



Challenges and Possibilities at HBCUs after the COVID-19 Pandemic

Reinvesting in vital institutions.

By Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Kimberly M. Jackson



Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), founded in the nineteenth century, are well-known for empowering students to become leaders and change agents. HBCUs have varying demographics, but all are centrally focused on ensuring the academic success of students of color. Among our 101 institutions are colleges and universities public and private, urban and rural, large and small, thriving and struggling, and single-gender and coeducational, awarding degrees ranging from the associate's to the doctorate.

Historically, HBCUs have produced 50 percent of Black teachers and doctors and 80 percent of Black judges. They continue to graduate the largest percentage of African American students with degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. According to the National Science Foundation, Spelman College has produced the highest number of Black women doctoral recipients in science and engineering. Xavier University of Louisiana and Howard University have been the top producers of African American medical school graduates. HBCUs deliberately focus on brokering access to STEM through a variety of policies, practices, and activities. Howard University now has the distinction of having graduated the first woman vice president in the nation's history. Other outstanding alumni and alumnae include Toni Morrison, Thurgood

Marshall, Martin Luther King Jr., Oprah Winfrey, Common, Stacey Abrams, Rosalind Brewer, Andrew Young, Levi Watkins Jr., Jesse Jackson, Samuel L. Jackson, and Chadwick Boseman.

The continued relevancy of HBCUs has generated academic inquiry for more than a decade. Some believe that HBCUs are an outmoded vestige of segregation and cite opportunities for African Americans now to attend all institutions of higher education. Increased access for African American students to the full range of colleges and universities has, for many, become an argument to dismantle HBCUs. Between 2010 and 2018, HBCUs experienced a 10 percent decrease in enrollment, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. However, applications and enrollments have increased at some HBCUs among international and Latinx students over the past four years as well as among Black students, perhaps as a result of the current political climate concerning structural racism. In this regard, an increase in hate crimes, including racist police violence, has been cited as a possible explanation for increased HBCU enrollments. Walter Kimbrough, president of Dillard University, attributes this increase at forty HBCUs to what he calls the “Missouri Effect”—racial harassment of Black students at majority (predominantly white) institutions.

At HBCUs around the nation, the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed administrators to think more strategically about their institutions in the wake of perhaps the most daunting challenge to face higher education in the twenty-first century. In many ways, it is the best of times and the worst of times. On the one hand, millions in much-needed philanthropic dollars have made their way to Black colleges in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in May 2020. On December 12, 2020, Congress finally passed the HBCU Propelling Agency Relationships towards a New Era of Results for Students (HBCU PARTNERS) Act following decades of lobbying efforts by HBCU advocates. Certain federal agencies are now required annually to explain how HBCUs can compete more effectively for contracts and grants. On the other hand, only a handful of Black colleges have endowments that exceed \$200 million; inequitable federal and state funding continues; our students, coming from households that on average earn considerably less than the median white family income, must secure larger federal, state, and private loans than many non-HBCU students, resulting in substantially greater debt upon graduation; and graduation rates in 2019 were reported to be only 35 percent compared with 60 percent for all higher education institutions. Chief among the various factors contributing to differential graduation rates is the large number of low-income and first-generation Black students at HBCUs, who face daunting financial and other challenges that make graduating from college in four years more difficult.

A year after the start of the pandemic, HBCUs are struggling to make difficult decisions about reopening and cope with daunting shortfalls in critical tuition and room and board revenue resulting from enrollment drops and campus closures. While students focus on preserving their GPAs with pass/fail requests, connecting with their peers, or wanting to walk across the stage at sometimes-canceled in-person graduation ceremonies, administrators have been forced to prioritize the health and safety of students and their workforce. These additional financial and operational burdens have forced many institutions to shift to crisis-management mode. HBCUs are among the estimated half of US colleges and universities facing financial crises, with effects that will likely linger beyond the pandemic. Significant declines in federal funds for HBCUs and rising college tuitions have also forced many HBCUs to the brink of financial disaster.

And yet, for many African American students, HBCUs remain irreplaceable. In a recent article in *Inside AMU*, “House Not a Home without Students: HBCUs and COVID-19,” Alabama A&M University student Aayana Ingram powerfully captures the importance and uniqueness of Black colleges: “These institutions are

not just institutions of knowledge for students but their home.” Testimony from a graduating student and student government association president underscores both the challenges and the possibilities facing HBCUs: “COVID-19 has affected the experience and the community of HBCUs drastically. However, the worldwide pandemic has brought HBCUs even closer together virtually. We are reaching out to each other to share ideas on how we can cater to students across universities. We are doing everything we can to keep the students involved, engaged, and entertained.”

