

# Unique Characteristics, Leadership Styles, and Management of Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Joyce Coleman Nichols

*ABSTRACT:* Historically Black colleges and universities play a significant role in our nation's higher education system. Currently, there are 105 historically Black colleges operating in the United States. Over the years there have been many challenges for these institutions. Given the importance of these institutions, the purpose of this article is to explore and understand the leadership styles and management of the institutions and provide insight into how they might adapt their leadership styles to ensure that they not only survive but prosper. This article also highlights strategies suggested by former presidents of historically Black Colleges to ensure educational opportunities for African-American students and others.

*KEY WORDS:* Historically Black colleges and universities; HBCUs; leadership styles; management.

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) emerged after the Civil War and represent a unique chapter in the development of American higher education. These institutions were established to educate Black students who were prohibited from attending other institutions of higher learning. Consequently, these institutions have a unique history when compared with other institutions (Brown, 2001). More specifically, these colleges were founded, for the most part, as a result of racism (Evans, Evans & Evans, 2002). Evans, Evans & Evans argued "the HBCUs were not designed to succeed, rather they were established to appease Black people or to serve as "holding institutions" so that Black students would not matriculate in historically white colleges and universities (HWCUs)" (p. 3). Fortunately, most HBCUs have managed to exceed expectations.

Although HBCUs may have been viewed by some as inferior in higher education, they have consistently shown that they are indispensable members of American higher education. A higher education writer suggested that without HBCUs, many Black students would not go

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to college (Henderson, 2001). According to Henderson recent figures indicate that 360,000 students attend HBCUs which represents a 26% increase over the past 18 years. He stated that “HBCU graduates make their marks in the world, becoming national leaders in many fields” (p. 128). There are now 105 HBCUs operating in the United States (<http://hbcu-central.com>).

Allen, Epps, & Haniff (1991) identified six goals of HBCUs:

- maintaining the Black American historical and cultural tradition;
- providing key leadership for the Black American community;
- providing Black American role models for social, political and economic purposes in the Black community;
- assuring economic function in the Black American community;
- providing Black American role models for social, political and economic purposes in the Black community to address issues between minority and majority population;
- producing Black agents for research, institutional training, and information dissemination in the Black and other minority communities.

In the 1950s, 90% of Black students attended HBCUs. By 1967, after the Civil Rights Act, 75% of Blacks were enrolled in predominately White colleges and universities. However, due to the large attrition rates of Blacks at White institutions, 80% of Blacks earning degrees received their degrees at Black institutions (Willie, Grady, & Hope, 1991).

Enrollment at HBCUs increased by 26% between 1976 and 1994 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). However, between 1976 and 1994, the increase in Black enrollment at HBCUs lagged behind the rise in Black enrollment at other colleges. Therefore, the enrollment of Black students at HBCUs declined over this time period. During this time, however, more students from other racial/ethnic groups attended HBCUs. Allen et al. (2002) reported that enrollment at 53 HBCUs increased from 1990–1999. According to Allen HBCUs with a decline in enrollment include Texas Southern University, Howard University, Morris Brown College, Grambling State University, Central State University, and Jackson State University. Institutions with increases in enrollment include Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University, Morgan State University, Cheyney State University, Kentucky State University, and West Virginia State University (Drummond, 2001; Godfrey, 1999).

A survey of 500 African-American professionals conducted by Black Enterprise magazine listed the top five schools providing the best

academic and social environments for Black students as Spelman College, Morehouse College, Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University, Clark Atlanta University, and Howard University (*The Top Colleges*, 2000, *Time Almanac* 2000).

### **HBCUs Role in Providing Future Black Leaders**

For 150 years, HBCUs have provided access to higher education for Black students. They have produced the vast majority of Black professionals and leaders, including Martin Luther King; Mary McLeod Bethune, educator; Thurgood Marshall, Supreme Court Justice; L. Douglas Wilder, Governor of Virginia; Toni Morrison, award winning novelist; Langston Hughes, poet; and others (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996).

