

## ***Decision Making in Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Defining the Governance Context \****

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*Decision-making practices at historically Black colleges and universities are the subject of healthy criticism. However, many conclusions are drawn in the absence of governance research on HBCUs. To better understand and evaluate the appropriateness of decision-making in these institutions, I use case study data to define three key contextual aspects of an HBCU that influence governance: (a) faculty traditions; (b) the paradox of mission; and (c) a racialized climate. Given these findings, I consider alternative theoretical frames to more accurately assess governance structures and decision-making practices in HBCUs.*

At a time when affirmative action in higher education is under attack, considering the health of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) is increasingly important (Brown & Freeman, 2004). Since their inception, these institutions have collectively championed access and opportunity for African Americans (Allen & Jewell, 2002). On a larger scale HBCUs serve an important educational, economic, and social function in America by sustaining a pipeline of educated African Americans (Brown & Davis, 2001). Additionally, African Americans who attend HBCUs demonstrate greater satisfaction with their college experience, academic achievement, and developmental gains when compared to those who attend predominately White institutions (Allen, 1992; Davis, 1991; Fleming, 1984). Although HBCUs represent just 3% of all institutions of higher education, they grant roughly 25% of baccalaureate degrees awarded to African Americans (Nettles & Perna, 1997).

Despite the accomplishments of HBCUs they are the subjects of considerable criticism within the higher education community. Presidents of historically Black colleges and universities are often accused of being autocratic and the mission of these institutions is said to compromise academic quality while upholding segregation (Hamilton, 2002). Moreover, financial instability, accreditation challenges, and questionable governance structures are constant quandaries associated with HBCUs.

However, the mission and plight of HBCUs situates them in distinctly different contexts that potentially affect campus decision-making and leadership practices (Drewry & Doermann, 2001). Decision-making contexts can be affected by structural, cultural, or situational distinctions that leaders of these institutions must take into account. If governance is the structure by which decisions are made determining the direction of a campus, then research on what affects decision making is important. While the distinctiveness of HBCUs is widely recognized, defining what contextual aspects potentially affect decision-making practices has not been a focal point of

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scholarship. As a way to understand the challenges associated with governance in HBCUs, this article utilizes a case study to define the decision-making context at one historically Black university. In doing so, those concerned with the status of HBCUs may be able to appraise leadership practices and institutional effectiveness. To begin, I frame the discussion by defining governance and decision making from the research literature. In the following sections, I outline the case study, define aspects of the decision-making context, and consider the ways governance is affected.

### DEFINING GOVERNANCE AND DECISION-MAKING

In higher education the phrase “shared governance” is often used to suggest collaborative management of an institution (Ramo, 1998). However, the phrase can connote multiple and sometimes conflicting ideas about how a campus should make decisions. In a recent national study, Tierney and Minor (2003) found that campus constituents define shared governance in three ways:

1. Collaborative—university constituents collectively make decisions about the direction of the campus.
2. Stratified—systems of governance where certain constituents make decisions according to decision type (e.g., faculty decide on curriculum and the administration determines policy and budgetary issues).
3. Consultative—governance structures in which the president reserves decision-making authority with the expectation that they consult with university constituents before making decisions.

As stated earlier, for many institutions shared governance remains an ambiguous phrase that can take on different meanings at various times (Hamilton, 1999; Keller, 2001). For this study, I define governance as the configuration of decision-making bodies (i.e., the structure that grants authority). The organization of governing bodies can vary significantly from campus to campus (Minor, 2003). Decision making then is considered the process by which those granted authority make determinations on issues under consideration. Also important to understanding governance is the context in which decisions are made (e.g., the political, academic, financial, social, cultural, and situational circumstances that can influence decision making). Decision-making environments are fluid and can, in some cases, influence decisions more than static structures.

