

## **Honoring the Past and Building the Future: The Continued Relevancy of Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

*Monica Flippin Wynn*  
*Jackson State University*

### **Abstract**

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) remain essential within the higher education landscape, serving as means for academic excellence and cultural empowerment. Despite unrelenting challenges such as limited funding and enrollment fluctuations, HBCUs continue to provide transformative educational experiences that nurture both intellectual growth and identity development. Their commitment to cultivating inclusive spaces empowers students to navigate academic challenges while encouraging an identity awareness. By connecting culturally responsive teaching methods, mentors, and community relationships, HBCUs empower students to stand out academically and contribute significantly to the culture. HBCUs also play a critical role in addressing systemic barriers that often impede the success of first-generation and historically resilient students. This article seeks to examine the foundational elements that have sustained HBCUs and consider why these institutions remain relevant in equipping graduates with the skills to consistently succeed and strive towards academic excellence and cultural empowerment.

*Keywords:* HBCUs, academic excellence, empowerment, relevance,

### **Introduction**

In recent years, a growing body of research (Jones, 2024, Strayhorn et al, 2024, Favors, 2019, Knox, 2024. Weis, 2024, Hatfield & Anderson, 2024, Gasman & Esters, 2024) have centered on the relevance and survival of Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Yet, most of the literature (Koch & Swinton, 2023) largely focuses on enrollment, institutional challenges, research and leadership; however, there seems to be a scarcity of content that is focused on core elements of the HBCU experience, specifically academic, pursuit of excellence, and cultural affirmation.

These pillars along with the educational and societal benefits they foster, continue to make HBCUs both relevant and essential for the success of Black students. In fact, if one were to rely solely on much of the readily available content about HBCUs, they might wonder why, any student would choose to attend institutions that are frequently beleaguered, criticized, at times outright disrespected and denigrated. Yet, despite shrinking resources and the numerous challenges that these institutions face, they continue to graduate a significant parentage of Black students in the United States (Sheftall & Jackson, 2021).

This essay aims to highlight key component and foundational systems that have enabled HBCUS to unapologetically, educate, persist and remain essential to students, communities during these transformative times. Specifically, it will briefly examine the key role of academic and cultural affirmation within the HBCU ecosystem and highlighting these vital components that foster student success and institutional resilience. Purposely, this essay, will delve into the significance of culturally responsive pedagogies and storytelling as powerful practices that enhance student academic achievement and culture a sense of belonging for student attending HBCUs, While these are not the only factors that contributor to the enduring success of HBCUs, they are critical platforms that create spaces for students that are often misunderstood, undervalued and underserved by other educational systems. This essay can briefly highlighting these aspects of HBCUs that consistently have lifted their communities and assisted with thriving despite the odds. While many researchers of HBCUs have very definite and nuanced concerns and opinions of the work with HBCUs, however, this essay focuses on key components and their continuation to be relevant to black excellence and student success.

### **The Development of Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

Established in 1837, as the African Institute and later renamed as the Institute for Colored Youth, Cheney University was the first HBCU established for the education of Americans of African Lineage. It was founded by Richard Humphreys, a philanthropist, who was displeased with the lack of training and opportunities for people of color. They were later certified by the Higher Education Act of 1965 and referred to 'as a uniquely American Institutions' (Gasman, 2014), HBCUs were recognized and defined in the Higher Education Act of 1965. Initially, many HBCUs focused on training teachers but soon worked to offer a wider range of options for previously enslaved and historically resilient individuals. The greatest number of HBCUs were developed between 1865 and the 1900's and recognized under the Higher Education Act of 1965

The majority of these institutions have been primarily located in the South, although recently there have been partnerships and alliances created to extend the HBCU opportunity for students and communities in the West.

### **The Struggle to Survive**

For over 150 years, HBCUs have been committed to providing high quality education originally centered on Black students, but they have expanded their mission to educate students of all backgrounds and ethnicities. And, despite unending debates about their relevance and merit, HBCUs continue to produce exceptional graduates who are industrious, civically engaged and prepared to contribute to the globally economy. Although facing insistent challenges, which often including funding gaps compared to predominately white institutions (Smith, 2021) HBCUs remain undeterred from the mission to provide and empower students.

This unwavering commitment ensures that HBCUs continue to play a significant role in higher education by producing qualified and well prepared graduates to meaningfully contribute to society. Central to being able to provide institutional success is the consistent pursuit of academic excellence by way of attaining and securing academic accreditation. Jackson-Hammond, (2020) suggests that “ Accreditation serves as a true testament to the institution’s effectiveness and affirms commitment to meeting the same standards and protocols as other institutions of higher education” (para3). Likewise, HBCUs pursue academic quality and securing accreditation because it is the anchor for change and innovation, which are the benchmarks for student success.