Jones (1984) reported that 75% of all Black Ph.Ds, 75% of Black army officers, 80% of black federal judges, and 85% of Black physicians had graduated from Black colleges (Willie, Grady, & Hope, 1991). A study conducted by D.C. Thompson (1986) of graduates of Black colleges corroborates the continuing success of HBCUs in preparing Blacks for participation in American society. Thompson followed the careers of over 2,000 alumni of Black institutions. Nearly 90% of the alumni surveyed worked in white collar professions such as medicine, dentistry, teaching, and law. Fleming (1984) stated that "Black colleges afford more opportunities for Black students to assume leadership roles . . . thereby providing them with a rehearsal for the roles they are expecting to assume in society" (p. 152). Therefore, HBCUs continue to play a critical role in providing equal educational opportunities for Black students. These colleges also serve the largest number of disadvantaged students in the nation. According to a report presented at the hearing before the Subcommittee on Postsecondary Education of the Committee on Education and Labor (1988) Black institutions will produce an excess of 300,000 Black college graduates every ten years. In addition, it was reported that HBCUs produce 48% of Black computer scientists, 43% of Black physical scientists, 48% of all Black teachers; and six of the HBCUs produce over 40% of all Black engineers in the United States. Henderson (2001) reported that approximately 80% of Black-American officers in the United States military, 80% of Black federal judges, 60% of Black attorneys and 50% of Black teachers are HBCU graduates.

Attending an HBCU equalizes income opportunities for its graduates (Constantine, 1994). A study conducted by the National Post-Secondary

Aid Study of 1990 found that African-American students who attend HBCUs are more likely to pursue advanced education and become professional than students who attended predominately White institutions (Wenglinsky, 1996).

### **Leadership, Governance, and Management in HBCUs**

Given the significance of HBCUs in American society, it is important to explore and understand the leadership styles and management of these institutions. Although HBCUs have enjoyed unparalleled success in the education of Black people, the institutions are facing many challenges today. Since the Civil War, presidents of HBCUs have struggled with students who are underprepared, inadequate management, dwindling financial resources including low endowments, competition for students and faculty members, an alumni base with not much wealth, and students from low-income families who may be unable to pay ever increasing tuition.

According to Wagener & Smith (1993), "as late as the 1960s, the HBCUs as a group suffered from stereotypes of presidents who rode around in limousines and lived in mansions while their colleges verged on the brink of fiscal disaster" (p. 40). Evans, et al. (2002) contended that many of the problems on the campuses of HBCUs seem to be related to leadership. According to Wagener & Smith, "one of the running jokes in HBCUs is that, if you have worked at one of them, you have worked at all of them" (p. 7). However, Evans (2002) pointed out that not all of the institutions have this problem, but many have problems in leadership. He stated that many HBCU Faculty Senates have turned down candidates for administrative jobs because the candidates were not the best qualified for the position.

A number of former and current HBCU presidents, trustees, and other leaders, agreed that the presidents of the future must have a firm understanding of the academic enterprise, management, finances, personnel administration, information systems, and planning (Foster, 1987). Presidents of independent colleges need to be effective at fund-raising and securing grants for their colleges. Presidents of state colleges need be effective in federal and state government circles to ensure that policies are beneficial or at least not detrimental to their institutions. College leaders must remember that they are, most importantly, educators; and they must be willing to communicate effectively with faculty, students, administrative staff, support staff, community organizations, alumni, friends, and other interested parties. Evans et al.

(2002) argued the following:

HBCUs that thrive throughout the twenty-first must continue to maintain their enrollment and to graduate competent, ethical alumni; to recruit more competent, dedicated, politically astute administrators and faculty; to develop and/or to acquire accredited programs/curricula; to encourage political, business community alliances/partnerships; to maintain or exceed present institutional funding; and, to create a more friendly workplace for employees and administrators, all of which are apparent for good institutions of higher learning. And make no mistake about the situation of HBCUs, as they must not only be good institutions of higher learning, they must also be flawless (p. 5).

### **Leadership Challenges: HBCUs and Historically White Colleges and Universities (HWCUs)**

Today, all institutions of higher learning face new and different challenges. HBCUs, like the HWCUs, have experimented with different governance and decision making models. The amount of faculty influence is as diverse in the HBCUs as it is in HWCUs. Thus, many of the same factors that affect the governance patterns of HWCUs will also affect governance patterns at HBCUs.

Jones (1984) had suggested that there is not that much of a difference between the governance structures of HBCUs and historically White colleges and universities (HWCUs). Although HBCUs are unique in their educational mission, "they are subject to the same pressures facing all of higher education and accordingly have had to adjust their governance and management system periodically to accommodate their environment" (p. 268).

Colleges and universities are complex, and there are many more demands placed on them by society. For example, institutions play an important role in a) preparing students for professions, b) promoting equality for women and minorities, c) providing educational opportunities for disadvantaged and low income students, d) solving socio-economic problems, e) servicing government and industry, f) complying with rules and regulations that ensure the rights of all people, g) trying to keep tuition low, h) paying competitive salaries to faculty and staff, i) providing a quality education, and j) providing social and cultural services to the community (Jones, 1984). Thus, decision-making methods have had to change to reflect this new environment and must meet the coming challenges. For instance, similar to HWCUs, presidents of HBCUs have had to become adept at promoting their institutions and competing aggressively for students and funding.

