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Jarrett A. Torrromeo
Gettysburg College

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HBCUs Importance to the Black Community

Abstract

This paper looks at the importance of Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the Black community. It explores how they are necessary in order to bring a sense of belonging to the Black community and how they can grow. They are critically underfunded compared to other universities/colleges but this can change with the sports that they have to offer.

Keywords

HBCU, Sports, African Americans

Disciplines

African American Studies | Higher Education | Sports Studies

Comments

Written for AFS 250: Black Bodies in American Sport

Jarrett Torromeo
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HBCUs Importance to the Black Community

Throughout the course of the semester, we have learned numerous topics about how African Americans in sports were affected by our society. We have looked at several athletes and how they have impacted our cultural beliefs and have tried to make a difference in communities by using the platforms they have due to their athletic ability. But, the main issue black Americans are suffering is the lack of representation in their college communities. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are known to be one of the most influential ways to encourage black Americans to receive higher education. Unfortunately, most HBCUs are underfunded and the majority of America has a lack of knowledge about them. HBCUs are critically important to the black community, through athletics and increased funding they can play a major role in higher education.

HBCUs were originally created due to racism. It was the thought that black Americans must attend a separate college than white Americans that created the HBCUs we see today (Evans, Evans, & Evans, 2002). It has also been said that when HBCUs were originally created the only time they would see improvements to their institutions was when whites would also benefit from the improvement (Gasman & Hilton, 2012). Although they were originally created to try and separate the races they are now looked at in the black community as a more desired option instead of attending a predominately white institution (PWIs). In fact, a survey conducted by Black Enterprise showed the top five schools that provide the best academic and social environments for black students were HBCUs (Evans et al., 2002). The reason why HBCUs are believed

to be a better environment for their students is that students feel comfortable attending a school with their race being the majority. When students are attending a school where they feel they are outnumbered in a racial sense then they will feel more excluded to participate in that school's activities and never get a true sense of belonging (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2018). Also, the graduates of HBCUs are able to be competitive in the field of work they choose to pursue. HBCUs have been able to stay afloat over the years due to their enrollment. Most HBCUs have witnessed increased enrollment over the past 20 years and this has helped them to stay open even though they do not receive the same funding as other institutions.

Although HBCUs provide education for low-income students and numerous graduates who end up going on to receive a Ph.D. they still receive a heavy amount of criticism. HBCUs are required to set goals in order to show that they are indeed providing proper higher education and, even when they meet their goals, critics still say that they are academically inferior and an embarrassment to the education system (Cantey, Bland, Mack, & Joy-Davis, 2013). HBCUs also receive a lack of recognition for the graduation success they have or the standard of excellence they have kept over significant periods of time. Because of this lack of accreditation, several HBCUs have received demotion threats, even though they are performing at a more than satisfactory level (Evans et al., 2002). It is crucial that HBCUs receive accreditation because without it then they are still viewed as a lower level of education. Those who have received accreditation for the work they have accomplished are not as highly criticized as those who have not. Due to the criticism, most HBCUs have to give up on certain majors or

limit the majors they offer in order to gain funding and stay open for their black communities.

HBCUs receive significantly less funding compared to PWIs even though they are successfully able to graduate blacks in high demand. HBCUs have been able to survive because of grants, donations, and student tuition (Cantey et al., 2013). One may think because HBCUs have been able to make it this far without receiving much funding then they should be just fine based on the way they have generated money in the past. This is not how it works though. This type of funding is highly unstable and cannot be relied on every year. So, in years where they are not able to receive the amount of money they need then they will have to make budget cuts. These budget cuts include laying teachers off, discontinuing academic programs, or a decrease in student enrollment. Not all HBCUs are private institutions, this means that some should receive funding from their respective state. So, one would think that those who receive funding from the state are in a better spot than the other HBCUs. Unfortunately, even those who receive funding from the state are not receiving their fair share. It was found that Florida A&M University only received \$130,000 in funding while three nearby universities allocated over \$1.5 million in funding (Evans et al., 2002). This goes to show how most HBCUs are looked over and critically underfunded. Federal funding has been of some assistance to the HBCUs. President Obama made a pledge to assist the HBCUs and invest \$850 million into them over the course of the decade (Cantey et al., 2013). The problem with this plan though is some HBCUs need the money now. If some HBCUs do not receive the funding that they require now then they will experience lower enrollment, faculty being laid off, or even having to shut down entirely. But, if they do receive the

funding that is needed then they will be able to make further advancements. Such as developing tutoring centers and academic resources to help increase graduation rates, or investing in new faculty members to help advance the education that the students are receiving.

