Still We Rise

Students on the campus of Howard University, 1946.
Photo by Alfred Eisenstaedt
The continuing case for America’s historically black colleges and universities

By Darrick Hamilton, Tressie McMillan Cottom, William Darity Jr., Alan A. Aja, and Carolyn Ash
Historically black colleges and universities played a heroic role educating African Americans during the long era when most institutions of higher education were for whites only. At a time when the society is nominally more open but deeper patterns of racial hostility are belatedly being exposed and discussed, HBCUs still have a major role to play. For many black students, they are safer and more nurturing places.

In his best-selling book, Between the World and Me, Ta-Nehisi Coates observes that his own alma mater, Howard University—one of the oldest of the black universities—was "The Mecca" for African Americans. "On the outside black people controlled nothing, least of all the fate of their bodies, which could be commandeered by police." But "here at The Mecca, we are without fear, we are the dark spectrum on parade." For countless others, the safety and affirmation of black universities has been a haven. The roster of notable black Americans who have attended HBCUs is astounding.

Rather than promoting a self-fulfilling prophecy of anticipated failure by black students, HBCUs offer black students the potential of a "stereotype safe" environment. Marybeth Gasman, a professor of higher education at the University of Pennsylvania, writes that HBCUs provide black students with "an empowering, family-like environment of small classes, close faculty-student relationships, and life without the daily racial tensions experienced off campus."

Perhaps this helps to explain why under-resourced Xavier University in New Orleans is so remarkably efficient in producing black doctors. Xavier University, a historically black institution, has only about 3,000 students, yet leads the nation in black graduates who eventually complete medical school. Xavier achieves this success by countering social stigma and promoting expectations of success among their faculty and students, tailoring a curriculum free of racial hostility.

But with public universities in general losing state fiscal support and private colleges, except for the most elite, getting squeezed, the HBCUs that represent those safe and nurturing spaces for thousands of students are at risk of extinction.

Last year, the former chancellor of North Carolina Central University, Charlie Nelms, wrote an open letter in The Huffington Post to HBCU graduates. Nelms chastised black alumni for failing to give back to the institutions that had given so much to them, and called for tithes, or regular morally bound payments, to alma maters. But this is a heroic view of black financial capacity that is at odds with the sad reality.

In February, the South Carolina State House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Higher Education voted to temporarily shut down heavily indebted South Carolina State University. Loyal students, alumni, and political defenders of the state's only public HBCU sought to save their financially strapped college—among their remedies to save the institution was more alumni giving. The state legislature relented, but the university budget included faculty and staff reductions, fewer institutional scholarships, and proposed building closures.

Ohio's Wilberforce University recently created an ambitious strategic plan to fiscally rejuvenate the oldest private HBCU in the country and avoid disaccreditation, which would prevent its students from receiving federal grants or loans. Aside from the goal of increasing enrollment to generate capital, the university, along with loyal alumni and student groups, has turned to emergency fundraisers.

But do blacks generally have the financial capacity to save HBCUs with their own donations to their respective alma maters? Given the historical, cumulative, and persistent black-white wealth gap in the U.S., this is not only unlikely, but a distraction.

Paul Quinn College, a private, religiously affiliated HBCU in Dallas, has pursued drastic and innovative approaches to avoid financial demise. One of Michael Sorrell's first controversial acts as president eight years ago was to terminate Paul Quinn's mediocre and cash-starved football program. Two years later, the college partnered with PepsiCo to transform its old football field into an organic community farm, which provides healthy and affordable food options in the food desert surrounding the campus. Food from the college's farm also goes to the Dallas Cowboys, the school's largest client, and is served in the high-end suites at AT&T Stadium. "The farm saved this school," Sorrell said during an interview last year on ESPN. Inclusive of sales and fundraising activities, the We Over Me Farm raised about $1 million for Paul Quinn's last fiscal year, which amounted to just under 10 percent of the school's budget.

In the fall of 2015, Paul Quinn College will also become the first urban work college, inspired by the model of Berea College in Kentucky. With this "New Urban College Model," as it is being dubbed, students at Paul Quinn will pay greatly reduced tuition rates in exchange for work on campus or with local businesses. Eighty-four percent of the students at Paul Quinn are Pell Grant-eligible.

While both the community farm and urban-college work model are innovative and highly commendable, their scale is necessarily limited. Creative efforts like these are not
the solution to “saving” HBCUs collectively, no more than they can rely on tithing.

