

## **HBCUs: The College, The Community, and the Dynamics of Their Relationship to One Another**

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### **Abstract**

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are more than just institutions of higher learning; they are cornerstones of their communities, contributing significantly to the economic, social, and educational fabric. Not only do HBCUs have a long and distinguished history of providing high-quality education to African Americans, particularly those from underserved backgrounds, they offer a nurturing and supportive learning environment, where students are encouraged to excel academically and develop their full potential. This position paper aims to provide an inclusive analysis of the multifaceted impact of HBCUs, investigating the unique pedagogical approaches employed by HBCUs, such as economic impact, that contribute to student success. It will also examine the role of HBCUs in addressing educational disparities and promoting equity in higher education, illuminating their often-overlooked role as catalysts for individual and community empowerment.

*Keywords:* HBCU; education; employment; economic development; economic contributions; social contributions, community engagement; university preservation; HBCU leadership

### **Introduction**

Historically, Black Colleges and Universities(HBCUs) have impacted economic growth and development in the area in which they are located. As major employers, HBCUs provide a wide range of jobs, bringing in employment opportunities through teaching and administrative staff internally and maintenance and service through external employment (UNCF, 2024). In addition to their economic impacts, HBCUs also have a strong social impact (UNCF, 2024).

They are central safe havens for preserving African American history and culture through various museums and archives and cultural activities. HBCUs can provide a sense of community and unity through holding artistic exhibits and group assemblies within their institutions. From an educational perspective, HBCUs have a long history of providing quality education to African Americans and underserved impoverished communities (UNCF, 2024). These institutions create environments conducive to learning and development by fostering a sense of inclusiveness.

Therefore, this article will investigate the mechanisms through which HBCUs drive economic growth in the community, specifically looking into employment generation, income generation, and general economic development. It will then investigate the distinctive pedagogic ways in which the HBCUs deliver teaching as a means through culturally appropriate curriculum and mentorship opportunities can enhance student success. Further, it will explore how HBCUs reduce educational inequalities and increase fairness in higher education. Finally, it will depict how HBCUs foster civic impulse and leadership skills, that allow people to advocate for their interests and engage meaningfully in local decision-making. This paper seeks to detail the contributory effects of the HBCUs on their communities – socially, economically, and educationally – and how these institutions improve individual and community empowerment. By looking at their achievements in economic enhancement, fostering social justice, and educational progress, therefore, the findings emphasize the vital role HBCUs play in positively affecting the development agenda and empowering people to advance their free choices. This will add to our knowledge of HBCUs and provide the much-needed evidence for policymakers, teachers and community leaders as an indispensable tool for using the unique advantages of these institutions to build a better and more equitable society for all.

### **Educational Contributions**

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) had their origins primarily after the Civil War (HBCU First, 2024). They were established to provide higher education opportunities to African Americans after they were denied admission to predominately white colleges and universities at that time (HBCU First, 2024). HBCUs became propellers of Black academic growth and empowerment. It is also a place where motivated, aspiring African Americans could flourish in teaching and learning within an African American context. Most recent statistics, academic year 2021-2022, report of HBCU's nationwide, there is a combined enrollment of nearly 300,000 students (Hatfield, 2024). Of these students, the number of black/

African American enrollment was 219,327. The number of degrees conferred are as follows: 5200 associates, 32,800 bachelors, 7500 masters, and 3041 doctorate (Hatfield, 2024). As institutions of higher learning, HBCUs in the United States have a strong history of offering high-quality education to blacks, particularly underserved Africans. HBCUs offer a nurturing and historically supportive college experience designed to foster student success through graduation and provide access to a variety of educational programs and degrees that lead to the formation of a skilled workforce among these students (NMAAHC, 2022). As of today, HBCU's have contributed 40 percent of black engineers, 50 percent of black lawyers, 70 percent of black doctors and 80 percent of black judges are HBCU alums (Bryant, 2025).

### **Economical Contributions**

HBCUs play an essential economic role in their communities. They are large employers offering a diverse range of opportunities, from academic and staff positions to service and maintenance work. A report from UNCF indicated that as of 2018 HBCU's have generated over 130,000 jobs and have contributed over 14 billion dollars to their local communities (Esters, 2024). This direct employment supports families, and contributes to the tax base, which in turn funds critical public services. Furthermore, the economic activity generated by these institutions spreads among the neighborhoods, benefiting local businesses such as restaurants, stores, and service providers that cater to students, teachers, and staff. HBCU's provide an estimated average of 6300 jobs annually and generate around 704 million dollars per state (Esters, 2024). The existence of HBCUs attracts investments and encourages entrepreneurship among alumni and citizens, hence encouraging economic growth (Esters, 2024). Benedict College applies a proactive approach that includes providing a community development center and affordable housing initiatives (Esters, 2024).