Evans, Evans & Evans (2002) argued that political power has always been important to institutions of higher learning. They assert that alumni at institutions such as Harvard, Yale, and John Hopkins use the political system to assist the development of growth of their institutions. Now, HBCUs have graduates in the state legislatures and Congress to influence laws that will benefit HBCUs. For instance, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University used political savvy to reestablish its law school which had been transferred to Florida State University in 1968. Evans, Evans and Evans also pointed out that Presidents of HBCUs have been invited by the White House, Congress, National Science Institute, and other organizations to present their needs. Additionally, there are calls for new and often expensive academic programs, competitive salaries, and new and functional facilities.

Securing funding had always been a problem for HBCUs according to Evans, Evans & Evans (2002). State funding has been inadequate, and federal funding has provided some assistance. Although HBCUs do not receive the amount of donations as HWCUs, they have increased their foundation endowments to millions of dollars. Spelman College has one of the largest endowments among private HBCUs. Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University has the largest endowment of public HBCUs. Salaries are one of the largest expenditures for colleges and universities, and HBCUs continue to have a difficult time offering comparable salaries to those of HWCUs. Buck (1999) reported that the average mean salary for all faculty ranks at HBCUs is \$45,300 compared to \$56,300 at all institutions. Full professors at HBCUs make 56,900 while full professors at all institutions make 72,700.

### **New Visions for Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

Fields (2001) interviewed HBCU presidents who were stepping down from their posts as presidents or chancellors to pursue retirement or other opportunities including Dr. Leonard Dawson, President of Voorhees College; Dr. Frederick Humphries, President of Florida A&M University; Dr. Joe Lee, President of Tougaloo College; Dr. Julius Nimmons, President of the University of the District of Columbia; and Dr. Gloria Randle Scott, President of Bennett College. They were asked six questions about the state of higher education and what the next generation of college or university leaders should do to continue to provide educational opportunities for African American and all students.

Dr. Leonard Dawson, President of Voorhees College in Denmark, South Carolina wanted to eliminate the deficit, expand enrollment, increase academic offerings, and increase the endowment (Fields, 2001). The college had a deficit of \$1.5 million dollars. Today, Voorhees has doubled its enrollment, tripled its endowment, and has balanced its budget for 16 years. The college has new campus facilities totaling \$10 million dollars, has completed \$5 million in renovations, and has added new academic programs in computer science and geographic information systems. According to Fields, Dawson stated that the three most important priorities facing presidents of historically Black institutions was “the overriding imperative for presidents of historically Black colleges . . . to be establishing a sound and reliable funding base for the programs and services that the institution provides for their students” (p. 22). He noted that HBCUs do not have the endowments or revenue that would enable them to concentrate on creative aspects of college leadership. He stated that “another very important priority is the need to recruit and retain a top-notch, academically qualified faculty committed to the mission of historically Black colleges. This is especially difficult in the areas of critical need such as the hard sciences and technology” (Fields, p. 23). Finally, he maintained that “presidents of these colleges must find a way to articulate consistent, meaningful and relevant visions for the institutions consistent with the educational, social and moral imperatives—even in the midst of an ever-changing social and political climate” (Fields, p. 23).

Dr. Frederick S. Humphries was the backbone of Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University from 1985 to 2001 (Fields, 2001). He received praise for significantly increasing the enrollment at the University and attracting some of the brightest scholars in the nation. According to Fields, the university had one National Achievement Scholar when Humphries arrived. Since 1988, however, the University has been among the nation’s top five recruiters of these scholars. In 2001, Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University tied with Harvard as the No. 1 recruiter of National Achievement Scholars. In 1985, enrollment at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University was 5,100, currently it exceeds 12,200. President Humphries was asked if being a college president had changed his outlook on education as an instrument of societal change. His response was:

Today, I believe that a more effective strategy must be employed to increase the participation of African Americans in underrepresented segments of higher education. In order to develop the kind of talent that

is needed, appropriate motivational methods and forums must be developed to make the case to youth that mastering science and technology is important to improving one's quality of life" (Fields, p. 23).

He stated also that "what I knew and what my parents told me growing up in Apalachicola, Florida, is that education is the key now, then and into the future" (p. 23).