**HBCUS AND THE LEGACY OF RACISM**

HBCUs have been dying since they were first born. Founded by various combinations of the formerly enslaved, abolitionists, and white philanthropists, HBCUs were tasked with “uplifting the Negro” through education. From the start, the task was monumental, the rhetoric lofty, and the funding paltry. Their noble mission has been hobbed by institutional racism since the beginning.

Ira Katznelson’s *When Affirmative Action Was White* documents that, by 1950, the GI Bill generated more spending on education than the Marshall Plan that rebuilt Europe. While this infusion of finance exponentially increased the growth of historically white colleges and universities, the context of a racially unequal distribution of GI benefits along with insufficient Jim Crow-segregated housing capacity limited the ability of HBCUs to accommodate black veterans.

The GI Bill is but one example of several postwar policies in which the federal government invested heavily in the greatest growth of the American middle class. However, African Americans and HBCUs were largely frozen out of many of those benefits, just as they had been excluded earlier from many of the benefits of the New Deal.

Structural racism at the federal and state levels directed resources disproportionately to whites. Most elite colleges and universities were closed to blacks, or open only in token numbers. As a result, African Americans had to rely largely on the few black-serving institutions of higher education. But the capacity of these institutions was restricted by the same racist policies.

HBCUs took in a record number of African American veterans whose GI Bill benefits, albeit far more limited than those made available to white veterans, finally made college a possibility. HBCUs could have taken in many more black veterans were it not for the compounding effects of racist federal policies that limited capacity and expansion. Separate was far from equal.

The historic outright refusal of many white colleges to admit black students, coupled with constraints on the growth of HBCUs and far narrower access to federal subsidies for college education for blacks—all products of public policy—resulted in a significant unmet black demand for higher education. The drastically restricted capacity of African Americans to build wealth interacted with the financial deprivation of the very institutions that had the greatest commitment to providing blacks with higher education. That pattern persists—and alumni giving from a low-resource alumni base is unlikely to dismantle it. A vast web of prejudices, policy, and history continue to threaten these institutions’ survival.

**A RESOURCE UNDER SIEGE**

Of the 100 HBCUs, 51 are public and 49 are private. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that from 1976 to 2011, the total number of students enrolled at HBCUs rose by 45 percent, and that the black student share of enrollment in higher education overall rose from 9.6 percent to 15.1 percent. However, the share of black students enrolled at an HBCU fell from 18 percent to 9 percent. HBCUs became slightly more diverse, with the share of non-black student enrollment increasing from 15 percent to 19 percent.

In terms of revenue, HBCUs collected about $8.45 billion for the 2010–2011 academic year, which is about 2 percent of the total $531.05 billion collected across all public and nonprofit private schools. In the 2010–2011 academic year, revenue per enrolled student was similar for public HBCUs and public universities in general—$21,550 and $21,384, respectively. However, private HBCUs had far less revenue per student than traditionally white, private nonprofit institutions: $39,722 versus $53,759.

Given the persistence of racial economic disparity, it’s not surprising that HBCUs receive a smaller share of their revenue from private gifts and grants and investment (endowment) income, and are more reliant on federal and state government. For the 2010–2011 academic year, HBCUs received 6.6 percent of their revenue from private gifts and grants, compared with the 10.7 percent received by private institutions. Not surprisingly, the private HBCUs’ share of revenue from endowment income was less than half of what accrued to all private colleges and universities—11.3 percent versus 25.9 percent. The flip side of this disparity is greater dependence on government.

From 2010 to 2011, HBCUs received 28 percent of their revenue from federal government sources, compared with...
about 12 percent for all colleges and universities. Some of these differences in federal funding may be driven by a larger share of Pell Grant recipients at HBCUs, whose students tend to be less affluent than their white counterparts. Despite the tendency of black students to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, students bore a similar tuition burden across HBCU and non-HBCU institutions. Students at HBCUs, few of whom have wealthy parents, were also more reliant on student loans. A 2015 report from the Wisconsin HOPE Lab, which studies higher education and student-loan trends, finds that “not only have black students always borrowed more than white students, for as long as the federal government has tracked these things, but the growth in take-up rates of federal student loans between 1995-96 and 2011-12 was also greater for black students than white students.” The differences are especially acute for the most risky loans in the student-loan universe, namely parent loans and unsubsidized loans. Both come with less-beneficial repayment terms like higher interest rates, fewer safeguards for managing long-term repayment, and higher rates of default.