More recent studies on the impact of HBCU's show that the upward mobility for all students as the result of attending an HBCU can have a significant impact on the overall long-term health of African Americans. More specifically, research by Colen, Pinchak, & Barnett, K. (2021) found that African Americans who attend HBCUs were significantly less likely than those at PWIs to develop metabolic syndrome in adulthood. The significance of such findings should not be understated as metabolic syndrome is a precursor to heart disease and experiences of strokes, two chronic diseases often associated with African Americans and "account for a substantial proportion of mortality in the U.S". More importantly, Cohen et al. (2021) suggest

that the health benefits associated with the sample of HBCU students were the result of the overall environment afforded by HBCUs. They stated:

[...] the HBCU environment is one that shields students from exposure to racial discrimination, allows African American college students to focus on learning and academic mastery while avoiding race-related stressors that have been linked to poor health outcomes, such as tokenism, and provides ample access to same-race mentors who have successfully navigated predominantly white environments in pursuit of educational or occupational advancement. (p.13)

The aforementioned quote emphasizes how Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) serve as essential institutions for African American student support. HBCUs develop a protective environment that defends students against racial discrimination which enables them to focus on their academic pursuits without the distraction of race-related stressors. Same- Race Mentorship plays a crucial role in assisting students to overcome systemic obstacles. The educational environment affects student health and shows that less exposure to racial stressors results in better health outcomes for African American students. This emphasizes how education and health systems intersect within the framework of systemic racism. Overall, HBCUs hold significant value as educational entities and essential support networks which bolster academic performance and economic and personal development for African American students.

### **Job Creation**

Because they offer employment possibilities both on and off campus, HBCUs are not only essential forces in their communities in which they are located, but they also provide educational opportunities that are vital for students who have been historically marginalized. According to the United Negro College Fund 2024 Economic Report HBCUs have had a 16.5-billion-dollar impact on the United States and created more than 136,000 employment opportunities and generated a staggering 146 billion in lifetime income earnings collectively from 2021 HBCU graduates (Jordan et al., 2024). While there are specific career opportunities accessible at post-secondary schools that are not administrative or academic positions, such as work-study, which are university appointments designated for enrolled students. (UNFC, 2024). All of these options are available. Universities and colleges hire individuals to work in dining facilities, maintain resident halls, and perform groundskeeping and landscaping services full-time during each academic term.

## **Impact**

By providing access to quality education and fostering a culture of achievement, HBCUs have produced countless leaders, innovators, and change-makers who have made significant contributions to society (UNFC, 2024). Vice President Kamala Harris (Howard University) and Oprah Winfrey (Tennessee State University) are both noteworthy examples of proud HBCU graduates who have impacted the black community. Many prominent figures in politics, arts, sciences, and civil rights are HBCU alumni, showcasing the institutions' influence on leadership and innovation. This culture of achievement should make us all proud and inspired. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr (Morehouse College), Thurgood Marchall (Howard University), and Jesse Jackson (North Carolina A&T State University) are well respected and prominent social justice and civil rights activist who are also graduates of HBCU's (Weathers, 2024).

## **Social Contributions**

The social contributions of HBCUs are equally important as they are living cultural centers where museums and archives preserve African American history and heritage (NMAAHC, 2022). The Greensboro Four were students of North Carolina A &T State University who initiated a sit-in movement during the 1960's. This act of heroism displayed a pivotal role of HBCUs and activism and proves the benefits of social contribution. Here is where artistic expression, community events, and more quotidian activities such as discussing the day's news and sporting events foster community attachment and identification are cultivated (NMAAHC, 2022). HBCUs also offer facilities such as programs that provide healthcare, childcare and housing services, as well as campus facilities that offer fee-based recreational opportunities to the community and low-, no-expense programs and lectures, that improve community wellbeing (NMAAHC, 2022). HBUCs serve as repositories and educators of the African American culture and history, fellowship and community, and spaces to inspire us all to engage in a joint enterprise to make our communities better (NMAAHC, 2022).

An analysis by Gasman, Spencer, & Orphan (2015) highlighted the role HBCUs have played in the civic engagement of African American students dating back to the 1940's. More specifically, they argue that HBCUs are often left out of the conversation of civic engagement in contemporary scholarship because they are often overlooked as active participants, or in some cases, have not been acknowledged because HBCUs have not done the best of job of effectively inserting themselves into the conversation. The authors continue to drive home the point that

while the civic participation of HBCUs is often only mentioned in respect to their work on service-learning program, there needs to be more empirical work done to document and show the impact of the civic engagement work of HBCUs, again highlighting the need of the current analysis and documentation of such.

An empirical study conducted by Smith (2017) examined how the civic engagement in the community of students from HBCUs is a leading factor in how the presidents of those HBCUs perceive their role as the leader of that institution. Although all of the presidents included are in the sample, each of them asserted that the larger purpose of Black community is to play a vital role in preserving and promoting the civic engagement of their institutions, which means “working individually and collectively toward the larger purpose of Black uplift”. Though participating in social justice movements and being an active participants in the change we want to see, by advocating for equality and fairness, and pushing back against institutional racism are all ways in which we collectively and individually uplift the black community.

### **Community Engagement**

Beyond their mission of educating, they cultivated and sustained African American culture as institutions that fostered community and protected Black identity, affirming and providing leadership that continues to influence generations of its alums and help sustain Black life and civil society into politics, business, and art. Several HBCUs became focal points for activism and social change during the modern Civil Rights Movement (TMCF, 2020). These institutions produced influential leaders and activists who fought tirelessly for social and racial justice for the nation’s downtrodden African Americans, contributing to the broader struggle for racial equality across the country. In many ways, the history of HBCUs is one of struggle and activism for racial equality; students and faculty members alike engaged in activism that challenged systemic injustice (TMCF, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

HBCUs continue their valuable legacy of educating and empowering the African American population in the United States today (TMCF, 2020). Today, HBCUs are needed more than ever as a pillar of equitable education, a force for progressive change, and a reminder of the values of equality, community, and cultural identity.

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