Research on governance in higher education is limited (Kezar & Eckel, in press), and research on governance at HBCUs is virtually nonexistent. In the last two decades, a time when higher education has experienced drastic change, governance issues remain understudied. The role of adjunct professors in determining curriculum, for example, is a relatively new issue that challenges conventional governance structures. Decision making around technology and distance education is another concern worthy of investigation. Recent legal decisions on the issue of affirmative action will cause many campuses to reconsider admission policies. Perhaps the latest governance matter is the concern over academic freedom and privacy in the wake of the terrorist attacks in the United States. Since September 11, 2001, campuses are experiencing increased government influence over issues such as the availability of student information and financial aid. Each of these decisions invites the question of who should decide. In what area of decision making should faculty be involved? How much authority does the president have? What should be the role of the board? Answers to these questions will be different for each campus. While the majority of four-year colleges and universities will face similar issues irrespective of institutional status, each decision is made while taking into account a unique set of circumstances that can influence decision outcomes.

The handful of studies conducted on governance issues focuses almost exclusively on structural components or the involvement of faculty (Baldwin & Leslie, 2001; Longin, 2002; Ramo, 1998; Randall & Miller, 1999; Schuster, 1989). Structural perspectives alone do not fully explain governance activity. Fewer studies consider the context in which university decisions are

made (Berdahl, 1991; Duderstadt, 2001; Gumpert, 2000; Mingle, 2000). Taking into account social, political, and cultural perspectives in addition to structure provide a fuller picture of governance activity. More recently, scholars point to the changing landscape of higher education and the need to create governance structures that are more responsive (Benjamin & Carroll, 1999; Duderstadt, 2001; Ferren, Kennan, & Lerch, 2001). Because research on governance at HBCUs has been ignored, differences that exist between HBCUs and predominately White institutions, with respect to decision making, are not well documented.

Determining contextual differences that influence decision making or leadership practices are important when assessing institutional effectiveness. I argue that criticisms endured by HBCUs and their leaders have been made in the absence of contextual understanding that may shed a different light on the appropriateness of governance structures and decision-making practices used in these institutions. Unfortunately, scholarship on governance forces scholars, policymakers, and campus leaders to speculate about how well or poorly HBCUs are governed. The crux of this article sits at the intersection of research and practice. Before conclusions can be drawn about the effectiveness of decision-making practices in HBCUs there is a need to research the context in which governance activity takes place. In what has been classified as a distinctly different institutional setting, the question that focuses this study asks: What contextual factors come into play as campus leaders make decisions at HBCUs?

### AN INTERPRETIVE APPROACH TO DEVELOPING A CASE

As a theoretical guide for this study, I employ an interpretive perspective that considers intentions, circumstances, and actions to be novel and filled with multiple meaning (Denzin, 1988). This perspective is not predictive but rather seeks to make sense out of social interaction within a particular context (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Given the paucity of research on governance within HBCUs, it is important to develop a fundamental understanding before theorizing about why particular challenges exist. Consequently, my approach to this research is devoted to interpretation and definition based on an analysis of interviews and a review of documents (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Yin, 1984). A case study method provides a useful means to explore what contextual factors might influence decision making within a particular institutional setting. Additionally, some scholars argue that taking into account the culture and traditions of an institution is an essential element to higher education research (Freeman, 1998; Tierney, 1988). An interpretive view is particularly useful for determining contextual factors that those within HBCUs deem important. This approach can also neutralize potential biases that come into play when precepts used to evaluate predominately White institutions are applied to HBCUs.

The case presented was part of a three-year research project on governance in higher education. The campus visit was conducted in a series of emblematic site visits to four-year institutions. Due to confidentiality agreements, the name of the institution and participants are not revealed. The pseudonym Urban State University is used for the campus and only the positions of participants are disclosed. Participants were purposively sampled with the help of "insiders" and selected according to criteria set by researchers (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). To enhance trustworthiness of these data, participants included a cross-section of campus constituents that represent diverse views on campus governance and hold various positions within the institution. This study of decision-making context is couched within a larger frame that seeks to discern institutional aspects that influence campus governance. With that goal, participants, through a series of semistructured questions, were asked to consider campus governance while taking into account both internal and external factors that might influence decisions or decision makers.