Along with the concerns surrounding their recognition and funding another challenge that HBCUs face is the leadership they have. The leadership of HBCUs and the funding they receive is strongly correlated. Unfortunately, many of the leaders of HBCUs lack the qualities that we see leaders of PWIs have. These leads to many problems internally for the HBCUs and gives them a bad reputation when they are unable to solve some of their problems. Because of the lack of proper leadership, many faculty members of HBCUs lose trust in their organization and will end up leaving because they do not feel their needs are being met (Evans et al., 2002). It has also been found that the people who are put in these leadership positions lack the business and marketing skills to help themselves with the higher education challenges (Andrews, No, Powell, Rey, & Yigletu, 2016). Without quality leadership, it will be viewed that the HBCUs are not accomplishing their yearly goals which mean there will be a reduction of funding since the state believes their money is not being well spent (Cantey et al., 2013). One major flaw in the leadership selection that HBCUs face is the timeframe it takes to elect a new president. Most PWIs will elect a new president of the institution within 2 months. But, for HBCUs, this process will take 6 months or even a year to elect a new president. The reason it takes so much longer for HBCUs to elect new presidents is because of the lack of interest shown in the position. It seems that those who are qualified to take on the leadership role of HBCUs do not want to burden themselves with

the responsibility. The reason why is because of the issues that were mentioned previously. They do not want to try and create their own source of funding, and they do not want to put themselves in such a stressful situation if there will be little to no recognition for their accomplishments. Another reason that we see a lack of interest in HBCUs' leadership positions is because of the fact that most of the students who are attending are from low-income families (Cantey et al., 2013). The reason this would discourage people from taking on the position is because of the lack of funding they will struggle to give these low-income families scholarship money. No one wants to be the person that would have to decline a student applying for financial aid. Fortunately, some of the required skills that an HBCU president needs were found in one study. It was found that presidents should be motivated to try and help all the students access educational resources (Freeman, Commodore, Gasman, & Carter, 2016). It is important that HBCUs try to find those who are qualified for the position and want to better the institution rather than someone who has been forced into the position.

A major program for every single institution that generates funding, recognition, and good leadership is the athletic program. Everybody knows that athletics tends to bring in the most amount of money for all institutions. In most schools that have a large athletic program, you would even see that a single team can bring in the majority amount of money into the school. Athletics also allow schools to become more recognized due to the amount of media attention they will get if they are successful. And, a school that is receiving funding and recognition will naturally get better applicants who can fulfill the necessary qualifications of being the president of an institution. We see this happen for the major schools that have successful athletic programs. But, the

main problem that HBCUs face is these major schools will actually steal all the potential athletes and stars that they are after. Before these athletes attended the PWIs we see them at now they actually did attend the HBCUs because they were the only schools they were allowed to attend or the only school that would give them scholarship money that the other institutions were not offering (Cooper, Cavil, & Cheeks, 2014). But now HBCUs struggle to attract the big names who are coming out of high school looking to play a sport at the next level. The reason why HBCUs are not able to obtain these athletes anymore is mainly that they do not have the scholarship money to offer. Also, since most of these athletes are looking to go professional in their respective sport they believe the best way to achieve this is to attend a school where they will the most recognition, and the bigger schools can offer this. The most surprising fact though is that other than the big-name schools across the country most schools do not actually attract large attendance numbers for their sporting events. But, at HBCUs, they average a significantly higher attendance for all their sporting events (Armstrong, 2002). This is important for athletes to note because when they are thinking about attending a school that is not the big-name schools then they will most likely be playing for a pretty empty crowd. But, if they were to attend the HBCUs then they will be playing in front of the entire school. Most schools cannot offer this kind of opportunity. Also, if they were able to increase their athletic success then they will be able to create revenue from the attendance that they attract. Being able to create this revenue will help the school improve on their weaknesses.

Marketing these sports is probably the greatest challenge for these HBCUs. As mentioned several times HBCUs do not receive the same amount of money that other

schools get. But, if they were able to create the revenue from the attendance then they might be able to market their sports on the next level. This would first start with trying to get some sponsors for the school through either local establishments or national companies. All of the bigger schools have the Nike swoosh on their jersey, or the Under Armour logo. If HBCUs were able to put their foot in the door with these companies and get sponsorship then they might be able to attract more attention (“Marketing of Black College Sports”, 2002). With this added attention then they would be able to attract better athletes who will only increase the amount of attention they are receiving. When this occurs then the HBCUs can take the next step. The next step would be for the HBCUs to gain the attention of television networks. By achieving this then they would be able to have commercials and other advertisements who would pay to be on their network. But, this all comes back to one thing that the HBCUs need in order to make all of these marketing strategies achievable. That one thing is funding (“Marketing of Black College Sports”, 2002).