Despite having shut down temporarily in March 2020, many HBCUs had no choice but to allow students, faculty, and staff to return to campus in August, despite increased COVID-19 cases in their states. Closing campuses for even one semester surely would have severely hindered their ability to reopen the following year, given the reliance of HBCUs on tuition and room and board for financial sustainability.

They did their best to keep students safe. Many of these Black colleges applied for federal assistance to create COVID-19-testing hubs. Institutions that chose to reopen their campuses for instruction in the fall 2020 semester applauded their students for compliance with social-distancing and mask-wearing requirements and reported lower COVID-19 infection rates than predominantly white institutions. However, there has been limited reporting of data on COVID-19 at HBCUs and limited information about campus protocols surrounding frequency of testing, quarantining on campus, and contact-tracing implementation. Faculty members on many campuses are frustrated by inadequate technology upgrades for remote instruction; the digital divide among students and between tenure-line and non-tenure-line faculty must be addressed. Faculty see continuing challenges associated with the lack of adequate training for hybrid, asynchronous, and synchronous teaching; uncertainty about the health and well-being of their faculty and staff colleagues as well as students; and an overall unease about the rush to reopen or stay open in the spring 2021 semester, given the increased numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths in their respective cities and states. They are also keenly aware that African Americans have borne a heavier burden than the rest of the population since the beginning of the pandemic. While students overwhelmingly share a desire to return to their campuses as soon as possible, they are also anxious about what they perceive to be less than optimal planning on the part of administrators with respect to a broad range of safety issues. For example, in spring 2021, Spelman College, whose prepandemic enrollment was 2,100, brought back a small number of students to campus using a low-density model (350 students or less). And, although the campus has instituted a “reset and pause” period (five days of rest for those students living on campus), mandatory COVID-19 tests including weekly rapid tests for students and staff, and extensive town-hall meetings, students and parents remain concerned about care available for students and staff when someone becomes ill, the cleaning and ventilation of campus buildings, the adequacy of food services, plans for contact tracing, and services for mental health. However, the desire of students to connect to unique campus cultures and to their peers appears to be outweighing their anxiety about returning to campus, given their reasons for having chosen to attend an HBCU in the first place: community and a sense of home.

HBCUs face compelling and difficult questions in a postpandemic era. How will they evolve and adapt to the serious financial burdens that are likely to linger or worsen, especially at more fragile institutions? The influx of millions of dollars from wealthy donors over the past several months has landed at only a handful of institutions, most of which are the least financially at risk. What is the likelihood that institutions can ensure safety for students, faculty, and staff returning to campus and to dormitories? How can HBCUs handle their serious financial challenges if postpandemic enrollments continue to drop? While the pandemic is certainly not responsible for all of the enrollment and retention challenges at HBCUs, it definitely has exacerbated

them. The socioeconomic status of African American families as well as their more serious health issues have also exacerbated the pandemic's impact in our communities.

An urgent question for administrators and faculty members at HBCUs to ponder remains: What have we learned about ourselves—our strengths and liabilities—during the past year? Because the COVID-19 crisis amplified deeply rooted inequities in education, we are at a turning point. HBCUs are critical to the higher education landscape, providing more reliable safe havens for students through housing, food security, health-care access, and mental-health support. State and federal agencies must reinvest in and reprioritize funding for HBCUs and other colleges that do the brunt of the work in supporting Black and brown students. Faculty at HBCUs should be recognized as they continue to be extraordinary teachers and advocates in places where students enter with serious financial and other challenges. HBCUs will need compassion and resources to address the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 crisis on Black and brown students in the years to come. They must continue to plan, prepare, train, equip, and organize for disasters; design and offer a model for sustainable tuition and fees; increase financial stability through alternative funding revenue streams; substantially increase endowments with more aggressive fundraising among philanthropists and other individual donors (including alumni and alumnae) and foundations; implement alternative and effective teaching models when in-person teaching is not an option; recruit more competitive, affluent international students; and close the digital divide. We are confident that serious attention to these challenges on our campuses will result in a reimagining of our futures and recommitments to what we do best. Increased and substantial philanthropic dollars for urgent racial equity projects in the aftermath of highly publicized anti-Black violence, especially the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd by police, are also signs of hope.

Beverly Guy-Sheftall is the founding director of the Women's Research and Resource Center and the Anna Julia Cooper Professor of Women's Studies at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. Kimberly M. Jackson is the chair of chemistry and biochemistry, director of food studies, and associate professor of biochemistry at Spelman College.