During the site visit, I conducted hour-long interviews with 17 members of the campus. Included were the president, provost, past and present leaders of the faculty senate, department chairs, long-time faculty members, and newcomers. In addition to the interviews, I also collected governance related documents such as the faculty handbook, minutes from faculty senate meetings, strategic planning documents, and documents that define shared governance for the

campus. To analyze these data, I used a grounded theory method that involves an inductive strategy to develop themes based on a constant comparison of these data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## **URBAN STATE UNIVERSITY**

Urban State (USU) was founded in the late 1800s as a small teachers college for Blacks by an American Baptist missionary group. For many years, the institution operated under religious influence with an excellent reputation for producing Black teachers. The southern state in which it resides began providing financial support for the institution in the mid-1900s, making it a public university. Today the student population at USU remains 95% Black. The university is classified as a research-intensive institution and is located in an urban setting. USU offers a range of undergraduate and graduate programs through eight schools and colleges. While the student population remains primarily African American, Urban State has an increasingly diverse collection of faculty, one third of whom are adjunct.

In the state, much has been made about appropriation disparities made by the legislature. The historically Black universities in the state have traditionally received significantly less support than predominately White institutions. USU is designated as the urban institution of the state but has traditionally lacked the resources to provide extensive graduate and professional programs. Still, USU maintains a moderately healthy institution; but, due to funding disparities, often has had contentious relations with its state government. Urban State maintains fidelity to its historical mission of providing access and quality education to African Americans. Through emphasis on teaching and student development, USU seeks to inspire positive social change in society through its students.

The governance structure is comprised of a governor-appointed Commissioner of Higher Education responsible for administering board policies. The 12-member Board of Trustees is appointed by the governor to staggered terms and governs all public institutions in the state. The president of Urban State was recently appointed by the board and in the last two years has selected a new provost who also serves as the vice president for academic affairs. Faculty governance at USU is troubled by internal conflicts, an ineffective committee structure, and a reputation for being dysfunctional. The relationship between the faculty senate and president has traditionally been litigious. The senate, for example, forwarded three votes of no confidence in the previous president. However, the current senate president and the administration have a fragile but working relationship. The senate is a deliberative body and their authority is limited to the forwarding of recommendations. Academic matters such as curriculum change are decided within committees located in individual colleges and program approval is granted by the board leaving the senate with little responsibility.

With new leadership and a surge of financial resources Urban State has recently undergone aggressive strategic planning with ambitions to expand and significantly strengthen academic programs. This includes improvements to the physical plant, improving faculty salaries, and investment in technological capabilities. There is also a clear institutional shift toward increased research capacity among faculty and an enhancement of graduate and professional programs. As plans for the campus move forward, what institutional circumstances, political forces, or cultural aspects will influence decision making?

### **The Function of Campus Governance**

Although the governance structure at Urban State resembles that of many institutions, it is important to understand the relationship between internal constituencies (e.g., the president, senior administrators, and faculty). The level of authority and interaction between these bodies significantly influences the function of governance. As a way to understand governance at USU, I consider not only the structure but also the function of particular bodies and how they interact.

At USU, the president reserves final decision-making power, faculty authority is limited to making recommendations, and the board is seen as external but important. According to the immediate past president of the senate, "Faculty governance on this campus has meant a small group of familiar faculty who stay in the loop while the large majority walk around either uninterested or marginalized." The senate suffers from internal disputes that inhibit organized faculty participation. An engineering professor of two years remarked, "It seems to me that if the faculty could ever get past themselves they might be able to get something done." Additionally, faculty at USU teach a standard of four courses per semester and receive salaries well below the state and regional average. As a result, their participation in governance is often limited and cynical.

Shared governance is currently being reconsidered on the campus. In an attempt to improve faculty governance, the provost, after soliciting faculty input, presented a statement to define shared governance for the campus. The document implies a collaborative model stating that "shared governance means and requires full participation of the faculty, staff, and students on all matters that directly or indirectly affect the environment at the University." However, the meaning of "full participation" is vague and the declaration is confused. In the same paragraph the document states that "administrators will act upon such recommendations and provide timely rationale for any modification or rejection of input received," which suggests a more consultative model of decision making.