It may be hard to believe, but HBCUs actually do have one advantage over the big-name schools regarding their athletic programs. This advantage is the graduation rate they have for their athletes. In most schools, people believe the athletes are among the population of students who do not end up graduating whether it be from academic issues or leaving school early. At HBCUs, they have actually exceeded the expected graduation rate of athletes. In the state of Louisiana, Grambling State was second in the graduation of athletes, first was Tulane (Evans et al., 2002). With this advantage, they are able to try and bring in more athletes by providing a better chance of their athletes reaching graduation. This is very important since the majority of college athletes will not

end up being a professional in their respective sport. By being able to provide a proper education for their athletes they are able to graduate and move onto the next stage of their life.

The next step for HBCUs, besides the athletic stance, is for them to try and expand their academic spaces and create more accreditation for themselves. If they are able to accomplish this then they will be able to acquire faculty who are more qualified to be teaching at a college level. It has been shown that most African-American teachers, with a Ph.D., are actually teaching in the K-12 systems (Cantey et al., 2013). But, if the HBCUs are able to obtain more accreditation then they will be able to get these more qualified teachers and have a higher retention rate. Also, by adding these types of teachers who have a Ph.D. they would bring more accreditation to the HBCUs. It has been frequently said that HBCUs are inferior compared to other institutions when this is not true. Also, by adding more professors they would be expanding the types of majors they have to offer at HBCUs. Earlier it was mentioned that most HBCUs have had to cancel several major programs due to the lack of funding or qualifications of the professors. By bringing in the extra professors who have more qualifications then they would be able to bring back some of these classes that had to be canceled previously. But, if they were able to obtain these teachers then people will start giving HBCUs the respect and recognition that they deserve.

If they were able to obtain this type of recognition then the endowment and funding would be increased. This would increase because the state would be the first ones to see that HBCUs are making improvements to their academic spaces and in response, they will give them more money that way they can continue to grow. Also,

because they are gaining more recognition the number of donations they receive would also increase. With the increase in their endowment size from this influx of money, the enrollment would naturally increase as well (Cantey et al., 2013). Of course, with an increase in enrollment, they would be gaining more money through tuition. And they would be able to give more financial aid to those who need it because they are obtaining more money. If HBCUs are able to obtain this recognition then virtually everything else would fall in place for them. They would eventually be able to obtain the funding they need and they would inevitably become a more respected institution. Finally, once HBCUs are able to achieve all of this success they would be able to get the leadership that they desperately need. Some may argue that it should really start with this step. They would not be wrong. But, as mentioned earlier it is difficult for HBCUs to obtain the proper leadership they need because of the previous issues mentioned. If they are also able to obtain this leadership then the staff of the college would have more confidence in the future of the career. With this boost of confidence, it would also attract more qualified teachers. Another way they could possibly obtain the proper leadership they need earlier is by the state, or government, assigning qualified presidents to HBCUs. If this were to happen then they would be able to get a head start and help solve some of the issues they have. The problem with this method is by doing this it would usually put someone in a position they do not want to be in. When this happens then the people who are forced into the position usually do not give it their best effort and end up quitting soon after being assigned. This is why they need to address some of the problems before obtaining the leadership they need. So, if they were able

to accomplish the much-needed recognition then they would finally be able to gain the leadership that they need.

HBCUs are one of the more important aspects of the black community. Unfortunately, they were virtually designed and set-up for failure. But, they have been able to gain enrollment from their surrounding communities and enough donations to stay afloat for this long. Although they still suffer issues such as poor funding and inadequate leadership they are still able to succeed and they can actually get past these setbacks. If HBCUs are able to receive the proper recognition they need then they will be able to get more funding from their respective states, or through donations, and then they will be able to get the proper leadership they need. They are also able to use their athletic programs to their advantage and build upon what they have in order to help solve some of their other issues. It has been seen in several cases that these communities rally around their local HBCUs. By having them they are a good way to engage in the local community. Also, by having them being engaged in the local community then they are able to attract more people to attend their institution. The more people who receive higher education is always beneficial for our economy since it would create a more competitive job market and allow low-income families to have the same opportunities as others. HBCUs are critical to the black communities in America and without them then most of these low-income families would not be able to receive the higher education that they deserve.

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