To add insult to injury, for-profit institutions, which are often corrupt and guilty of misleading claims about their success rates, still disproportionately target black students at the expense of both HBCUs and legitimate nonprofit community colleges. (See Mark Huelsman’s “Betrayers of the Dream: How Sleazy For-Profit Colleges Disproportionately Targeted Black Students,” from The American Prospect’s Summer 2015 issue.)

HAVE HBCUS OUTLIVED THEIR PURPOSE?
Black students are no longer explicitly barred from attending historically white colleges and universities. However, black students still represent only a small percentage of the student body at many of these institutions. For example, while 28 percent of South Carolina’s population is black, only about 10 percent and 6 percent, respectively, of the student bodies at the University of South Carolina and Clemson University. By contrast, the nearly 3,000 students enrolled at South Carolina State University are overwhelmingly black.

Despite the promise of integration, black students frequently report feelings of isolation and the burden of representing their race in alien spaces. Some spaces are not only alien, but explicitly hostile. For example, in December 2014, members of the Clemson chapter of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) fraternity threw a gang-themed “Cripmas” party. The university placed SAE on probation in April 2015 for two years. This same fraternity also made national headlines in March 2015 after video surfaced of University of Oklahoma SAE chapter members singing, “There will never be a nigger at SAE. You can hang him from a tree, but he’ll never sign with me. There will never be a nigger at SAE.” The chapter was immediately shut down, but the damage from this egregious case, which just happened to be caught on video, is done. Such hostility suggests that traditionally white institutions should not be the only option for black students. HBCUs provide options for students whose academic development might benefit from being in less-hostile environments.

Students are not the only perpetrators of racial hostility on majority-white campuses. For instance, a 2012 study published in the Journal of Labor Economics by two Duke University faculty members and a graduate student (Peter Arcidiacono, Esteban Aucejo, and Ken Spenner) is indicative of the ongoing stereotype of cognitive inferiority often ascribed to black students by faculty at predominantly white institutions. The authors argued that black students at the highly selective institutions tend to switch from what they deem as “harder” majors (natural sciences, engineering, and economics) to “softer” majors (humanities and social sciences) as a result of enrolled black students having weaker academic backgrounds.

The evidence? SAT scores. The irony is that it is the presence of the stereotype itself that severely lowers performance of black students on high-stakes testing like the SAT (an empirically questionable predictor of “success,” especially by race) in the first place. This is based on more than 20 years of well-documented experimental research of the phenomenon of stereotype threat, pioneered by social psychologists Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson. The authors demonstrate that on high-stakes tests, social stigma leads to exaggerated score differences between stigmatized and non-stigmatized groups.

In fact, this need for a stereotype-safe environment with a “sympathetic touch between teacher and pupil” was articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois 80 years ago in his 1935 essay titled “Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?” In his own words:

It is simply calling a spade a spade. It is saying in plain English: that a separate Negro school, where children are treated like human beings, trained by teachers of their own race, who know what it means to be black in the year of salvation 1935, is infinitely better than making our boys and girls doormats to be spit and trampled upon and lied to by ignorant social climbers, whose sole claim to superiority is ability to kick “niggers” when they are down. I say, too, that
certain studies and discipline necessary to Negroes can seldom be found in white schools.

Although he was not speaking directly about higher education (and not defending segregation mandated by whites), Du Bois recognized that learning environments are shaped by peer cooperation and that administrators, teachers, and students shape the culture and curriculum of the educational process by influencing students' norms, motivations, aspirations, and educational content. For Du Bois, “a mixed school with poor and unsympathetic teachers, with hostile public opinion ... is bad,” and a segregated school with “inadequate equipment, poor salaries and wretched housing, is equally bad.”

More than 60 years after Brown v. Board of Education, segregation is still the norm in elementary education, and Du Bois's words still resonate. There is an important place for black colleges and universities, as nurturing environments of inspiration and affirmation, and curriculum relevant to the students they serve. As Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, “I knew I was literally walking in the footsteps of all the Toni Morrisons and Zora Neale Hurstons, all of the Sterling Browns and Kenneth Clarks who had come before.”

