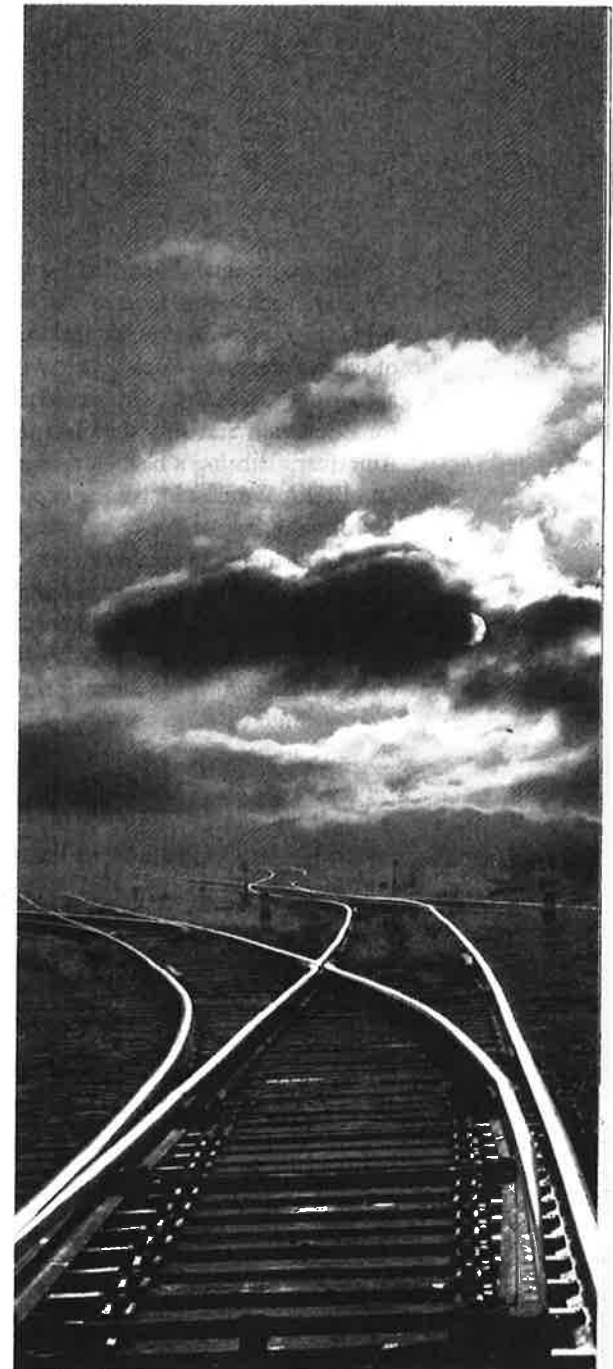


Three Things HBCUs Could Do *to Survive and Succeed*

BY DONALD EARL COLLINS

Historically black colleges and universities face new challenges in the twenty-first century. How can they best meet them and thrive?

Is there still a place for historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the United States? This question has been asked repeatedly since the end of legal segregation and exclusionary policies at predominantly white institutions more than a half century ago, but it is based on a false premise. HBCUs have not become dinosaurs.



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The question should never be about the need for HBCUs. Today, one out of every ten black college students attends an HBCU, and increasing numbers of whites and Latinos also attend these institutions, according to 2010–11 data from the National Center for Education Statistics. In addition, one in six African Americans earning a bachelor's degree graduated from an HBCU. We should ask instead what HBCUs can do to make themselves more competitive and more solvent in the wake of a half century of decline.

In the short term, the problems facing HBCUs are serious. Many remain beholden to the model of the early twentieth-century liberal arts college, a small or midsized institution meant primarily to serve the

highly selective (that is, if they accepted fewer than 35 percent of all applicants on average). Most HBCUs, though, have acceptance rates of between 50 and 80 percent, according to 2012 data from the National Center for Education Statistics and *US News & World Report* college rankings.

It would be in the best interest of most HBCUs to add courses that fit the needs of the 72 percent of their students who, according to the 2010 US Census and the related 2011 American Community Survey, work at least part time and come from families with incomes at or below the national average. These offerings could include evening and weekend classes that meet only once a week and more undergraduate-level

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old black elite. Such colleges and universities offer undergraduate classes only during Monday-to-Friday bankers' hours on a fall-to-spring semester schedule. They seem designed to benefit only traditional-age college students, especially those who don't have to work while going to school. This mindset has hurt HBCUs in the competition for students, faculty members, and necessary dollars.