In addition to an ambiguous statement on shared governance, other internal challenges include faculty apathy, broken trust, and a lack of communication between the faculty and administrators. This is most often expressed through quarrels between the faculty and administration over access to information and inclusive decision making. According to a sociology professor, "The leadership in the senate is not well respected and it has a history of being confrontational so I think over the years a lot of faculty see that as their purpose." The senate lacks an agenda for the faculty which results in ineffective senate committees. When asked about the activity of the senate, one political science professor laughed saying, "I don't pay attention to the senate. They are essentially irrelevant to what happens on this campus."

"The nature of the faculty is to resign themselves to whatever decisions are made by the administration and then complain about them later," one faculty member remarked. The senate president stated, "For a long time the senate and administration have had a distrusting relationship. We sent up three votes of no confidence in the last president. The combination of distrust and disempowerment has led to the disenfranchisement of many faculty." Symbolic of faculty power, the votes of no confidence in the last president were virtually ineffective in his departure.

The new administration has aggressively sought to repair faculty relations by employing more open systems of decision making, but for now, the history of faculty-administrator relations supercedes those efforts. The provost, in an effort to support faculty governance despite the dysfunction of the senate, created alternative decision-making bodies to advance campus initiatives. "The provost goes out of his way to ensure that faculty are involved and there is the sense that the president is open," said one kinesiology professor. The provost explained:

We [the new administration] know that faculty governance has been an issue in the past. This is part of the reason that I've gone overboard trying the revise documents that guide our process and trying to convince faculty that there is a place for them at the table.

Similarly, the president stated:

I'm open to the voice of the faculty but I'm also disturbed that it is sometimes uninformed, irrational, and hostile. Faculty governance is something we're working on but we've got a ways to go before we get to the point where the faculty and administrators can come together and make decisions in the best interest of the campus without the past or personalities getting in the way.

In spite of such efforts there is a small contingent of faculty who are suspicious of the board's agenda and the new administration. Their suspicion is expressed by antagonistic questioning of the president during public events and regular correspondence with the board. "We are here to ensure this place [USU] is not run like a plantation as the board would have it," asserted the faculty leader of this group. This contingent regularly indicts the president and senior

staff with claims that the campus is being run “irresponsibly” and at that the president is “too heavily influenced by the board.” They have also made accusation of improprieties that range from illegal hiring practices to compromising the integrity of the university. Most faculty on the campus, when asked about this group, acknowledged their concerns but were disapproving of their tactics.

Like many institutions, the structure and function of governance at USU could be improved; however, it is operable. The president maintains control of campus and commands the respect from most USU constituents. The faculty quarrel about not having more authority, but run an ineffective senate. Additionally, the board is distant and maintains less than admirable relations with Urban State. According to an associate provost, “Over the years the board has not been a good friend; USU is viewed as the step-child.” One faculty member suggested that “the president and everyone has been deceived and let down by our predominately White and conservative board.” Many at Urban State expressed concerns about the lack of representation and advocacy on the board and they often related to funding disparities.

### **Combating External Perceptions**

In addition to the internal governance challenges, Urban State faces a number of external and political forces that affect the institution. The majority of the participants (14 of 17) expressed a belief that USU, because of its status as an HBCU, is perceived as an inferior academic institution. This problem poses an internal challenge to uphold a positive institutional image to combat negative perceptions that exist. In fact, a significant portion of the USU strategic plan concerns “enhancing the image.” When asked about external perceptions of the institution across the state, many participants expressed feelings of regret that “USU rarely receives the credit it deserves.” Moreover, many felt as though the university is often unfairly depicted by the media which further perpetuates negative images of USU. Participants described the external challenges faced by the institution as undeserved and often motivated by race. A long-time faculty member in the School of Health Professions explained:

As a White man involved in state politics, I’ll sometimes have another White guy come up to me and say ‘you know I hired a USU graduate and...’ have a negative comment attached not knowing that I work here. USU seems to get a bad rap in the state just because it’s Black. I’ve worked at a number of other White institutions and have lived long enough to know that White graduates sometimes perform poorly also. Many times the ole southern racist ideal that Blacks are intellectually inferior plays into how the institution is handled by the state.

