, Clark Atlanta University, and Morgan State University, have significant numbers of Muslim students (Gasman & Tudico, 2008). The existence of religious diversity, however, does not necessarily lead a campus to embrace different religious communities.

Beliefs and behaviors counter to the dominant religion on campus can result in divisive tension among factions of the community (Harper & Gasman, 2008; Nguyen et al., 2014). However, it is important to note that the campus climates of religiously affiliated HBCUs or those with a strong
religious culture are no more likely to be strongly affected by religion than non-HBCUs with similar institutional structures and missions. In other words, HBCUs should not be singled out for their religious identity, nor should religion be utilized to develop a narrow understanding of their student bodies. If this rationale were to be used to make sense of HBCU student populations, then other institutions with a Christian history such as the College of William and Mary (public) or Harvard University (private) would also be thought to enroll “only Christian students” (Karabel, 2006). We know this is not true.

**Myth 5: HBCUs Are Unable to Advance Our Nation’s Higher Education Goals**

In 1866, HBCUs educated Black students from every background, and even as some Blacks moved into the middle class, HBCUs continued to educate the majority of Blacks, since majority institutions refused to enroll them. After 1954, Blacks were slowly gaining entry into majority institutions, although it would take almost 20 years for any real movement to take place. In the 1980s and 1990s, majority institutions were under immense pressure to diversify, and consequently, they offered scholarships to high-achieving Black students, pulling them away from HBCUs that could not provide the same kind of funding. The “brain drain,” as many sociologists called it, that took place at HBCUs caused many to believe that HBCUs only educate low-achieving students (Seymore, 2006).

To believe that HBCUs are irrelevant and contribute to student failure is to dismiss the complexity of American higher education. HBCUs recruit and educate a highly disproportionate number of students from the poor and middle class; 71% of HBCU students receive federal Pell grants (Gasman, 2013). It is no surprise that Black students, as well as Hispanics, on average, enter college more underprepared than their White and Asian peers (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Poverty, experienced within many Black communities, prevents many minority students from procuring the opportunities—quality secondary schools, extracurricular activities, and testing preparatory services, to name a few—needed to enter and succeed in college. Students choose to attend HBCUs due to curricular offerings, family legacy, or an interest in being educated in an environment that empowers them by providing same-race role models (Gasman et al., 2010). Given this, HBCUs are experienced in addressing this poverty and using it to transform underprepared students into accomplished and high-achieving graduates. Because HBCUs represent 3% of all postsecondary institutions in the United States and enroll 11% of all Black students, our nation and its policies cannot ignore the significance and contributions HBCUs have made to the higher education agenda (Gasman, 2013). In many instances, non-HBCUs are performing no better than HBCUs in graduating their students (Flores & Park, 2013). The performance of HBCUs
and their ability to advance our nation’s goals must be understood and compared appropriately to institutions with similar institutional structures and resources.

Unanswered Questions and Opportunities for Research

Historically Black colleges and universities have existed and played a part in the nation’s development for the past three centuries. As they have evolved to reflect the social and economic trends during this time, the canon of literature and research on HBCUs to this day remains quite meager, yet ripe with untouched opportunity. Although we have touched on and addressed popular myths about HBCUs, we urge current and emerging researchers to develop sophisticated and innovative inquiries and studies in order to push and clarify our understanding of these complex communities. For instance:

- As HBCUs’ student populations shift and grow to reflect the changing nation, how will leadership address the needs of these students?
- What can HBCU faculty teach faculty at other colleges and universities about teaching a diverse student body?
- As the country continues to embrace individuals who identify as LGBT, how will HBCUs lead discussions around advancing student inclusivity?

Some researchers might want to limit their research to institutions that are deemed popular or attached to a widely known legacy of success, educating and graduating the next generation of leaders. But it is equally important to pay heed to institutions—HBCUs—that continue to provide access to education to those whose communities have witnessed centuries of political, social, and economic oppression.

Conclusion

In the broadest sense, the term historically Black colleges and universities could be considered a misnomer. This designation has led society to take generally accepted notions of Blackness—racially segregated and homogeneous, heterosexual, Christian, poor, and unintelligent—to make sense of the culture and student populations of these very institutions. Based on our historical and contemporary review of the research on HBCUs, we know that these notions are simply false. But if one were to look into the historical representation of HBCUs, one would find that the designation is appropriate. It is important to remember that HBCUs emerged from a response to extreme and intentional exclusion of Blacks from established institutions that, to this day, continue to accrue and enjoy the patronage of the majority. This history is not one to be forgotten, but remembered and used to fuel the missions and policies of HBCUs to offer all students an opportunity of a quality education. A misnomer? We think not.
References


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