Given the continuance of racial hostility vividly exemplified by the leaked video of the SAE chapter members’ singing, and the ongoing societal presumption of black inferiority maintained by many college faculty and administrators, HBCUs have not outlived their purpose—indeed, their need calls for greater strengthening.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BLACK WEALTH AND BLACK COLLEGES

Despite the fact that blacks proportionally engage in more giving than whites relative to their incomes, the overwhelmingly black alumni base of HBCUs does not have the wealth capacity to “save” HBCUs. According to the Census, the typical black family holds about $7,113 in net worth. This is a mere 6 cents for every dollar of wealth held by the typical white family, whose median net worth is well over $100,000. Even for families whose head earned a college degree (the alumni donor base for colleges), the typical black family has only about $23,400 in wealth, while the typical white family has close to eight times that amount, with a median wealth of $180,500. This amounts to a difference of about $160,000 between these similarly educated households. In fact, the $23,400 median-wealth figure for black families is only two-thirds of the median wealth of white families whose head never finished high school. When we compare family wealth for heads of households who had earned a graduate or professional degree, the disparities are even larger. The typical white family with a head that has a graduate or professional degree has more than $200,000 more wealth than the typical similarly educated black families ($293,100 versus $84,000 in median wealth).

The vast majority of black wealth is held in home equity, money that cannot be tapped for alumni donations. The typical black family has only $200 in liquid wealth (wealth readily convertible into cash), and when retirement savings are removed, the value of their liquid wealth falls to $25. That may be why Charlie Nelms focused on a church tithing analogy, since African Americans are famous for generous support of their churches.

The low black net worth is not due to a black propensity for profligacy. After accounting for income, the best available evidence indicates that there is little difference in black and white savings rates—and in some income categories, the black rate is slightly higher. The white advantage in net worth is mainly the consequences of access to inheritances and other intergenerational transfers of resources, and a legacy not clouded by racist obstacles to education, earnings, and stable home ownership—all of which built wealth that could be passed along to future generations.

Presumably, blacks with little wealth might draw on their incomes to sustain HBCUs. Here, too, there are problems. First, there is the racial income gap. According to a 2014 Census Bureau analysis, the real median household income for blacks was calculated at $34,600 in 2013, while the same statistic for (non-Latino) whites was calculated at $56,300, a figure reasonably higher than the overall median household income of $51,939 for all groups in 2013.

Moreover, blacks already are self-taxing their income at rates higher than whites: Blacks have a significantly higher rate of charitable giving than whites with similar financial resources. Researchers Richard Steinberg and Mark Wilhelm find that “if anything, black families are slightly more generous [than white families] ($1,363 per family versus $1,325).” And the work of economists Ngina Chiteji and Darrick Hamilton, an author of this article, demonstrates...
that if we expand our notion of charitable giving to include relatives and friends in need, the kin and social networks to which middle-income black families subscribe have substantially more need than their white middle-income counterparts. To put as fine a point on this as possible, black alumni are not failing black colleges. Instead, blacks have markedly lower financial resources and higher need.

Social-science research confirms that black students and their families are doing more with less. Research by economist Patrick Mason and sociologists Dalton Conley and William Mangino demonstrates that blacks attain more years of schooling and credentials than whites from families with comparable resources. Yunju Nam, a professor of social work at the University of Buffalo, has documented that the median net worth of black parents who offer financial support for the higher education of their adult sons and daughters is only one-fourth of the median net worth of white parents who do not provide any support for their children’s college education.

Could market strategies rescue HBCUs? Many institutions have shifted their focus to what Sheila Slaughter and William Rhoades have called “academic capitalism,” to stave off institutional entropy—partnerships with entrepreneurs, for-profit distance-learning ventures, licensing of research breakthroughs, and the like. But even if this idea did raise valid concerns about academic mission, how feasible is it for HBCUs? Most HBCUs enroll students who benefit from institutional resources that have little market value: remedial education, housing, and intensive teaching and counseling. Shifting attention away from these resources and toward marketable services undermines the students whom we are presumably shoring up HBCUs to serve. It takes money to make (and give) money. It takes a lot of money to maintain intensive teaching and counseling for students who need to be academically successful, while also investing resources in market activities. Obviously, if HBCUs had enough money to do both we wouldn’t be asking how to save them.

Wealth-chasing and alumni tithing are no solutions. Historically, despite a record of racial disparity in support, government funding has been key—and needs to be again.

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