Another White professor recalled an incident she felt was unfairly being played out by the media. According to her, “If it can go wrong and it’s bad, it’s at Urban State, if you let the local paper and television stations tell it.” She went on to say:

A few years ago a student was stabbed on campus and it had little to do with USU per se. The incident happened on a Monday and the perpetrator was not a student. The stabbing was a result of an off-campus dispute that carried over from the weekend. That made front page news! In the same paper, it was reported that a student had been pushed over a balcony and killed in a football dorm at [a predominately White state institution] and that was on the third page of the sports section in an article about this big [she makes a hand gesture].

The associate dean of the School of Education insisted that the external challenges USU face have to do with its name:

To many in higher education the title of “historically Black” still connotes a tradition of teaching colleges and second-rate education for Blacks who couldn’t go to White schools. The idea of supporting an HBCU as the flagship research institution, in the minds of many, does not make sense. I think that the tradition and plight of the institution, not to mention that it’s Black, prevents a lot of people from seeing it as a competitor with the White schools in the state.

The associate vice provost used a teaching parable to explain Urban State’s external challenges:

It’s like when you teach any class, the assumption is that everyone has an A. That’s the starting point and you have to do something substandard to receive a lower grade. I’ve been here for 36 years and it seems to me that USU, as far as the state and board are concerned, starts with an F and continuously has to prove that we’re worthy of an A. To them, it’s like our ice is not as cold.

A graduate student agreed that “there is a negative stereotype attached to USU.” “I have attended [a predominately White institution in the state] and there is virtually no difference in instruction,” she claimed.

Others pointed to the economic and political implications of state support for USU. Because the campus is located in the capitol city, which represents the only metropolitan area in the state, some suggest that USU poses a threat to White campuses. A biology professor explained:

If the state supported USU like it does White institutions, we [Urban State] would flourish. We are located in the heart of the state and could be a major provider of graduate and professional education. That would make us a leading institution in [the state] and possibly over time, the premier institution in [the state].

The associate provost claimed:

There seems to be a subtle jealousy and fear of our capabilities. I have always felt that this has been part of the reason the board continues to deny us a law school, graduate programs in medicine, and adequate support.

### **Institutional Ethos**

Because of Urban State’s traditions, mission, and current governance context, its institutional culture is orientated toward resistance, social justice, and equality in education. Traditionally, the institution has operated from a deficit which many claim was perpetuated by the state. Still there is a sense of pride and resiliency associated with the survival of the institution and its accomplishments. Urban State, as an institution, symbolizes the ethos of many Black and ethnic communities in America. A student service administrator expressed this notion by stating, “We started with very little and have suffered blatant injustices in a time when education is supposed to be equal. In spite of that, [Urban State] has not only survived but thrived on far fewer resources than other campuses.”

A political science professor of 23 years explained the culture of USU as having gone through phases:

We [the institution] have just arrived at the point of charting a preferred future. For the last generation, we have been slowly moving between a culture of resistance and survival. Resistance meaning that we reject the notion that education for Blacks in this state should be limited or tracked for specific jobs such as teachers or industry workers. For many years, we’ve had to resist that notion as an institution. We went from that to a mode of survival. The institution, and I mean that collectively, had to make up its mind that it would survive while remaining true to the mission as an HBCU no matter the circumstances and no matter the funding received from the state. I would even argue that we attracted leadership that understood their duty to be surviving rather than advancing.

An academic counselor asserted, “In this state race will always play a part in everything we do as a Black institution.” As a social parallel, many faculty, students, and staff accept the struggles the institution will face as a result of being predominately Black. A member of the faculty senate stated: “I know I could make more money by leaving but I’m committed to our students and this institution. If I leave I would play into the hands of the board and politicians to further denigrate USU.”