Challenges such as decreases in enrollment, limited resources and financial funding, and out-of-date structures, are not new and have been a factor and mainstay for HBCUs since their inception (Shetfall & Jackson, 2021). Yet, these institutions have stayed the course and continued to graduate, mentor, create belonging spaces, and prepare African American students for professional and academic careers. There may always be challenges and deficiencies, but there is hopefulness in the future of HBCUs. As David Wilson, president of Morgan State University in Baltimore, stated, “Our vitality going forward will depend on our ability to garner appropriate resources from our alumni, states, the federal government, and philanthropic communities, and to attract bold and visionary leaders to enable us to move closer to the nucleus of American higher education.”

### **Elevating Systems to Support HBCU Students**

HBCUs have remained relevant foundations of support for Black students because of there is unrelenting commitment and allegiance to the promise of excellence and triumph (Brown, Donahoo, & Bertrand, 2021). These institutions have created inclusive curricula and agendas that generate student motivation, self-efficacy, identity and persistence, foundations to student success and completion (Tinto, 2016). Kuh et al. (2006, as cited in Baker 2020), “suggests that student success can be many things, but it involves actual student achievement, satisfaction and completion of education outcomes and objectives indicating that student success involves academic achievement, student satisfaction, and completing educational outcomes. It also includes post-college performance, as well as moral and identity development”. Additionally, Kuh and Kinzie (2016) suggest that student success can have a variety of meanings and outcomes, depending on who is being asked to define it. Samayoa & Gasman (2017) state that student success at HBCUs can be attributed to a multifaceted list of factors including cultivating and the ethos of familial success and providing support historically resilient and undersourced backgrounds? The ability to capture these varied ways of student success can be difficult to obtain through regular or traditional metrics, but ignoring these different ways of capturing student success, fails to recognize the history and mission of HBCUs and their necessity to society’s educational way forward (Samayoa and Gasman, 2017).

### ***Academic and cultural affirmations***

Academic and cultural affirmations are one of these components of student success at HBCUs, that often cannot be measured by traditional metrics of assessment but are critical to the ongoing relevance and success of these institutions. HBCUs have been lauded for their dedication to incorporating in their missions to foster academic excellence and cultural affirmations or student success. As a basis to their origins, these institutions were established to unite Blacks with access to higher education when there were no other sources or opportunities and were largely excluded from attending majority institutions.

As initially designed, HBCUs continue to reach for excellence by continuing to pursue thorough academic rigor while also observing and affirming the black experience and the culture. Yet what sets HBCUs apart and facilitates their student’s success is connecting the cultural affirmation into their academic experiences with intent and foresight. Specifically, students are immersed in curricula and campus activities that celebrate the culture, history and the many contributions and experiences that students can relate and sustain. The affirming of

student identity creates a deep sense of belonging, and pride, which encourages students to explore while excelling and moving forward. The involvement is designed to reflect on the histories, and influences of African Americans that provide students with a more comprehensive and empowering student experience and by combining academic rigor with a commitment to engage learning with a commitment to cultural affirmation, students not only excel and feel connected to the space, but also their own individual academic and cultural journey. More importantly, this dual focus can help build confidence in their academic ability, provide a sense of purpose that goes beyond the classroom.

Well-known pillars of success are acknowledged in the work and insight of HBCU researchers. Arroyo & Gasman (2014) highlight the role of HBCUs similar to cultural havens, where students are not only academically empowered but sustained and supported in traditions that assert their cultural identities. Ndamu and Walker (2022) argue that that work created by Arroyo & Gasman (through the Cen Center for Minority-serving institution and demonstrates how HBCUs are positioned not only to serve a culturally relevant academic foundation that meets academic standards but also provide culturally affirming possibilities that provide students a sense of identity, self-efficacy and is critical to their sense of wellbeing and success.

**HBCU Framework.** Gasman and Arroyo's (2014) framework and its components energize the supposition of academic and cultural assimilation of success at HBCUs. The HBCU framework includes four important components that include a supportive environment, flexible entry points, broad interpretation of student achievement and a holistic view of success, particularly useful for this essay to note are the recognition of a supportive environment of feeling like you belong, recognition, similar backgrounds and experiences that ebb and flow throughout the entire institutional experience. The integration of similar traditions that are incorporated into the academic components of these students. Another component of the framework that relates to the work in this essay includes the comprehensive resources and consideration of student achievement. Ndumu and Walker (2021) state that HBCUs have historically fashioned different ways of knowing, of creating, binding traditional and varied competencies. Embracing these options have been the bond that motivates student identity and values. The last item in the framework that coincide with this essay, is the holistic component of success, which suggests that success is not only gains from actual completion, but also the ability to create opportunities for community growth, involvement, and civic participation in

their environments. Wilson (2021) suggested that “Three or four decades producing the kind of curriculum and culture required to graduate the foot soldiers, and generals, and lieutenants of the Civil Rights Movement, that, in my view, was an enormously productive thing for America in terms of the character side of things, creating purveyors who felt a responsibility for generations to come, to pave the way and provide opportunities.” (para6).

