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Historically Black Colleges and Universities in a Time of Economic Crisis

How have HBCUs responded to the current crisis?

By Marybeth Gasman

Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have suffered disproportionately in the current financial crisis. The difficult situations at these institutions have many causes, but they stem in large part from the commitment of HBCUs to serving disadvantaged students and from the history of underfunding and discrimination that disadvantages HBCUs themselves. Tightening budgets and low enrollments have forced some HBCU leaders to take drastic steps to keep their institutions vibrant or in some cases afloat. This essay looks at how well some HBCU leaders have maintained respect for academic integrity and shared governance amid pressure to impose austerity on their institutions.

HBCUs were created during the decades after the Civil War to educate the newly freed black population (three exceptions being Cheyney University, Lincoln University, and Wilberforce University, all created before 1861). The majority of private HBCUs were established by missionary organizations aiming to Christianize the former slaves. The bulk of the nation's public HBCUs emerged as a result of the second Morrill Act of 1890, which enabled southern states that were not willing to integrate their historically white institutions to continue receiving federal higher education funding by establishing a separate group of black institutions. Through the 1970s, these institutions, both public and private, graduated the lion's share of African Americans in the United States. In effect, HBCUs have graduated most of the black middle class as we now know it. Currently they enroll 16 percent and graduate approximately 20 percent of all African Americans who attend college. Although growth in their enrollments has leveled off in recent years, HBCUs continue to compete for students with better-funded historically

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white institutions. The main draw to HBCUs for many African American students is the empowering, family-like environment of small classes, close faculty-student relationships, and life without the daily racial tensions experienced off campus.

James T. Minor, writing in the *Journal of Negro Education*, has argued that “criticisms endured by HBCUs and their leaders” for autocratic governance “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.” In an article in the May–June 2005 issue of *Academe*, Minor noted that HBCU faculty and administrators he interviewed claimed that “the climate in which these institutions operate justifies many of their distinct practices,” with some respondents going as far as to say that strong presidential leadership has been partially responsible for the very survival of HBCUs. From my research, I know that HBCUs, like historically white institutions, have many kinds of leaders.

Exemplary Leaders

Two presidents who stand out in their respect for faculty tenure and shared governance are Johnnetta B. Cole, the former president of both Spelman College in Atlanta and Bennett College for Women in Greensboro, North Carolina, and Walter Kimbrough, the current president of Philander Smith College in Little Rock.

In her [article](#) in the [November–December 2006](#) issue of *Academe*, Beverley Guy-Sheftall, former faculty senate chair at Spelman, observed that Cole “actually encouraged faculty to pursue the establishment of formal governance structures.” Given her own history as an active, outspoken faculty member, Cole believed Spelman would be a stronger institution if more faculty members were involved in institutional decision making. Guy-Sheftall also noted that at Spelman the faculty shares responsibility in a very real sense for “tenure and promotion policies, faculty hiring, the faculty handbook, curriculum review, faculty grievances, and, most recently, program development and review.” She added, “It hasn’t always been easy, and it’s still a work in progress, but faculty members, with support from the administration [under both Cole and the current president, Beverley Tatum], are exploring more effective, long-term strategies for institutionalizing a new model of shared governance that we hope will be replicated on other campuses of our size, especially at HBCUs.”

Kimbrough, the young president of Philander Smith College, worked with the AAUP to enhance his institution’s tenure process, ensure due process in grievances, promote and maintain shared governance, and get his college off the AAUP censure list. Kimbrough told me in an interview that he believed that one of the quickest ways to ease tension on campus was “to rescind an edict by the former president that prevented faculty and staff from speaking with the media. This directive caused a tenured faculty member to be

summarily dismissed and led to the AAUP sanction.” Because faculty members were entrenched in the previous ways of the institution, Kimbrough said, he had to “push for more faculty involvement, not simply to challenge the ‘administration,’ but to first start as a self-governing group.” He noted that “a strong faculty and a solid academic program are the keys to a strong institution.”

Perhaps most enlightening and encouraging for the future leadership of HBCUs was Kimbrough’s description of his job: “to create a climate where we can engage in spirited discussion and debate in order to develop the best ideas to further the college. My challenge has been to create this climate where we can disagree with each other and there not be any repercussions from disagreeing with the president, which was the case before.” Kimbrough also noted that although the current economic crisis has forced Philander Smith to tighten its belt, the institution has been fortunate in that it has not had to make any cuts in the past few years. Since he arrived at the struggling institution, he has increased faculty salaries consistently; in 2008, faculty received a 7 percent raise. Cole and Kimbrough exemplify leadership that respects faculty contributions and governance, the kind of leadership that is needed at HBCUs.