“The state has under funded us [the institution] for years and denied us programs, but we haven’t let that stop us from moving forward as an institution,” a dean lamented. She went on to say:

It’s a shame that the unfair practice of funding higher education in this state has been allowed. But the social foundations of this country and particularly this state are such that prejudice on the basis of race guides actions and decision making.

USU culture acknowledges the history of discrimination and embraces the “uphill climb” or an “uneven playing field” as described by one communications professor. This climate significantly influences the culture of the institution.

### **DEFINING THE CONTEXT**

After describing institutional conditions, I now turn my attention to making sense of the governance context at Urban State. Based on the analysis of data from this case, I identify three contextual aspects believed to influence decision making in this institution: (a) faculty traditions; (b) the paradox of mission; and (c) a racialized climate. Certainly no single case will illuminate

every detail of decision-making contexts. University decision making is dynamic and the context is made up of fluid circumstances and individuals. A new governor, university president, or legislation can significantly change the contextual dynamics. Aspects of the governance context described are thought to be more static features of the institution. Likewise, I recognize the diversity among HBCUs and the differences, for example, between public and private institutions. Defining aspects of the decision-making context at Urban State is intended to help develop a framework for better understating governance at HBCUs.

### **Faculty Committed to Teaching**

Consonant with the tradition of Urban State, the majority of faculty are more dedicated to teaching than to research. With a standard teaching load of four courses per semester, the traditions of faculty governance resemble a management style where faculty are viewed as employees rather than specialized professionals responsible for making decisions concerning their discipline. This does not suggest that teaching faculty cannot be engaged participants in governance. Liberal arts colleges dispel such a notion. However, Urban State is a doctoral university with a significant number of faculty who do not conduct research. This creates a mismatch between the structure and culture of governance. The nature of faculty work at Urban State does, in some ways, contradict faculty involvement in decision making. A political science professor explained that “the majority of faculty are concerned with teaching classes and helping students.”

Only in the last decade has Urban State focused on recruiting research-intensive faculty. Currently, 32% of the faculty have been employed at Urban State for more than 20 years and have enculturated the traditions of teaching. For years, resource shortages prevented the recruitment of research faculty and created a heavy reliance on adjunct faculty. The faculty senate was not founded until the late 1940s and has only recently become affiliated with the American Association of University Professors. Urban State does not have a strong tradition of faculty governance.

Teaching loads and low pay leave little time for service among USU faculty. Additionally, the faculty senate, an emblem of faculty governance, is riddled with internal conflict. On campuses where faculty governance is effective, faculty have formal authority, see themselves as responsible for improving institutional quality, and maintain collaborative relationships with the administration (Floyd, 1994; Minor, in press). The small cohort of USU professors who are engaged in governance are significantly younger research faculty who have worked at other campuses. These faculty also participate in venues outside the senate.

The leadership at USU is making efforts to establish a functional senate, but their current activity involves laying the foundation for participatory governance. The statement on shared governance is new representing the preliminary stage of establishing sound faculty governance. When asked about the challenges of the senate, the current president stated, “We [USU] need to establish a tradition of faculty governance which takes time. Campuses that have strong faculty governance have strong traditions.” As the campus moves forward, there is an increased need for faculty governance, yet a teaching faculty, an ineffective senate, and traditions of strong leadership create challenges that require USU to reconsider traditional models of faculty participation. USU and other HBCUs with similar characteristics must recognize the tensions between teaching traditions and the requirements for effective participation in governance. The combination of these factors calls into question the application and usefulness of traditional governance practices for the effective involvement of HBCU faculty.