Dr. Joe A. Lee's as President at Tougaloo College had to struggle to manage limited resources and declining enrollment (Fields, 2001). During his six year tenure from 1995 to 2001, the college has managed to balance its budget. When asked what he perceived as the three most important priorities facing presidents of HBCUs, he commented that:

No longer can these institutions depend on traditional sources of funding . . . These sources of support that we counted on to augment tuition and endowments income have gone the way of the dinosaurs. The challenge is clear and compelling: Our intuitions must find additional support to provide scholarship aid for deserving students and to address deferred maintenance on many of our campuses." (p. 24)

According to Fields, Dr. Lee stated that HBCUs do have a place in society:

There is still a need for institutions that can educate students in an environment free of the racial tensions that continue to plague our society. There is a need for a place that is warm, friendly, supportive and encouraging to those who want to focus on their futures and not be constantly reminded of their cultural differences. This becomes even more important in a society that has put on blinders when considering the need for affirmative action." (p. 24)

In 1997, during a controversial time in the history of the University of the District of Columbia, Dr. Julius F. Nimmons, Jr. took over as president (Fields, 2001). The University was facing a \$18.2 million deficit, 225 faculty members were released, course offerings were downsized and the University sold its all-jazz radio station to C-SPAN. As a result, faculty and students as members of the Washington D. C. community were angered. Dr. Nimmons's task was to restore calm.

The enrollment at the University of the District of Columbia is smaller than it was in the mid-1990s; however, the University continues to be a bustling center of learning (Fields, 2001). When asked what he thought were the three most important priorities facing presidents of HBCUs, Nimmons asserted that there is a need to increase the number of minorities who are qualified for faculty and staff positions in order to replace both an aging faculty and aging staff at HBCUs. Fields noted that, according to Dr. Nimmons, HBCUs need to achieve fiscal stability



and expand their revenue base. He advised institutions to work with their communities to build and sustain fiscal strength. HBCUs must stop being fearful of technology and begin to understand the benefits associated with technology. He argued as follows:

HBCUs must substantially beef up the training they provide in financial markets and financial instruments. This can no longer be limited to our business schools, but must be offered across the curricula. Our students must learn about money markets and how to access them. The gap in financial portfolios is already severe and is slated to expand, given the historical positions of (Whites) in this country (Fields, p. 24).

Dr. Gloria Randle Scott is the president of all- female Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina (Fields, 2001). Fields pointed out that, according to Dr. Scott, Bennett College is a place where “phenomenal women are produced.” When asked how being an African American college president had changed her outlook on education as an instrument of societal change, she commented as follows.

As the president of a historically black college, I see the tremendous infusion that HBCUs have been responsible for in the creation of the middle income and/or middle class and/or upper income/upper class Blacks in America. Bennett College for women has produced more than 6,000 women who hold major leadership roles throughout the world as well-educated professionals. These women produce children whose lives are enlightened and facilitate social justice. And these women are informed, participating citizens. Their education has provided the access to affecting societal change. Every day . . . I have been confronted with a moment in which I have recalled that John Dewey was correct—education and democracy are inextricable bound together (Fields, p. 25).

Wagener & Smith (1993) did a case study of three HBCUs which had implemented strategic planning. These institutions are Fisk University, Tougaloo College, and Howard University. Four major themes emerged in their study of these institutions. First, HBCUs must build upon their strengths. Fisk University, for instance, capitalized on its history and position as a cultural leader by renovating historical buildings. Tougaloo College began to rebuild ties, negatively impacted as a result of civil rights activities in the 1960s, with the local business community and to utilize its historic holdings. Second, HBCUs need bold institutional leadership. HBCU presidents need to reduce expenditures and increase revenues. A third theme that they discovered is the relationship between fiscal stability and long-term academic health. They point out that “without it, buildings decay, morale is low, and the capacity to attract first-rate faculty and studies is limited, as is the capacity to experiment and take risks” (p. 48). The fourth theme that emerged

is that the involvement of faculty in strategic planning is crucial but difficult. HBCUs should consider involving faculty on committees established to deal with restructuring.

## Conclusion

Historically Black Colleges and Universities do indeed play an important and significant role in our nation's higher education system. Over the past few years there have been many challenges for these institutions. Current and future leaders of Black colleges must take advantage of every opportunity to ensure that HBCUs not only survive but prosper. Presidents of HBCUs must adapt their leadership styles to deal with the changing environment with which they are faced. Gardner (1990) noted that the tasks of effective and successful leaders of colleges and universities include envisioning goals, motivating, affirming values, managing, and unity. Current and future presidents of black colleges should be incorporating these functions into their leadership styles in order to ensure success at our nation's HBCUs.

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