The Current Crisis

There are two main reasons why the current economic crisis has hit HBCUs so hard. First, these institutions serve a student population that is disproportionately low income. According to data from the U.S. Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, in the 2006–07 academic year, 90 percent of HBCU students received financial aid. Reflecting the institutions’ commitment to educating low-income students, HBCU tuition rates tend to be 50 percent lower than those of their historically white counterparts. Lower tuition equals fewer operating dollars, which means less flexibility during tough times. Of course, one might ask why HBCUs do not increase their tuition. In fact, HBCUs have increased their tuition over the past decade but not at the exorbitant rates of their historically white counterparts. To do so would mean leaving behind the very group of students for whom these institutions were created. Moreover, HBCUs cannot afford to alienate potential students; a drop in enrollment can have dire consequences. Low-income African Americans might decide to attend community colleges or historically white state institutions, both of which boast relatively low tuition. For the 2008–09 academic year, many HBCUs experienced decreases in their enrollments. They foresaw more of the same for 2009–10.

The second reason HBCUs have been hit substantially harder by the economic downturn is that they have historically had smaller endowments. Of the nation’s 103 HBCUs, only three—Howard University, Spelman College, and Hampton University—have endowments in the top three hundred of all U.S. institutions of higher education. Smaller endowments mean fewer dollars available for operating costs and institutional financial aid.

HBCU endowments are smaller than those of their historically white counterparts for a variety of reasons. These institutions, throughout their history, have received less funding

than other colleges and universities from state and federal governments, foundations, and corporations; historically white institutions have received substantially more money even when size is taken into account. In addition, alumni giving, critical to building endowments, has been and continues to be lower on average than at historically white institutions. These lower rates result in part from African Americans' historic lack of access to wealth, which stems from systemic forms of racism throughout U.S. history. Nonetheless, some HBCUs need to take more responsibility for fundraising. For decades, some HBCUs neglected to ask their alumni for support, assuming that their alumni had little to give and doubting the return on investment of money and time spent cultivating alumni contributions. In recent years, HBCUs have reached out to alumni, and giving percentages are growing. During difficult economic times, however, it is not easy to secure dollars from alumni not in the habit of giving.

As a result of their very difficult financial situations, many HBCUs have taken sometimes well-calculated and other times drastic steps to sustain their institutions. At Spelman College, President Beverley Tatum anticipated future shortfalls in funding and, as a result, phased out the institution's education department, choosing to have students participate in a shared teacher-certification program hosted by nearby Clark Atlanta University. Tatum also eliminated thirty-five staff positions. Although Spelman has a considerable endowment and is much better off financially than most other HBCUs, 40 percent of its students are supported by Pell Grants, a higher percentage than at any other highly selective liberal arts college in the nation.

Morehouse College, Spelman's all-male counterpart, garners roughly 80 percent of its revenue from tuition and fees. It boasts a strong endowment but took a \$40 million loss in endowment this year, an enormous hit for an HBCU. The small college cut twenty-five adjunct professors, roughly a third of the institution's part-time instructors. Both Morehouse and Spelman worked diligently to make difficult cuts in ways that would have minimal impact on full-time faculty and academic programs and did so with a well-honed respect for shared governance.

According to an article in *Inside Higher Ed*, another HBCU, Clark Atlanta University, laid off seventy full-time faculty members, including many with tenure. Although the faculty senate offered to take an across-the-board pay cut and suggested many ways to save the institution operating costs, the administration was not receptive to these suggestions. Claiming a state of "enrollment emergency," President Carlton Brown presented the seventy faculty members with separation agreements and a few hours to remove themselves and their possessions from campus. The elimination of these faculty members constitutes a 30 percent loss in faculty at the institution.

A lack of respect for tenure and shared governance by one HBCU administration harms the reputation of these institutions as a group. The actions of one or two HBCUs are often generalized to the entire lot. To counter negative perceptions, as well as to be fair and just in their actions, presidents and administrators of HBCUs should think about ways to involve faculty in institutional decision making instead of seeing them as adversaries in

the educational process. A happy, involved faculty makes for a strong, vibrant campus community. One of the beauties of the academy is that its ideals differ from those of corporate America. Yes, financial stability is essential. However, colleges and universities do not have as their goal making a profit; instead, their mission is to educate young people and generate ideas. These goals can and should be reached in the most humane ways.

During these difficult times, it is essential that HBCU leaders make smart decisions. Their institutions need to circle the wagons, bringing together all constituents to contribute to the greater good. Loyal alumni, foundation and corporate donors, and state representatives need to be aware of the difficult issues at hand so they can come to the aid of HBCUs. To enable HBCUs to remain competitive with their historically white counterparts, administrators need to allocate funding to support faculty salaries, faculty tenure, and student scholarships whenever possible.

HBCUs need to avoid “mission creep” and focus on what they do best: providing a solid education that empowers future leadership. In order to provide this education, HBCUs need to respect and take care of their faculty members, engaging them in shared governance and appreciating their intellectual contributions and commitment to the institution. HBCUs are too important to the future of African Americans and the country as a whole for these institutions to lose sight of their goals.

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