### **The Paradox of Mission**

Traditionally, Urban State has been dedicated to providing higher education to African American students who were excluded from predominately White institutions. More recently, a



large part of their mission has been providing access to higher education for African American students who might not otherwise gain admittance to four-year colleges. Access and student development has long been a part of the mission at Urban State. However, as the campus seeks to improve its academic reputation, maintaining fidelity to its mission presents a paradox. To achieve a better academic reputation, raising admission standards and increasing tuition are frequently considered, but such moves come at the cost of diminishing access. Additionally, the push to increase graduate and professional programs will attract an increasing number of White, international, and adult students.

As the institution changes, some USU constituents worry about what such a transformation means for the identity of the institution. "In my opinion the board has bought out the president to turn [Urban State] into a White campus," argued one professor. Another from the physical sciences claimed that "for years there has been a stand off with the state where they [the board] will leverage money for influence." The president also expressed the challenge to balance the traditions of Urban State with new initiatives that would improve academic quality. This paradox most recently has been manifested through administrative revisions to tenure and promotion policies that place more emphasis on research and less on teaching. The president explained: "There are a lot of times when I have to consider the history and traditions of this institution while trying to move it forward. A lot of people feel as though moving in certain directions compromises who we are."

The time-honored mission of Urban State and the current direction of the campus are not necessarily harmonious. Consequently, decision making on issues perceived to compromise the mission of the institution are strained and frequently contested. This has been the case even when decisions could potentially advance the campus. A great deal of contention, for example, surrounds the state's request for USU to recruit more White students in exchange for increased support.

### **A Racialized Climate**

In much of the discussion with participants it was clear that race is seen as a salient feature that influences the decision-making context at Urban State. Members of the campus consider race to be a significant aspect of the institution's identity and culture. There is also an indication that those outside the institution often view the campus through racial lenses. Many of the racial undertones present in the larger society are also apparent at the institutional level. That is, Urban State as an institution is likely to experience similar prejudices and discrimination that an African American individual might experience in the larger society. The provost captured the notion when he stated:

This institution is great in many ways and Black people recognize all the wonderful things about it through experience. Others who will never experience this university simply because it's Black and will never fully see its value. Even for Whites who do experience Urban State, preconceived notions about what an HBCU is can often ruin their experience before it takes place.

From a governance perspective, the infusion of race further complicates the decision-making context. In addition to the more standard challenges that governance presents, USU must contend with racial dynamics that influence internal and external decisions. The president while bemoaning this concept explained:

There have been a few gifts that I've had to turn down and some partnerships that won't fly because we are a Black institution. The flip side has been that there are also a number of doors that have been closed because we're a Black school, so it works both ways.

The mission of the institution, its relationship with the state, and its future are all permeated by race. To assume that race does not affect decision making about the campus would be naïve. This notion is particularly important when considering external decision making at the local, state, and federal levels.

## UNDERSTANDING DECISION MAKING IN HBCUS

When considering decision making at HBCUs it is important to acknowledge that although historically Black institutions share many historical and cultural attributes, they are not all the same. The point is that institutional characteristics that HBCUs share can be used to help comprehend the context in which decisions are made. In the case of Urban State, a public institution, two important lessons can be learned. First, assessments about the soundness of governance at HBCUs are better made with an understanding of the context in which decisions are made. The teaching traditions of these institutions, the potential paradox their missions present, and the acknowledgement of a racialized climate are key to understanding governance and decision in this institutional sector. Policymakers and practitioners that have an understanding of the context are likely to view governance at HBCUs more accurately. Those without an understanding of the context are susceptible to making unqualified comparisons between HBCUs and predominately White institutions which usually renders HBCUs deficient. The consequences of such may be apparent in the seemingly negative or pitiful disposition many higher education leaders exhibit toward HBCUs.

To be clear, this perspective does not imply that governance at HBCUs is without problems. Governance at Urban State could benefit from structural reforms that empower the faculty senate, cultural shifts that enhance trust and communication, and a better articulation of what shared governance means. The purpose of this article is not to defend poor practice. Urban State, given their circumstances, could significantly improve governance and the processes of decision making. Instead, the purpose here has been to better understand the context in which decisions are made at HBCUs. Understanding the decision-making context can help higher education leaders and campus constituents more accurately assess the challenges associated with governance at HBCUs. For those outside these institutions, taking into account the context permits a fuller consideration of the challenges facing these institutions and offers insight about how they might be improved.