There are three practical steps that leading HBCUs could take today to improve their chances for survival and success. Systemic changes are needed to build stronger foundations from which these higher education institutions can recruit and retain a more diverse student body. Such changes might inspire alumni to help their institutions thrive by making donations for years after graduation.

1. Offer evening and weekend classes, and expand the number and scope of summer classes offered.

This proposal sounds simple, but it requires running into hurricane-force headwinds. Top HBCUs like Howard University, Spelman College, and Morehouse College have followed the traditional scheduling model of elite liberal arts colleges and universities for years, offering nearly all of their undergraduate classes between 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday and from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. on Fridays. This schedule might not be a problem if HBCUs were

summer classes. Such changes could help raise completion rates or at least accelerate degree completion. They might also increase revenue if the wider variety of courses attracted and helped retain more students.

2. Embrace nontraditional students in college access and retention efforts and create a welcoming campus climate.

Just as most predominantly white institutions need to do more to diversify their campuses, so do most HBCUs. Less-known public HBCUs like Bluefield State College in West Virginia, West Virginia State University, and Lincoln University in Missouri have student bodies that are more than 50 percent white. Other HBCUs could fulfill part of their long-term mission of providing a high-quality education for African Americans by embracing such racial diversity.

Diversity, however, is about more than white students on a historically black campus. Acknowledging and embracing age and socioeconomic diversity would also help create more vibrant HBCUs, not to mention provide new demographic groups from which those HBCUs that are cash-strapped could draw tuition fees and other funding.

Such moves would not be unprecedented for HBCUs. Literacy was a priority among HBCUs founded in the years after the Civil War; it was typical to find men and women over twenty-five years old in

remedial grammar and high school classes on these campuses. That tradition reached a high point during the first wave of black migration to the urban South in the 1910s and 1920s.

For HBCUs—especially private ones—the challenge in the second decade of the twenty-first century will be to embrace more diversity in the age and socioeconomic backgrounds of their students. Can HBCUs dedicate sufficient financial, faculty, and other academic resources to nontraditional students, so that they can call their campuses home? Will the more traditional student bodies of HBCUs welcome older and more economically challenged students? Will faculty and administrators embrace these students and the potential financial, academic, and social obligations that come with them? Everything from remedial classes to homecoming programs should be inclusive, with components designed for the schedules and lifestyles of nontraditional students. Finally, major HBCUs should make sure that many of the courses and programs they gear toward nontraditional students are on their main campuses, not in a branch location or a remote office miles away.

3. Work more systematically with other colleges, local school districts, and progressive community organizations.

Collaboration with communities of color, school districts, or even other nearby HBCUs or predominantly white institutions could help HBCUs better serve nontraditional students. Existing partnership agreements with local school districts could help fill the gap in remedial courses for underprepared nontraditional students, and consortium agreements with other universities could enable graduate students and well-qualified adjuncts to teach on-campus courses on evenings, weekends, and during the summer months. HBCUs could even pool their resources to hire faculty to teach courses across campuses. What administrators at HBCUs *shouldn't* do is hire an army of underpaid adjuncts to teach new courses.



Perhaps the biggest obstacle HBCUs face in seeking to strengthen their relationships with communities of color is themselves—or at least the perception that they have of themselves. Howard University, for example, still sometimes describes itself as the “Black Harvard,” and some Spelman College alumni still compare their alma mater to Radcliffe or Smith College. And they are far from alone. W. E. B. Du Bois’s idea of the “talented tenth,” which he first outlined in *The Souls of Black Folk*, focused on nurturing and developing the black elite. And as black philosopher and New Negro Movement leader Alain Locke once wrote, the “main justification for a Negro university . . . is the possibility of its developing . . . as a center for the research study of

the problems of Negro group life [and] thus becoming a center of counsel of guidance for intelligent group action.”

HBCUs should not approach partnerships thinking that they have all the answers or adopt the attitude that they are simply “giving back to the community,” as if the community needs a savior or an institution engaged in “corporate responsibility” efforts. Almost all universities—and HBCUs especially—already engage with the community by providing tutoring programs, holding blood drives, planting trees, and hosting open houses. How about also working with youth-development organizations to identify high-potential youth in elementary or middle school and providing summer college experiences in collaboration with these organizations? Or working with juvenile-justice organizations to provide hope and work for young people who have lost their way?

Many individuals, and even some student organizations, do some of this work out of HBCUs. True partnerships, though, need to be both individual *and* institutional in basis, treating community members as more than recipients of the institution’s largesse or part of a social engineering experiment. Such partnerships will allow communities to see the value of HBCUs beyond an education, and perhaps pave the way for a new generation of youth to see HBCUs as institutions they can aspire to attend. ■