### **Community Service**

Also, suggested in his Book, Jelania Favors, states that HBCUs encouraged students to give back to their communities and be role models and leaders, again, suggesting the idea that HBCU student suggest is not only individual it is holistic endeavor the communities and people who live among them. while not the sole factors or success and definitely provide the floor for differencing perspectives and opinion, but have been some of the academic and cultural affirmations that have led to the continued relevancy of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Further highlighting the importance of holistic success, , work by Williams, Borley, Campbell and Jowers, focusing on culturally affirming practices employed by Historically Black Colleges that support and creative inclusive and supportive environments for success at these institutions for historically resilient student populations. In their research study, Meeting at the Margins, these authors highlight the voices and research employed by HBCU faculty and administrators to cultivate students from HBCUs and other resilient populations and backgrounds. The research concluded that creating student’s experiences in humanizing ways, centering their experience and connect to their personal narratives and values through a concentrated level and using those knowledge to connect student to academic content, in very humanizing and effective ways.

Giving power to the very real and transparent barriers that student face and giving power to the influence they have on their academics and persistence, is to travel this journey with the students intentionally and with a culture a of care and humanizing acceptance. HBCUs are intentionally affirming for students and creating spaces where the usual hidden curriculums, according to Jack (2021) “ which are those systems of unwritten rules and unsaid expectations that we all must abide by”. And who has access to those rules is highly classed and even racialized., but HBCUs dismantle those unwritten agendas that often create confusion, frustration and persistence issues for student, particularly first generation and other historically resilient and providing places where they can speak to the unknown and unfamiliar in culturally relevant

conditions, so students can avoid having more frustrations than required. This has been the narrative at HBCUs, working with students academically and through a lenses of cultural affirmation. It is important to note that these space have been intentionally equipped and organized to provide support and acknowledgment to students that they are worthy of this experience, and they are capable of success.

When movie and television favorites *School Daze* and *A Different World* were popular figures in HBCU culture, they connected the power of understanding and identity confirmation — and marked one of the major moments of HBCU visibility in mainstream culture (Burch, 2022). In fact, respected jewels of Black American Culture, were being expressed in a bold and captivating way, and finally according to Burch, “we saw ourselves,” (para2). This mass media phenomenon demonstrated the familial settings, Brooks and Allen, 2016; Williams K. L. et al., 2021), support, and the “institutional agents who support students on an academic and personal level (Jackson & Johnson, 2024, para 13.) for identity and the affirmation of self and others who mattered. Through the literature is scant, there have been studies conducted to examine how academic and cultural affirmation prove to be successful components for students at historically Black Colleges and Universities, and when utilized appropriately at other institutions where students of color reside. There needs to be more ongoing about how these components and teaching and learning through culturally relevant pedagogies allow students to at HBCU’s to see the academic and intellectual frames through a lens of cultural and identifiable experiences.

### **Conclusion**

In a 2023 Forbes article, which focused on a report released by the National Academies of Science Engineering and Math, stated that HBCUs “uniquely allow Black students the opportunity for black racial identity formation through offering culturally relevant academic programs, service actives, Black faculty and Black Staff mentors and black role models that all contribute to developing a positive sense of their identities” (Thomas, 2023 para 3). Shout it from the hilltops: This is what HBCUs do, it is one of the shinning components in their toolkits and a mainstay that leads to the continued relevance of these institutions. The HBCU narrative is deep and wide. Everything is not roses and butterflies at our historically Black colleges but it also not doom and gloom, and disparity and neglect. We must make sure that the narratives are transparent and realistic if we want to continue to grow and resonant with new generations of students. We must provide stories that talk about the incredible faculty and staff, who adopt’

mothering and mentoring roles, and stay up to help you complete your paper or fix your project to review. We must talk about the teaching and the HBCU alumni whether are in the news or not, all have and continue to make a difference in creating pathways. This essay is a beginning to providing more narratives and stories about the experiences and how lives change, and families are made through a new book entitled *Preserving the Legacy and the continued relevancy of HBCUS; From tradition to transformation*. If the HBCU nation is not the purveyor of resplendent and realistic narratives about the experiences, the challenges, and the benefits, would one expect others to take up the case. This essay had examined the academic cultural affirmation students find at Historically Black Colleges. The opportunity to merge academic domains with affirming student identity, efficacy and belonging, creating spaces which allow learning growth, transformation and success. It is time to share the wins and success.

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### Author Biography

**Dr. Monica Flippin Wynn** is an Educational Consultant working with K-12 also serves as adjunct professor at Jackson State University. She has published several articles and participated

on conference panels focusing on teaching and learning, incorporating retention within teaching strategies, and digital reform in curriculum.