A second lesson that can be learned from this case concerns how HBCUs are studied. What criteria, concepts, or methods should be used to assess decision making at HBCUs? Historically Black college and universities are distinct institutions and cannot be compared to predominately White institutions without declarations that give significance to such distinction. Although many functional elements of teaching and learning are similar to other institutions, the historical foundations, cultural aspects, student population, and racialized climate in which USU operates clearly distinguishes them and potentially many other HBCUs from all other higher education sectors. Each of these factors can significantly influence governance and decision making. For these reasons, researchers must question the usefulness of applying conventional higher education theory and concepts in study of HBCU governance.

For scholars conducting higher education research, using a culturally sensitive approach is useful for studying governance. Governance research on colleges with strong religious affiliations where clergy serve as trustees, for example, would require an understanding on how religious traditions currently influence decision making. Many of the current hypotheses about the state of governance and decision making at HBCUs are void of appropriate methods or theoretical frameworks for studying this population of institutions and those who lead them. An increasing body of K-12 literature suggests *culturally sensitive methods* or *Afrocentric methods* that take into account historical, cultural, and contemporary experiences of African Americans as central to research paradigms (Kershaw, 1990; Tillman, 2002). These approaches can also be applied to higher education research. Delgado and Villalpando (2002) offer the following assertion:

Higher education in the United States is founded on a Eurocentric epistemological perspective based on white privilege and 'American democratic' ideals of meritocracy, objectivity, and individuality. This epistemological perspective presumes that there is only one way of knowing and understanding the world, and it is the natural way of interpreting truth, knowledge, and reality. (p. 171)

Critical race theory, for instance, provides another alternative theoretical approach to governance research on HBCUs. Critical race theory, derived from the work of legal scholars, is

now used in K-12 research as an analytic tool for understanding school inequality (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This theory is based on the following assumptions: (a) race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequality in America; (b) racism is not a series of isolated acts but is endemic in American life; and (c) the intersection of race and property rights creates a tool for understanding social and school inequality (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Using race conscious theory conjointly with traditional higher education paradigms may be a useful approach to research on HBCUs. From this perspective research questions might concern how external perceptions of higher education leaders about the effectiveness of a "Black college" affect political aspects of governance. Research questions might also consider how cultural differences among American Americans constituents within HBCUs influence decision-making processes. Are there significant differences in communications styles, decision-making traditions, or the charisma of leaders that influences governance?

## CONCLUSION

The tenor of conversations about governance in HBCUs is often cynical. Critiques are highlighted by a number of articles that report violations of faculty rights, financial fragility, or contention between the faculty and the president. Scholarships on these institutions void of contextual understanding will continually, and in some cases erroneously, view HBCUs as troubled and underperforming. Those familiar with HBCUs intuitively know of the particular challenges faced by HBCUs but operate without a framework to express the effects of such differences. Leaders and supporters of HBCUs spend a significant amount of effort defending the virtue of their institutions. A more explicit understanding of the decision-making context compared to predominately White institutions would likely enhance their leadership abilities while at the same time enabling them to better articulate the challenges they face. This notion not only gives credence to distinct decision-making contexts but also helps understand and give credibility to discrete practices.

Many historically Black colleges and universities now face an important point in their history. Scores of teaching faculty will soon retire, the paradox of mission must be reconciled, and the courts are defining the place of race in higher education. This decade will likely prove crucial for many HBCUs. Those institutions able to effectively make decisions in response to their environment stand a much better chance at surviving and thriving; those that do not face a threat of extinction. While assessing their progress, it is important to consider how contextual factors influence decision making. Desegregation mandates, funding disparities, and racialized institutional perceptions are just a few that affect Urban State. As HBCUs seek to resituate themselves in the current environment of higher education, the ability to define the governance context is critical. Doing so will enhance decision making and institutional effectiveness while strengthening their defense against critics.

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